



## A Thread of Grace

*Mary Doria Russell*

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Set in Italy during the dramatic finale of World War II, this new novel is the first in seven years by the bestselling author of *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*.

It is September 8, 1943, and fourteen-year-old Claudette Blum is learning Italian with a suitcase in her hand. She and her father are among the thousands of Jewish refugees scrambling over the Alps toward Italy, where they hope to be safe at last, now that the Italians have broken with Germany and made a separate peace with the Allies. The Blums will soon discover that Italy is anything but peaceful, as it becomes overnight an open battleground among the Nazis, the Allies, resistance fighters, Jews in hiding, and ordinary Italian civilians trying to survive.

Mary Doria Russell sets her first historical novel against this dramatic background, tracing the lives of a handful of fascinating characters. Through them, she tells the little-known but true story of the network of Italian citizens who saved the lives of forty-three thousand Jews during the war's final phase.

The result of five years of meticulous research, *A Thread of Grace* is an ambitious, engrossing novel of ideas, history, and marvelous characters that will please Russell's many fans and earn her even more.

## A Thread of Grace Details

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Author : Mary Doria Russell

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## From Reader Review A Thread of Grace for online ebook

### Lewis Weinstein says

A fantastic story of Italian resistance during WWII, including the incredibly brave efforts of Italian Catholics to save Jews. Beautifully written. Emotional. Well researched.

The story begins when Italy surrenders to the Allies, which is followed immediately by a brutal German occupation, which in turn triggers further Allied ground attacks and bombing. Russell brilliantly presents the grinding unrelenting pressure caused by this series of events, including the fanatical pursuit of Jews by the Germans, even to the detriment of their rapidly deteriorating war aims.

The characters are extraordinary and memorable ... Italian priests and nuns, Italian Jews, refugee Jews, Nazis, partisan fighters, all caught up in an enterprise they know is ultimately useless. The Allies will win, but Hitler refuses to give up, and many must therefore die for no purpose.

But, as the Italian rabbi says towards the end of the story, "No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there's always a thread of grace."

Much of Russell's historical basis for the story comes from *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism* ... another fine read.

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### Wealhtheow says

sobbed through her earlier books, and this is no exception. Set during WWII, with many jewish main characters, Russell nevertheless avoids the obvious tragedies (although there are oblique mentions to the events in other countries) in order to concentrate on hearts, minds, and shattering illusions. She has an obvious love and understanding of her characters, and so even the most horrifying come across as realistic, almost sympathetic. Her plot is complex and interweaves many disparate elements without getting bogged down.

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### Laysee says

*"No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there's always a thread of grace."* -Mary Doria Russell.

**A Thread of Grace** is an important and informative historical novel by Mary Doria Russell that tells a true story of the courage and sacrifice of ordinary Italian citizens who saved the lives of forty-three thousand Jews between 1943 and 1945 in the last phase of WW2.

The Axis forces have begun to crumble. Italy has surrendered and signed the armistice. For uprooted Jews living in Italian-occupied southern France, a new death knell has just sounded. With the retreat of the Italian forces, the Germans are marching in. The only escape is to flee over the Alps to Italy.

A brigadier, the first of innumerable kind Italians, supplies Claudette Blum (age 14) and her father, Albert, with Italian passports to aid their flight. Santino Cicala, an Italian soldier, makes it his personal objective to help the Blums cross safely to Italy. It is heartbreaking to see hordes of frightened families, many with young children, risk their lives scaling impossible mountain terrains in a bid to save themselves. The old, too feeble to flee Sainte-Gisele, are predictably killed. The sweet moment arrives when the Blums cross into Italy and Santino whispers, "Welcome to my home." The locals witness emotional reunions. 'People weep with relief, boast of unexpected prowess in mountaineering, laugh giddily when they tell of terrifying encounters with pursuing Germans, who turned out to be squirrels or chamois.' The hotels go out of their way to welcome, feed and accommodate the tsunami of Jewish fugitives. Reading these episodes where goodness abounds is uplifting and renders the horrible plight of the Jews a little more bearable.

However, the relief is short-lived. (view spoiler)

**A Thread of Grace** is an ambitious novel. Owing to its length and structure where the scene shifts alternately between France and Italy, it takes some effort to track and follow the large cast of characters. It bothered me that I did not know what happened to Santino, whom a priest rightly calls 'a good soul' who 'wears his love like a crown', except that he died just like anyone else.

As one would expect of a war story, **A Thread of Grace** is a difficult book to read. However, despite the carnage, the impression one is left with is that of generosity and grace. There is so much evil; there is also so much good. A thread of grace may be thin but it is strong and sufficient to succor the weary and restore some faith in humanity. This is an important story worth telling. Thank you, Ms Russell.

