

A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet Ohio author Mary Doria Russell and learn about her compelling novel that reimagines events surrounding the famous gunfight in Tombstone, Arizona on October 26, 1881.

Select from a range of discussion questions and extension activities to deepen the experience of reading and sharing *Epitaph*.

Discover historical newspapers and primary sources, as well as more recent novels and films based on the gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

Epitaph

A Novel of the O.K. Corral

By Mary Doria Russell

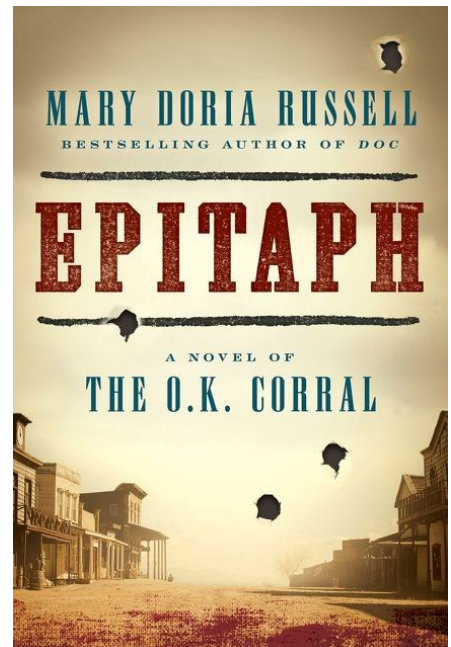


About the Book

A deeply divided nation. Vicious politics. A shamelessly partisan media. A president loathed by half the populace. Smuggling and gang warfare along the Mexican border. Armed citizens willing to stand their ground and take the law into their own hands... That was America in 1881.

All those forces came to bear on the afternoon of October 26, when Doc Holliday and the Earp brothers faced off against the Clantons and the McLaurys in Tombstone, Arizona. It should have been a simple misdemeanor arrest. Thirty seconds and thirty bullets later, three officers were wounded and three citizens lay dead in the dirt.

Wyatt Earp was the last man standing, the only one unscathed. The lies began before the smoke cleared, but the gunfight at the O.K. Corral would soon become central to American beliefs about the Old West. *Epitaph* tells Wyatt's real story, unearthing the Homeric tragedy buried under 130 years of mythology, misrepresentation, and sheer indifference to fact. It gives voice to the real men and women whose lives were changed forever by those fatal thirty seconds. At its heart is the woman behind the myth: Josephine Sarah Marcus, who loved Wyatt Earp and who carefully chipped away at the truth until she crafted the heroic legend that would become the epitaph her husband deserved.



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Book Details

Epitaph: A Novel of the O.K. Corral by Mary Doria Russell.
Ecco (HarperCollins), 2015. ISBN 9780062198761. 592 pages.
www.harpercollins.com/9780062198761/epitaph

Available as an ebook and digital audiobook through the Ohio Digital Library:
ohiodigitallibrary.com

The audiobook is exquisitely narrated by Hillary Huber, who makes the characters and story come alive. If you enjoyed the story, you owe it to yourself to listen to the audiobook.

Available through the State Library of Ohio Talking Book Program:
webopac.klas.com/talkingbooks/ohio



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“On the afternoon of October 26, 1881, the Earps were incorruptible, intrepid lawmen bravely marching off to protect the city from gun-toting outlaws. The next morning, they were cold-blooded killers who’d murdered three men on a public street...”

About the Author

Widely praised for meticulous research, fine prose, and the compelling narrative drive of her stories, Mary Doria Russell is the award-winning author of six bestselling novels, including the science fiction classics **The Sparrow** and **Children of God**; the World War II thriller **A Thread of Grace**; and a political romance set in 1921 Cairo called **Dreamers of the Day**. With her latest novels, **Doc** and **Epitaph**, Russell has redefined two towering figures of the American West: the lawman Wyatt Earp and the dental surgeon Doc Holliday.

The daughter of a sheriff, Mary grew up with cops and guns but also holds a Ph.D. in biological anthropology from the University of Michigan and taught anatomy at the Case Western Reserve University School of Dentistry. She lives in Lyndhurst, Ohio.

“All my books are historical novels.
It’s just that some of them take place in the future.”
- Mary Doria Russell

Author Resources

Mary Doria Russell’s official website

marydoriarussell.net

Includes an expanded biography and links to her social media profiles.

Mary Doria Russell at Book Passage

youtu.be/l85pdrgL20g

In this 2015 bookstore appearance, Mary Doria Russell reads from and discusses **Epitaph** (video length: 45:57).

Nancy Pearl interviews Mary Doria Russell

www.seattlechannel.org/BookLust/episodes?videoid=x57351

From *Book Lust* with Nancy Pearl on the Seattle Channel (video length: 28:04).

For publicity and speaking engagement inquiries:

contact MDRappearances@gmail.com.

Go Further

*Ideas for extending the experience of reading **Epitaph**.*

A number of movies are based on the people and events surrounding the “Gunfight in the Vacant Lot behind Camillus Fly’s Photography Studio Near Fremont Street.” Consider having a film viewing and compare it to the story as told in **Epitaph**. Some options include **Tombstone** (1993) starring Kurt Russell as Wyatt Earp, **Wyatt Earp** (1994) with Kevin Costner in the title role, and **Gunfight at the O.K. Corral** (1957) starring Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas as Earp and Holliday, respectively. The gunfight even inspired *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* episodes. The Internet Movie Database offers a list of films and television episodes about the famous gunfight: www.imdb.com/list/ls066189469.

More on the last page!

Talk About It

Topics to share when discussing *Epitaph*.

Spoiler warning! Some discussion questions refer to key elements in the book. Do not read if you do not want to find out what happens.

