



Memoir Hardcover

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### **Sins of the Innocent: BOOK SUMMARY**

Mireille and Abel are a young, talented, and sophisticated couple enjoying life among their friends in Parisian café society when Hitler's shadow falls upon the entire world, forever changing their own small part of it. Security becomes scarce and danger, routine; friends turn into betrayers; and the gaiety of youth is replaced by the sobriety of experience.

From the perspective of a memoirist, World War II may have been a show for which there was not a bad seat in the house. It has bred a population of remembrances that exhibit startlingly keen vision, from authors who saw it up close and from farther away. Mireille Marokvia's sight is set upon the ideological battlefield of the German home front. There death dealt by Allied bombs and Nazi prisons made it as dangerous to be a civilian as to be a soldier.

And she was trapped there, not by citizenship but by circumstance. A French woman married to a German man, she could not return to her Nazi-occupied homeland, and was forced to remain in a country where she inevitably fell under suspicion.

*Sins of the Innocent* is a beautifully told account of an adventure that could define a life or end it. Mireille, who struggles to find safety and food in the countryside, and her husband Abel, who is drafted into the service of his government, are not-so-secret dissidents in a nation where dissent is functionally a capital offense.

And any day either could come to the attention of the wrong people—and that day does come.

Yet through Marokvia's vision, the beauty of a land and the humanity of a people still shine through this harrowing story of wartime strife. In *Sins of the Innocent*, one of the most quietly remarkable authors alive today shares her journey through a most devastatingly remarkable era.

### **ABOUT the AUTHOR**

Mireille Marokvia was born in France in 1908 and experienced a childhood punctuated by the realities of World War I and an adulthood shaped by World War II. During the late thirties Marokvia and her German went to Stuttgart, and a planned six-month stay dragged into eight years during which they were captive to the war, its hardships, and intrigues. Seeds of *Sin* were planted then.

Its 2006 publication by Unbridled Books represents the third life of a manuscript that refused to die by a woman who has lived for almost a hundred years. The first draft of it was destroyed in Germany in 1944 as Marokvia prepared for a visit from the SS. She was under suspicion as a spy and so burned all writings and letters. Over a generation later, the work was sacrificed for the sake of her vulnerable marriage.

Yet throughout her life, she has kept her hand in the inkwell, publishing her first essay 60 years ago in France and writing five children's books after coming to America.

### **Questions and Answers with Author Mireille Marokvia**

**With so many close calls, how did you think you and your husband managed to survive World War II?**

My husband said it was his guardian angel. I say it was dumb luck.

**You call him "Abel" in the book, but what was his name? And why did you choose to use a pseudonym for him?**

Artur was his real name. I do not know why I did not want to call him by his first name. People ask me but I cannot explain.

**How did your husband feel about your writing?**

I do not like to say it, but my husband did not like me to write. I was 42 when we came to the United States. He thought that I would never be able to learn a

language well enough to write in that language. Teachers at Columbia University offered to correct whatever I would write. My husband did not believe it. He wanted me to be a dressmaker. I did for a while, but it was mentally painful.

Finally, without his knowledge, I wrote my first children's book. I took it to Lippincott and they accepted it for publication. My husband illustrated it. He got used to my writing children's books: I wrote five. Then I decided it was over with children's books I was going to write something else. He said no.

He was a very gifted man: a painter, a musician, a very good pianist. He did not think the little French woman could be a very good writer.

### **How long were you married before he died?**

We knew each other for almost 50 years. We were married for 45 years. He died 20 years ago in April. It started with a little stroke. I thought it was really nothing. We took him to the hospital, and I thought we would be sent home. But the doctor said it is more to it than that little stroke. Then, organ by organ, everything gave out. His lungs filled with water. He died of kidney failure. He was about 82.

### **Isn't this book the third version of *Sins of the Innocent*?**

Yes. The Gestapo was coming to the house and I burned the first. Then I rewrote it 30 years later. It was a very big manuscript, and it was not finished. Some chapters have not changed. My husband was so opposed to it. One day, I was so irritated and so angry I burned it again.

After he died, I wrote about my childhood in *Immortelles: Memoir of a Will-o'-the-Wisp*, and it was published in the fall of 1996. Around 2000, I started on the third version of *Sins of the Innocent*. Considered it finished in 2004.

### **Looking back, was there any prior indication that your friends in France could have betrayed you and denounced you to the government, as they did?**

We would never have thought of that. We thought only of all of the good times we had with them. We were very sentimental about former happy times in France.

I think the reason they betrayed us was partly the trauma of the occupation. And it was partly bad conscience. They probably had not been the great patriots they said they were. The times presented a pretty hard test of character.

We are all very imperfect, and we expected too much from them. We were naïve.

### **What are some of the other challenges that you have faced?**

We suffered hunger for many years. During the war there was no food in Germany. But that we survived and lived long tells me that people eat too much today.

During recent years, I have had some very difficult times with my health. In 1997, I had a small stroke and, one month later, another one far more serious (due to an error in the new medications I was starting to take). I went home unable to sign my name. I relearned to write as a child would. It is a miracle that I am still here.

### **Are you working on anything now?**

Of course. I would never stop scribbling. I am writing about my very early childhood. I am writing an essay about the first toy I had. I am writing a collection of different stories about different subjects.

### **Do you have any advice for readers who will wonder what the secret is to a long and successful life?**

I would not call my life very successful. But I have done so many things. It is nice at the end to get a book published. That gives me a very good feeling. It is very satisfying. I am grateful for the life I had. It was very interesting, not always very happy but very interesting. I have never gotten bored, never, even today.

### **READERS' QUESTIONS**

1. From Mireille's view, who are the implied innocents? Why are they perceived to be innocent?
2. What do you think are the sins of "the innocent" in the book?
3. What did you think of the relationship between Mireille and Abel? Was theirs a good marriage? the type of union that you would want?
4. Would it have been a good idea for Abel to make an attempt on Hitler's life? Why or why not? Is it morally justified to assassinate a so-called "murderous dictator?" Why or why not?
5. How does one determine that a person elected by the majority of his countrymen, as Hitler was, is or is not a legitimate leader? And if a dictator can be deemed ripe for execution without due process, does it set a dangerous

precedent that implies anyone could designate any leader as a tyrant to be violently and quickly disposed of? Isn't every politician *somebody's* Hitler?

6. Does Abel seem like a hothead at times because his remarks may threaten his and his wife's safety? Why or why not?

7. Does Abel seem like a hero because he is as faithful to his principles as the wish for survival will allow? Why or why not?

8. In Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, the pivotal question about response to the Holocaust is "What would you have done?" Keeping in mind the horrendous consequences those caught rebelling could and did suffer, if you were a Gentile in Nazi Germany and knew of the death camps, what do you think *you* would have done?

9. How do the Nazis perceive the French? Considering the way she is treated in Germany, where is Mireille, as a French woman, on the Nazi racial pecking order when compared to other groups—Jews, Russians, blacks, Poles, Japanese?

10. Does it surprise you that Hitler was a proponent of vegetarianism? Why or why not?

11. Why did their friends in France denounce Mireille and Abel? Were they traumatized by the occupation or trying to cover their guilt for their own lack of action or both?

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

*Immortelles: Memoir of a Will-o'-the-Wisp* by Mireille Marokvia

*In the Eye of the Needle* by Ken Follett

*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank

*Destined to Witness: Growing up Black in Nazi Germany* by Hans J. Massaquoi

*Mohr: A Novel* by Frederick Reuss

*The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink

*Other People's Houses* by Lore Segal