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### **Donna says**

I have read 2 books by this author before this one. I liked them both. Her books always seem to take a fair amount of research. She does that well. Authenticity hasn't been a problem with her. I also enjoy her characters. They are purposeful and well drawn.

The main problem I had with this book was not only the number of characters parading through this, but the multiple story lines. There was so much going on. Usually I don't mind that. But this was a book I wasn't able to sit down and read in one whack. I picked it up several times throughout the day and it was hard to remember where I was exactly. So three stars.

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### **Linda Hart says**

I was deeply moved by this story and am impressed by Mary Doria Russell's ability as an author. She has created characters that one can't help but love and care about. Favorite quote, and summation of the book's message .... "No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there's always a thread of grace." I will never forget the incomprehensible struggle of crossing the Alps to freedom (short lived) and Italy in 1943.

This is a beautiful but painful book that will stay with me for a long while.

more favorite quotes:

"God save us from idealists! They dream of a world without injustice, and what crime won't they commit to get it! I swear, Mirella, I'll settle for a world with good manners."

“The world is filled with unreasonable hate. What's wrong with unreasonable love?”

“I suppose I should warn you, Padre. In the absence of male supervision, my mother has become a revolutionary.” ~Renzo Leoni”

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### Noel says

This was very interesting at times, but most of the time I just read in a state of confusion. Way too many characters and way too many plotlines. This book needed some careful editing, and perhaps it could have been 2 stories or the historical parts written a bit more clearly. I can't quite put my finger on what it was that didn't work, but having read many WWII books, this one just didn't cut it for me.

There is no Status entry for RIP - but that is what this fine book is now doing. It met its demise at the hands of an overflowing pot of beans. It all started when my mother-in-law advised me to soak beans overnight with a bit of baking soda. When I forgot the overnight bit, I thought I'd be clever and just boil them for an hour with plenty of baking soda. Having slept through elementary science class, I had no idea that I was creating a volcanic eruption like none ever seen in a classroom, and off I went to do some laundry. My dog's frantic barking and a mysterious odor drew me to the kitchen where there it was. A flow of bean lava coming out of the pot, onto my counters, down the side of my cabinets and into my shoes, taking with it this book. The bean mush was thick, hot and bubbly and wound up everywhere. So ended A Thread of Grace.

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### Nancy says

My experience of Maria Doria Russell's writing has been consistently wonderful. I loved her Sparrow and Children of God. This follow up to those sci-fi moral tales was seven years in its creation and according to an interview, during a difficult time in her life – the kind of mundane tragedies and challenges we real peons think no one famous ever struggles with. Her historical fiction is every bit as complex as her other work. A Thread Of Grace is a narrative of the Italian resistance including Italian Jews, Catholic clergy, and peasants and the loose network that saved an estimated forty-three thousand Jews in the final phases of the war. A broad story in scope, location, and characters, they were all very present. While Claudette Blum is often billed as the focal point, the real stars for me were Renzo Leoni and Werner Schramm, both souls emotionally scarred by their own secrets. Both trying to come to terms with their war crimes and make amends for their guilt. Well researched and grounded in a composite of real stories and people, Russell doesn't spare any of the violence or grief of war. There is an authenticity and intensity that brings her writing to life.

A thought provoking closing that ties to her introduction: *“and yet, in the end, did Klara Hitler's sickly son ever fire a gun? One hollow, hateful little... One last awful thought: all the harm he ever did was done for him by others.”*

*“You know what I think? Ten percent of any group of human beings are shitheads. Catholics, Jews. Germans, Italians. Pilots, priests. Teachers, doctors, shopkeepers. Ten percent are shitheads. Another ten percent -- salt of the earth! Saints! Give you the shirts off their backs. Most people are in the middle, just trying to get by.”*

*“When the preponderance of human beings choose to act with justice and generosity and kindness, then learning and love and decency prevail. When the preponderance of human beings choose power, greed, and indifference to suffering, the world is filled with war, poverty, and cruelty.”*

*“There's a saying in Hebrew, 'No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there's always a thread of grace.’”*

And there were remarkable ‘graces’ reflected in so many interchanges in this story. This was the thread that connected the entire novel – an ecumenical spirituality in all its raw beauty and pain.

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### **Ben Babcock says**

Damn it, Mary Doria Russell made me cry again!

Culture class is once again the culprit, although this time it's Nazi anti-Semitism versus the Italian resistance instead of Jesuits and scientists versus aliens on Alpha Centauri. *A Thread of Grace* begins with Italy's surrender to the Allies, and from the Jewish perspective of the book, this is one of history's great ironies. It's a relief that Italy has surrendered; to be sure, this is a turning point in the war. Jews in the Italian-occupied territories were safe from the Nazis, but now the Italian army is going home. Many Jewish families choose to accompany it over the mountains, but when they arrive in Italy, they find the Germans are there too. So much for the war being over.