***Epitaph* also provides a number of parallels to Homer's *Iliad*, and these feature in several of our "Talk About It" topic suggestions below.**

- The theme of Homer's *Iliad* is the rage of Achilles. In fact, the first word in the original Greek is *menin*, "a wrath or rage worthy of the gods." The wrath in *Epitaph* is arguably Wyatt Earp's. How does his rage shape the story overall? Is it appropriate to draw this parallel between Wyatt and Achilles?
- *Epitaph* is a work of historical fiction with "characters" who were living human beings. In fact, Wyatt Earp lived well into the 20th century, and Sadie Earp died in 1944. What are your thoughts on using actual people as characters in a novel? Since there is no way of knowing the content of private conversations, do you find it acceptable to "fill in the details" for interactions between characters? Does it matter if the story is set in the distant past (*Iliad*) or the more recent past (*Epitaph*)?
- On her website, Russell states that "the gunfight at the O.K. Corral has been a story about men, written by men, told to men..." She chose to tell the story of *Epitaph* from multiple women's perspectives, and the men are often portrayed through the perspectives of the women in the story. Discuss whether and how this changes the tone of the story.
- Both Doc Holliday and Johnny Ringo are portrayed as educated men, and both frequent the library in Tombstone. When Ringo states he's going to the library, Bill Brocius says, "Always reading. Juanito's a strange one." Holliday's friends are sometimes befuddled by his use of Latin phrases and similar quirks. Discuss the similarities and differences between these two men and the paths they took.
- What do you think of Russell's decision to include the section entitled "Who In Future Will Speak Well Of You?" that warns readers "[i]f you want a storybook ending, stop—now—and remember them in that tender moment." The section title is from Book XVI of the *Iliad*, where the speaker is expressing concern that if Achilles continues to sit out the rest of the war, nursing his wrath, "Who in future story will speak well of you unless you now save the Greeks from ruin?" What would have happened to Wyatt's and Sadie's reputations if that's actually where their story ended? Would we be reading about them if it had? As Russell writes: "Where a tale begins and where it ends matters."
- Russell doesn't paint the Cowboys as entirely villainous nor the Earps and Holliday as entirely virtuous. In fact, Tom McLaury is shown to be kind-hearted (although not entirely selfless) with his gifts of flowers and the puppy to Louisa. Ike Clanton is portrayed as having mental issues which serve as a precipitating factor for the gunfight itself. How does this shade your perception of the various characters and their roles in the action leading up to the gunfight and its aftermath? Did you feel sympathy for any of the Cowboys? Did you feel the actions of the Earps were justified?
- The motif of the piano comes up several times in connection with Doc and Sadie: first, at the very beginning with Doc teaching Sadie to play the piece she was working on. Later, Sadie plays for the group but has Doc sit right next to the piano. Doc states he wants to play a good piano at least once before he dies. What does the piano represent in each of these instances?
- The book's first line is "You're Russian." That is, as Doc explains soon after, "You're rushing." Does this have any resonance for the rest of the story? Does the story of the O.K. Corral rush out of control? Does Sadie's later life seem like she's continuing to rush when working to secure Wyatt's legacy? Or does the fact that the book begins with a misunderstanding (Russian/rushing) speak to a larger theme of confusion and misunderstanding in the characters' lives?

Go Further (continued)

Just like films, numerous books have been written that chronicle the Earps, Doc Holliday, and the Cowboys in both fiction and nonfiction. Your book discussion can be enhanced by comparing and contrasting these books with **Epitaph**. Here are just a few suggestions:

Doc by Mary Doria Russell

The “prequel” to **Epitaph** is Russell’s story of Doctor John Henry Holliday. Readers who come to Doc after reading **Epitaph** will recognize many characters in addition to Doc himself, including Wyatt Earp and Mária Katarina Harony. The book tells the story of Doc’s life in 1878 when he opened his dentist office in Dodge City.

Bloody Season by Loren D. Estleman

Estleman brings his writing style of hardboiled Western and mystery stories to the tale of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. With a mixture of in-depth research and fictionalized dialogue, the author provides a not-always-flattering portrait of the characters. Sadie Earp may not have approved, but this version of the story—full of vivid details—is a page-turner in Estleman’s hands.

Tombstone Travesty: Allie Earp Remembers by Jane Candia Coleman

Coleman based her novel on the actual memoir of Allie Earp, Virgil Earp’s wife. This book is Coleman’s take on Allie’s attempt to set the story right, not unlike Sadie’s crusade to make sure everyone knew Wyatt’s “true” story.

Explore More

*Additional ideas and resources to use with **Epitaph**.*

People sometimes forget that the events surrounding the gunfight at the O.K. Corral actually happened. Explore the historical record of those events and relive the actual “officer-involved shooting in the alley behind Fry’s Photography Studio near the corner of First and Fremont, a little north of the O.K. Corral.”

Tombstone History Archives

www.tombstonehistoryarchives.com

This site provides transcripts of a number of historical documents relating to the Earps and the gunfight, including court records, depositions, articles, and much more.

The Essential Books on Wyatt Earp and Tombstone

www.paulcoolbooks.com/?p=391

In 2014, Paul Cool, a writer and historian of the Southwest, compiled a list of the “essential” books on the people involved in the events recounted in **Epitaph**. Cool’s annotated bibliography includes almost two dozen titles. His website provides additional context of the time period.

As It Happened: Contemporary Newspapers

chroniclingamerica.loc.gov

The Library of Congress’ *Chronicling America* allows one to see history as it happened. The website has freely-available digitized newspapers dating from 1789 to 1963. Searching for “Wyatt Earp” provides a glimpse into Earp’s life before and after the events in Tombstone.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors, illustrators, and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits:
library.ohio.gov/ctro.

This toolkit revised
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