

Tackling the big questions: Novelist Mary Doria Russell

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

Mary Doria Russell's novels include intricately drawn characters who explore life's deepest and most troubling questions. She is perhaps best known for her first novel, The Sparrow (1996), and its sequel, Children of God (1998), about human contact with aliens on a space mission organized by Jesuits. Her most recent novel, Dreamers of the Day, released in May, is set in 1921 and concerns the Cairo Peace Conference and the shaping of the modern Middle East. She is at work on a novel set in Dodge City, which she hopes will "solidify her reputation as a literary genre slut."

Your fiction tackles the big questions, like theodicy, and the big issues, like genocide, the Holocaust and colonialism. Why?

I seem to be drawn to the big picture. I crave understanding. I am hungry to see how the large-scale and small-scale elements of human history and human lives fit together.

In any consideration of the Holocaust, for example, the underlying questions are, "How could this have happened?" and "What would I have done?"

The first question leads me into the history of Europe, 19th-century nationalism and colonialism, the causes and outcomes of the Great War, the expectations of the Germans when they surrendered and their feeling of betrayal at the Paris Peace Conference, as well as religion-and-culture themes like millennia of religiously sanctioned violence and anti-Semitism. The second question leads me into memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and interviews. I want to understand the way the big picture pressures came to bear on flawed, complicated, ordinary people. My novels combine those elements: the culture, the history, the personalities and the flaws.

Where does your appreciation for the relationship between science and faith come from?

I am a classically trained four-field anthropologist, which means that my studies involved archaeology, linguistics, social-cultural anthropology and biological anthropology. I was drawn to the field because it offered a global understanding of the human species. What is the place of the human species in nature? What do people value and how do they live their ethics? How do they combine their worldly needs for food, shelter and a safe place to raise their children with their ideas of a life well lived?

At the center of anthropology and at the center of religion are similar concerns, and I find religions and ideologies interesting because they attempt to reconcile the big and little pictures—the ways that individuals or groups behave within the context of history and culture.

In science, the answer to any sensibly phrased question is theoretically knowable. The answers to the questions of faith are inherently unknowable. You cannot *know* the answers to the questions of faith; you can only believe you know.

One of the many reasons that I feel at home within Judaism is that it doesn't require or even expect faith per se. There is a large space in Judaism for doubt, for questioning, for skepticism, for agnosticism and outright atheism. In the Torah, God tells us, in essence, I don't really care if you believe in me, but obey my law. If you behave honorably and act ethically, then faith may follow, and if not, that's OK too.

What feeds your imagination?

Just about everything. Movies. The *Wall Street Journal*. Music. Anger. Conversations. Comedy routines. Song lyrics. Relationships—trying to understand my mother, raising my kid, being married for 38 years to the same man. It's all grist for the mill.

In your novels, a wide spectrum of views are entertained and given voice without this leading to agreement or resolution. What understanding of God and human nature is closest to your own?

In *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*, all of the views of deity are mine, from Emilio Sandoz's bridal mysticism to George Edwards's flat-out atheism. I get it all. I haven't experienced it all, but I get it.

Which of your characters comes closest to speaking in your voice?

In each novel there are characters whose voice is more or less my own. In *The Sparrow*, Vincenzo Giuliani is my politically pragmatic, intellectual hard-ass avatar. In *A Thread of Grace*, Mirella Soncini is the mother in me; Werner Schramm has my most contemptible traits: faced with authority, I tend to ingratiate and appease. I'm not proud of that, but I'm not kidding myself either.

Dreamers of the Day is my most autobiographical novel. Agnes Shanklin is what I imagine I might have been like if I had been brought up by my maternal grandmother. In that novel, I was attempting to understand my mother better, so I combined my own schoolteacherly elements with my mother's childhood to see what might have resulted. Agnes has had her confidence severely undermined by her mother, but when her intellect is engaged, she is swept away by ideas and loses her fear.

How would you describe the progression of your fiction?

Absolutely unanticipated. I am not one of those people who always wanted to be a writer. I was always a passionate reader, but I never imagined I would ever write fiction of any sort. Unless you count grant proposals.

When I finished *The Sparrow*, it felt like a miracle: something utterly outside my natural world and wholly astonishing even to me. I figured, OK, that was one of a kind. It'll never happen again.

After writing 4.3 novels, I'm better at this job now, or more efficient anyway. I know how to organize the research, and I have a good feel for how long a chapter ought to be and how to balance narrative, dialogue, character and plot. *The Sparrow* remains special, but each one of the books has drawn me in, pulled me along, seduced me and dominated my life for years at a time.

The Sparrow and its sequel, *Children of God*, are about religion and faith. I said all I had to say about those topics—and to date, I haven't felt the need to go back over that ground.

A Thread of Grace and *Dreamers of the Day* are about the ways people behave during the predominant historical fact of the 20th century: warfare. I never feel that war is the right decision, and I am frequently bewildered that the majority of human beings find war both necessary as an instrument of policy and desirable as a way to give meaning to lives and to make money. *A Thread of Grace* is about what happens

to the individual who is trying to maintain some sense of honor and decency amid the degrading violence and senselessness of total war. *Dreamers of the Day* is about how you can win the war and lose the peace.

My next novel is called *Eight to Five, Against*. I'm about 80 pages into the manuscript. Technically it's a murder mystery. It's set in Dodge City in the summer of 1878, when the unlikely but enduring friendship between Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday began. This is about three years before the famous gunfight at the OK Corral in Tombstone. They are both young, neither of them is the legendary figure they become, but the book shows the raw materials of those legends.

The themes emerging now seem to be racism, greed and corruption. The story takes place in the aftermath of war. A civilization has been smashed but hasn't been rebuilt yet. Initially there seemed to be good reasons for the war, but the results are chaos and violence and bitterness. Men with guns rule the streets and money talks. The setting is very specific, as are the characters, but there is a sort of universality about it, too. Baghdad and Dodge City are not so very different.