Irony is recurrent in *A Thread of Grace*, often as the companion of macabre humour. Most of this book is obvious and predictable. It's easy to guess that Claudette and Santino will fall in love; it's obvious that Stefania is the missing Steffi; when Renzo and his elderly mother team up to free Iacopo, is it really a surprise when she doesn't make it out alive? Tragedy meets the main characters at every turn, and the attrition rate is incredibly high, even for a war novel. But this irony and predictability work in tandem to ramp up the pathos. It's called foreshadowing. We know bad things will happen, because that's a given for any story, doubly so for WWII novels. But we start having an inkling of what specific fates await these characters, all of our characters. As the story draws toward a close, these foreshadowed fates tighten their grasp around our hearts, refusing to let go. Claudette, the stalwart widow; Renzo, embracing irony to the end; Osvaldo, a flawed priest with so much courage.

These are all characters worth our time and empathy. I'll admit, sometimes they seemed to blend together. (This might be a result of every character having about seven different names and endearments; now I understand why we get a *dramatis personae*.) But it's worth the effort to distinguish between the characters and understand their individual sorrows.

Claudette is, as I mentioned before, a widow. Well, she starts as a precocious fourteen-year-old, marries young, and becomes a widow. The war takes from her all her family, beginning with her mother (though she doesn't acknowledge it for a long time), then her father, and finally her newfound husband. Before he leaves her to turn himself in for the "crime" of killing several Nazis who were gang-raping a young woman, he and Claudette conceive a child. Lest you accuse MDR of any false sentimentality, however, I'll disabuse you right now: the child is prematurely born and dies soon after. This is not a book about miracles; it is a book about humility in the face of great catastrophe.

Renzo is one of my favourite characters. He is the trickster of the group, always ready with a confidence

game or deception to trip up the Germans. In particular, he loves disguises, to the point of establishing an alternative Aryan identity of "Ugo Messner." This leads him to an unfortunate and ironic end at the hands of his fellow countrymen, who recognize him only as Ugo and not Renzo when the time comes to punish the Germans who don't manage to retreat. But it's not all fun and games for Renzo. There is a deeper sadness about him, a melancholy made evident by his attachment to alcohol. He is literally and deliberately drinking himself to death over his guilt for bombing a Red Cross hospital in Abyssinia. The action continues to haunt him as he helps coordinate the resistance. Renzo is a man for whom happiness comes only in the momentary joy that accompanies children playing; long-lasting contentment and peace, he knows, is forever beyond his reach.

Schramm is less likable, in that he is a former Nazi and readily confesses to sharing some of their ideology. It's not clear how much of that ideology he has renounced; certainly he struggles with long-held views on the mercifulness of euthanizing the mentally ill and weak. His most memorable scene is a confrontation with Mirella. First he reassures her that malnutrition was not the cause of her second child's Down's syndrome. Then he goes on, unfortunately, to mention that the child's accidental death was a blessing, for no one with Down's syndrome could live a fulfilling life, and children with such conditions just drive families apart. Mirella fumes at such an assertion. Schramm doesn't mean to upset her or to proselytize Nazism. He's just internalized, through his medical training, these beliefs, to the point that they are present and on the tip of his tongue.

I could go on at length about other characters, but the above three were my favourites. It's a shame that MDR did not extend their complexity and depth to her antagonists. The Germans representing the occupying forces are a joke. Von Thadden is the intelligent but oblivious general who moves for mysterious reasons and ends up dead because of it. Reinecke is the competent but unimaginative aide. And Arthur Huppenkothen (AH!) is the caricature of an uptight Gestapo who takes his loyalty to the Führer and the Vaterland entirely too seriously. Even the tone in which these characters are written is bumbling and supercilious. This is something that could work well in another type of WWII novel, but it really undermines the emotional chord that MDR maintains throughout the rest of the book. I just can't take von Thadden or Huppenkothen seriously, even if they are villains who order reprisals against civilians.

Likewise, the Italians and Jews we meet are reluctant heroes or neutral to the partisan cause. Just once I would have liked to see a collaborator, someone who sided with the Germans out of fascist solidarity. Battista comes close, being a fascist and somewhat temperamental, but it's clear he's closer in allegiance to the partisans than to the Nazis. This is a peculiar omission in an otherwise well-rounded story.

The plot, you'll notice, I've largely avoided discussing, because it's not at all remarkable. It's just the minutiae of these characters' struggles to survive under German occupation and repel the Germans from Italy. There are a few memorable scenes, such as Schramm's aforementioned confrontation with Mirella and the subsequent scare with the undetonated bomb. For the most part, however, they are generic misfortunes. This seems to be an artifact of how MDR wrote the characters to stand for all refugees and all partisans; *A Thread of Grace* is an unapologetic microcosm for the humanity and succour the Italians extended to the Jews. I just wish the characters were more reified, less archetypal.

Yet I found myself tearing up at the end of the book. It's not sappy, and it isn't even very sentimental. MDR does her best to pull out all the stops; the protagonists lose family, friends, and fortune. This unrelenting commitment to the worst possible scenario makes the book work, preserves the eponymous "thread of grace" as an act of compassion, limited in its abilities rather than a panacea. It's *not* going to work out all right, and pretending otherwise would be insulting. *A Thread of Grace* is moving precisely because it acknowledges this part of the tragedy of World War II. It is a reminder that when big gestures fail and fixing the problem

isn't possible, sometimes you just have to do what you can. Sometimes it won't be enough. But once in a while, you make a difference.

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### **Kristy Miller says**

Years ago, when I was still working at Borders, I came across a paperback book on the front tables as I was straightening up. The cover caught my eye, and I picked it up to read the back. It was set in northern Italy, towards the end of World War II, and I decided to make it my book of the week. At that point Italy was my favorite country that I'd visited, and I have been obsessed with World War II stories since I was a girl. That book, *Thread of Grace*, was to become my favorite book, and Mary Doria Russell became my favorite author.

The book follows the story of several characters, starting on the day Italy surrendered. Having always been welcoming of others, and not really caring about religion, Italy was flooded by refugees, but it is now a country occupied by the Germans. We meet Claudia and her father, who climb the alps from France with the aid of an Italian soldier, and seek shelter with a poor mountain family. We follow Renzo, a Jew and former bomber pilot, as he, his mother, and his rabbi neighbor and family deal with the German's new interest in Italian Jews. Mixed in with these main characters are others in the community; Duno, a young Polish refugee who is tired of running; Don Osvaldo and Don Leto, local priests; Werner Schram, a German doctor who has abandoned his post; and German officers and SS leaders trying to deal with now uncooperative Italian people. Together, these characters weave a tapestry of love, resilience, heartbreak, and the horrors of war. Mary Doria Russell's two greatest strengths in writing are her research and her characters. She spends years doing meticulous research as she writes her books. This makes the wait between them seem unending, but the result is worth it. Her stories are rich in detail and scope, and make you feel like you are completely immersed in the story that her characters are living. The characters she writes are as rich as the landscape they fill. You feel like they are sitting across the table, and telling you their story on their own. They have personality, history, depth, and heart.

I can't tell you how many times I have read and listened to *Thread of Grace*. It still moves me, and brings me to tears. It is probably not her best book; that would be *The Sparrow*, which I also recommend. But it is my favorite of her books, by far.

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### **Holli says**

Spoiler Alert!

I stayed up until after midnight last night finishing this. I started out listening to it on tape and got half way finished and it was on hold for someone so I had to turn it in and get the book. The narrator did a great job with the French, German, and Italian accents. Russell is so smart. She weaves the fictitious characters and places with historical fact and makes a beautiful and difficult story. This novel is very character-driven. I wondered about the characters when I wasn't reading about them. And even though some of them are larger than life, they are believable and human all the same.

I can understand how Schramm would embrace Nazism so totally. I love the way Russell uses Schramm in juxtaposition to the priest, Dom Osvaldo Tomitz. How Tomitz refuses Schramm absolution for killing 91,867 people because he feels no remorse. And then Schramm in the end gives Tomitz his last rites and has a conversion/redemption experience at his death.

I also love the scene where Mirella presides over the Sabbath with Schramm at her table and he realizes for the first time that she is a Jew, this woman who has been nursing him for months.

The novel points out the overall absurdity of war and what defines an enemy—the last battle the partisans engage in, killing the Republicans right and left, finding out the war is over, staying up all night to bury them because they are fellow countrymen. And, of course, there's the death of Renzo Leoni—masterful and perfect. He risked his life again and again to save Jews, fight with the partisans, bring them supplies, etc. And he is hung as a Fascist/Nazi sympathizer because that was one of his disguises. There are no easy answers in this novel, but Russell certainly helps us live with the questions.

*“There’s a saying in Hebrew,” he tells her. “’No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there’s always a thread of grace.’ After the Yom Kippur roundup in ‘43, people all over Italy helped us. Almost fifty thousand Jews were hidden. Italians, foreigners. And so many of them survived the occupation. I keep asking myself, Why was it so different here? Why did Italians help when so many others turned away?”* (p. 421—conversation between Rabbi Iacopo Soncini and Suora (Sister) Corniglia).

This is one of my favorite novels of all time. Like Russell's earlier book, *The Sparrow*, there are a few scenes where the characters wrestle with difficult theological questions. She handles this so well, so authentically, and so truly. No easy answers, but somehow she makes it okay to live with the questions. There is one exchange between Doktor Schramm and Don Osvaldo that I would put in the top 5 literary "scenes" of all time.--HR

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## Book Concierge says

Audiobook performed by Cassandra Campbell

Russell's third novel leaves space and the future, and instead looks back on WW2 and the Italian citizens who saved the lives of thousands of Jews; not only their neighbors but refugees coming from other countries. It opens in September 1943, with fourteen-year-old Claudette Blum and her father. They've already fled Belgium and are in Paris, when they need to move once again. This time they will cross the Alps on foot, led by an Italian soldier. Eventually they are taken in by a farm family and come to know the villagers in the area. As the war progresses over the next few years we meet a large cast of characters that includes a German doctor who regrets his past, an Italian rabbi and his family, a priest, a British paratrooper, and a charismatic Italian resistance leader.

What a story! Based on true incidents, Russell's tale draws the reader into the lives of these many people. She gives us examples of true courage, from the fighters actively engaged in battle, to the grandmothers who carried messages or the Catholic nuns who sheltered Jewish children in large orphanages. I fell in love with

these characters. Russell doesn't sugarcoat the sacrifices and dangers they faced, nor does she make them saints.

They squabble, succumb to temptations, and waver in their determination. They are also courageous and fiercely resistant to the evils of the Nazis. Out manned and out gunned by the Germans, this "army" of citizens nevertheless shows discipline and ingenuity when fighting. Their huge advantage is their intimate knowledge of the terrain and their fierce loyalty to one another.

This is a war story, so I knew there would be death and destruction. Even though I expected this, some of these scenes brought me to tears. Russell tempers the sadness and horror with moments of great tenderness and even humor.

I was lucky that I chose to listen to this audiobook while on a long road trip. I finished the 17-hours of listening in two day's driving. Cassandra Campbell does a superb job performing the audiobook. She is a gifted voice artist and really brought the story and these characters to life.

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### **Jen says**

I read this book during the holiday season but find myself thinking about various scenes at odd moments. I'll be brushing my teeth, and suddenly, I'll be on the Ligurian coast of Italy while a German deserter confesses to the local priest that he is responsible for over 91,000 deaths. I'll be on the edge of sleep, and as I close my eyes I'll see a toddler learning to walk when suddenly the bombs start to drop. I'll be driving and will be visited by one of the kind visions of an Italian soldier wooing a Jewish escapee as they climb the Alps. Doria Russell's characters are so well-developed and her research put to such good use that I feel like I have a much better understanding of the European front during WWII. Did you know that the Italians managed to hide over 43,000 Jews during the war? What was different about the Italians? This novel will give you a few answers.

One of the best novels I read in a long while, I would have to recommend this to all of my reader friends. Do yourself a favor and read *A Thread of Grace* when you get the chance. You'll thank me.

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### **Michael says**

I simply loved this moving rendering of life in northern Italy during the long period of Nazi occupation after Mussolini stepped down. It is the story of two families of Jewish refugees who hide out in the mountains with the support of Italian peasants and poorly equipped partisan fighters of diverse origins. The tale is well researched and very satisfying in revealing the strengths of a community and the ability of the human heart to thrive under great challenges.

At the beginning of the narrative, thousands of Jewish residents and refugees in coastal towns near the border with France make the decision to cross the mountains to the north and hide out in the rural country of the piedmont portion of Italy. The book dwells on the life of a 15-year old Belgian refugee girl, Claudette Blum, travelling with her middle class father. Hardship and losses cannot quell her spirit, nor keep her from falling in love with a former Italian soldier, Santino, who helps them cross the mountains. Both find a pathway to serve the resistance network. Other key characters include a former Italian Jewish airman, an Italian Rabbi, a

priest, a nun, and a deserter German doctor. The story brings to life their experiences and moral choices, along with their successes and failures in endurance and sacrifice. The prose is largely invisible and transported me very vividly into the rural environment and social discourse of characters I could root for.

As you can see from the box on the map, the site of the story is the region between Genoa and Nice (the towns are fictional). At the start in the Fall of 1943, the Allied invasion of Italy was bogged down south of Rome, and from then until the end of the war they only got as far as the middle of Italy (the “Gothic Line” on the map). During this nearly two years, the Nazis were free to try to carry out the “Final Solution” for the Jews of northern Italy, which the former Fascist government had been reticent to accede to. However, the resistance curtailed that effort, with the consequence that nearly 45,000 Jews were saved and “only” about 5,000 were nabbed and sent to the death camps. Through ambushes and sorties, the partisan fighters inflicted about 20,000 casualties on the German forces, thus making a valuable contribution to the war effort by diverting German troops from defense against the Normandy invasion.

The SS used their usual tricks of terrorist intimidation. They pushed for a policy that for every soldier killed, 20 residents from the closest village would be slaughtered in response, and anyone harboring a rebel or a Jew would be shot. Fortunately, few regular German soldiers carried out such policies, but when such atrocities were enacted, it took community courage and resolve to continue resisting. At one point the Rabbi wonders: “I keep asking myself why was it so different here? Why did Italians help when so many others turn away?” He recalls to a nun a saying in Hebrew: “No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there’s always a thread of grace.”

From the four books of hers I've read, Russell seems to me a gifted and versatile writer who puts her training in anthropology to good use in her skilled approaches to elucidating the essence of our humanity in the face of challenges.

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### **Marita says**

“*Benvenuti al’Italia!*” (Welcome to Italy!) the refugees were told when they crossed the border into Italy from Southern France after Italy had signed the Armistice in September 1943. It is there that many people such as the Blums and the Brösslers found refuge after crossing the Alps on foot to reach safety. However, due to the German occupation of Italy their safety was not assured, but they were taken in and hidden, sometimes in plain sight, by the locals. Author Mary Doria Russel invents villages in which to hide them, but her excellent research gives those villages credence. These invented villages are in the actual Ligurian/Piemonte region of Italy. This is the story of the refugees and the people who helped them, including the Italian partisans.

It is a well crafted novel which gets better as one progresses through it. It is not overly sentimental, it is often written in an ironic tone and there is even some humour. Of course there is brutality. There are all the evils of war, but the brutality is offset by compassion, as is guilt by redemption. Horror is interspersed with the banal, for example there might be a scene where people are talking and drinking coffee, and then something happens; or there is a buildup to an event followed by a polite enquiry into something commonplace. For some the execution of fellow human beings is simply a day at the office, and it is seemingly ordinary people

who perpetrate hideous crimes against humanity. But it is not all brutal; not at all. It is a novel in which we see the better side of human nature, as people lay their own lives on the line to help others. It is not only about hatred and persecution, but also about love and compassion.

There is a fairly large cast of characters, some of whom are unforgettable, such as the reluctant war hero Renzo Leoni with his multiple personae and his wry humour. He is indeed a lion amongst men. But he is not the only one who is memorable.

There are many wonderful lines in the novel, and I enjoyed the operatic references used by the partisans.

In conclusion here is what Ms Russel says in her Author's Note:

*"Skeptics may believe that I have idealized the courage and generosity of ordinary Italians during the 1940s. So I will close with the inscription chiseled on the marble memorial stela erected in Borgo San Dalmazzo in 1998 by the Jews of Saint-Martin-Vesubie in honor of the people of Valle Stura and Valle Gesso.*

**WHEN RACIAL HATRED RAGED IN EUROPE,  
JEWISH REFUGEES, UNCERTAIN OF THEIR FATE,  
COMING FROM DISTANT COUNTRIES  
— AUSTRIA, BELGIUM, GERMANY, POLAND—  
FOUND HOSPITALITY AND SAFETY IN THESE VALLEYS.  
HIDDEN IN ISOLATED COTTAGES,  
PROTECTED BY THE POPULATION,  
THEY WAITED WITH TRUST AND HOPE,  
THROUGH TWO INTERMINABLE WINTERS,  
FOR THE RETURN OF LIBERTY.  
IN HOMAGE TO AND IN MEMORY OF THOSE WHO HELPED THEM,  
THOSE REFUGEES AND THEIR DESCENDANTS  
EMBRACE THE NOBLE INHABITANTS OF THESE VALLEYS  
IN BROTHERHOOD."**

#####

**Here are a few quotes:**

(view spoiler)

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Recommended!

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**Ellen says**

**Some of the best scenes in literature:**

1. *The Idiot* - moek execution

2. *Macbeth* - Act 5; Scene 5 - Macbeth's world is crashing around him when he hears of his wife's death. He remarks, laconically, "She should have died hereafter," and then delivers what might be the most perfect lines in literature:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

...Nowhere in literature is despair and futility communicated better.

3. *Invisible Man* - Liberty Paints Factory or battle royal

4. Flannery O'Connor - too many to list

5. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* - Janie telling Joe Starks, "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life."

The few examples above come from "Tier One" literature. While this sounds hierarchical, I guess I do view books in general categories. For example, though Mary Doria Russell is an excellent writer, she doesn't make my Tier One list. And, I'm no elitist, but I'd be willing to bet most of us have some sort of invisible line that separates truly great literature from the rest. Then, there is schlocky literature and those books - like Glenn Beck's recent foray into literature (and I'd rather check out Hell for a few days or rip my face off than read *The Overton Window*) - that are beneath contempt.

However, in Tier Two literature (very good but not great), Russell's scene between Werner Schramm, an SS deserter, and Father Osvaldo Tomitz, an Italian priest, is absolutely unforgettable. Schramm has been dogging Osvaldo for some time, hoping to have him hear his confession. [If you consider this excerpt a spoiler, don't read it.] Osvaldo wants nothing to do with Schramm, but Schramm persists and starts by asking Osvaldo a number of questions concerning faith, and then begins his confession:

"A priest's office is to instruct the faithful!" Schramm shouts. [Osvaldo is disgusted but resigns himself to hearing the confession.] ...

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, he says when he can speak again. "I have murdered 91,867 people."

Osvaldo laughs. You're joking, this laugh says. You can't be serious! "Ninety-one thousand," he repeats. "Eight hundred..."

"And sixty-seven. Yes."

The number is absurd, but Schramm does not laugh. [Schramm tries to make excuses, to clarify the situation, but Osvaldo cannot comprehend; it is beyond belief.]

Osvaldo looks at Schramm, at the goat, at the diamond studded-sea in the distance. Mind racing, he tries to imagine what he can possibly say to this...this *demon*. His mouth opens. No words emerge. He lifts his hands, drops them, and begins to walk over.

"Wait!" Schramm calls. "You must-- What is my penance?"

Osvaldo turns and stares. "*Mein Gott*, Schramm, what did you expect? *Rosaries*?" Bending suddenly, leaning hard on hands that clutch his knees, Osvaldo chokes back vomit. Trembling, he lifts his eyes. "Shoot yourself."

I've eliminated both parts of this scene and its ending. It has to be read in its entirety.

The book's title is perfect, for grace does thread its way through this book. Though the plight of the Italian resistance, Jewish refugees and many others in this book prompt situations that are wrenching, the book is uplifting as well.

A poignant and memorable read.

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### **Julie Christine says**

Once again, I have an outstanding work of historical fiction to thank for teaching me about a time, events, places and people I knew virtually nothing about—that I didn't realize I *wanted* to know anything about. Mary Doria Russell, with her uncanny ability to wring gorgeous stories out of dry facts, brings wartime Italy to my living room.

In the fall of 1943, Italy surrenders to the Allies and thousands of Jewish refugees from across the diaspora

pour into the country, just as German occupation forces advance. *A Thread of Grace* show us what was won, and what was lost, by those who sought and offered shelter.

Russell fictionalizes a town and a cast of characters, but all is wholly believable from this gifted researcher and anthropologist. The threads are many, and the cast of characters is large, but at the center is WWI hero, cynic, alcoholic, Renzo Leoni, a Jew who assumes several identities as he infiltrates the Nazi occupiers, supports the Resistance, and hides the refugees.

But what's striking about this cast is their sheer ordinariness. These are shopkeepers, housewives, rabbis, grandmothers, foot soldiers, teenagers. There is nothing in their backgrounds that would make them inherently courageous and noble; in fact, they risk their very security and stability—what little there is in the face of German occupation—to aid strangers.

The author set herself a daunting task: to bring dense historical fact to life, to convey the complexities of faith and resistance to faith, and to provide backgrounds and personalities to a multiplicity of characters. At times, the narrative sinks under the weight of history, and I found myself frequently flipping to the front list of characters to remember who was doing what, where, but balance is found in the vivid and fascinating people whose threads are woven together in a tragic-comic tapestry.

Most compelling to me were the intersections of faith and ethnicity—to watch Italian Jews interact with others of their faith, but not of their nationality—to witness the compassion and confusion of Catholics, to understand Italy as a newly-united nation of tribes and dialects, trying to sort out its future as a struggling whole.

My favorite actors are rarely those who take top billing at the box office. They are the character actors who disappear into their roles, making us forget that we are watching fiction unfold on the screen. That's how I feel when I read Mary Doria Russell's novels—she conjures these human beings who lift from the page and assume a three-dimensional, flesh and blood grip on my imagination, inhabiting the space that craves connection with a world beyond my reach.

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### **Elizabeth (Alaska) says**

First, I inferred from the GR description that this is the story of Claudette Blum. It also states there are a handful of characters. Claudette is one of dozens of characters and, although the story returns to her throughout the book, I think there are others who appeared more prominently and importantly in the narrative. I only say this so that you might rely less on the GR description than on many of the other fine reviews here.

We often hear of the French resistance. Why not the Italian resistance? This is an important story that ought to be told over and over, yet I've encountered it so late in life. The story is not just that the Italians hid or protected Jews, but that there was also a large and organized network of active, militant partisans. They were brave people who did what they thought was right in the face of brutality.

My favorite character was Renzo Leoni, a Jew, who had been a pilot for Italy in Abyssinia and whose memory was his own personal demon. I shouldn't forget Renzo's widowed mother, Lidia, who knew that "old black crows" were so ignored that they could accomplish what younger, more attractive women couldn't. Or

German deserter Werner Schramm and his confessor Osvaldo Tomitz, who couldn't grant absolution for Schwart'z 91,867 murders. There were so many more - perhaps not superbly drawn, but well enough to be distinct, and well enough to you'll want for their survival. Not everyone survives in war, of course, and each loss was hard for me.

Another reviewer says this doesn't make her top tier in literature and it doesn't make mine either, but only because it's not "literature" not because it isn't worth reading. This rises just above the line between my 4- and 5-stars, wherever that fictitious line rests on any given day.

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### **WarpDrive says**

There is no such a name as "Tomasso" in Italy.

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### **Violet wells says**

A Thread of Grace tells the story of the Nazi occupation of a region of north east Italy. It begins with an uprooted community of Jews in southern France who have to flee France across the Alps when the Italians sign the armistice. It's essentially the story of how these refugees fare in Italy.

When I discovered Mary Doria Russell had invented all the locations in the novel I was a bit dubious as so often this is a trick writers use to mask the sparseness of their knowledge. But the thoroughness of the research in this novel and the beautiful lightness with which it carries it is breathtaking. This is no The Nightingale where one felt the author had spent two weeks in France, had no knowledge of the language beyond oui and merde and had read a couple of books on the war and watched a few films. Russell has an intimate knowledge of Italy, Italians and every aspect of her material which is impressively wide. She sets herself the task of telling the story from all sides – so the cast of characters is expansive: we have the Gestapo, Wehrmacht officers, a chief Rabbi, Catholic priests, Nuns, a German deserter, partisans, fascists, an English SOE officer, children, mothers, fathers and grandparents. Were I to be hyper-critical I might say there were too many characters and as a result it was difficult to emotionally bond with any one specific character. It didn't though bother me though I can imagine it might try the patience of some readers.

Sometimes you have to read back to remind yourself who someone is, not helped by a couple of characters changing their identity. Only other nitpick was now and again a character would deliver a history lesson – in those times propaganda was rife and no one knew for certain what was happening so when a character gives a detailed account of what exactly German divisions on other fronts are doing or what Allied tactics were it jarred a bit. The majority of WW2 novels tend to do this. I'm reading the journal of an Italian partisan at the moment and despite being very well connected she doesn't have much of a clue what's going on in the war. It's all rumours. I suspect fiction has contributed to the notion we now have that many more people knew about the Holocaust while it was happening than in reality did. My partisan woman certainly knew nothing about it. It's a fascinating subject in itself how fiction begins to alter our perception of historical events.

So A Thread of Grace is a tremendously enjoyable novel with no other pretensions but to tell a fabulously well-crafted story (and into the bargain pay homage to the humanity and bravery of the Italian people in helping a persecuted friendless people in need). Most beguiling of all its characteristics was the love with which this novel was written. You could feel that heartbeat of love on every page.

Other notable novels set in Italy during WW2 for anyone interested (I'm on a mission to read them all).

### **Lisa Vegan says**

What I loved:

For once I was able to thoroughly enjoy a historical fiction book without wondering what was real and what was fiction.

This is a character driven story and everyone in the book seemed genuine. I especially enjoyed the poignant sensibilities of the children and adolescents.

I'm a sucker for maps and this book had a map of real places and one of fictional places that were within the real map's area. There was also a handy characters list at the front of the book. I found myself referring to both of these frequently and found the character list indispensable, especially because a few of the characters went by more than one name.

It was so refreshing to see a book about World War II that's about Nazi occupied Europe (in this case Northern Italy) where the populace helped Jewish citizens and refugees and partisans too, and where Jewish people often helped themselves and also often contributed significantly to the fight against the German occupiers. (At times it reminded me of another great Holocaust era novel: The Book Thief, which shows ordinary German citizens who help a Jewish man/Jewish people in Germany during the same Nazi era.)

There was actually much humor.

The book had a compelling message about what trauma can do to people and also made me think (more) about elderly people and what they might have been like when they were younger. I also thought the portrayals of the people's motivations and changes they experienced seemed very authentic.

I loved the meaning of the title A Thread of Grace.

I did think this was a fine novel and I appreciated the research that went into writing it.

What I didn't like a lot but was okay:

I knew a bit more about this book than I would have liked before I read it, so I won't say a lot, but I will say that it's a book about a brutal war so the reader can expect a lot of carnage.

There are so many characters and there were a lot of times where I grew very attached to a character and then they didn't appear again for many, many pages; there are a lot of subplots; in this book I guess the plot is a bunch of subplots as no single one really stood out for me.

What I didn't like:

No, Hitler was not a vegetarian. I didn't like that this book perpetuated that myth.

and:

Because of this book, I'd like to read more history about this area of Northern Italy during World War II. I'd also love to visit the area, even though I'd enjoy the cuisine of Southern Italy much more. It will have to be armchair traveling for me.

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