



## Divine Sarah

By Adam Braver  
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### Introduction

**Adam Braver** renders a portrait of the great actress Sarah Bernhardt in the twilight of her career as she explores her relationship to art, also asking the question, "When does art become the artist?"

Sarah truly was the first international star, and she caused a sensation wherever she went. Set over the course of one week in California in the year 1906, this novel opens with controversy. Facing protests from the League of Decency, she is forced to move her latest production from Los Angeles to the new developments of Venice Beach. And though this is only her most recent skirmish, the 62-year-old Sarah is exhausted and beginning to lose the will to fight.

Plagued by maladies of the flesh and the spirit, she begins to search her soul, revealing the truths of her life, including the self-doubt and insecurity hidden beneath an extravagant and confrontational lifestyle. Yet Sarah is not alone in her battle. Vince Baker, an ambitious newspaper reporter, faces his own demons as he tries to uncover the truth about the great actress. With a fierce imagination, lyrical delicacy, and a uniquely passionate vision, Adam Braver not only gives us an unforgettable Sarah Bernhardt, but he probes the depths of artistry and what happens when it begins to do battle with itself.

### Discussion Questions

1. *Divine Sarah* offers an intimate -- and fictional -- look into the life of a theater legend. How accurate do you think the author's recounting is? What makes the narrative feel "real?" How does the author achieve this?
2. Describe the relationship between Sarah and Molly. In what ways did their relationship resemble: Husband and wife? Siblings? Best friends? Business partners? Would you consider their relationship "healthy" or "unhealthy?" How so? Why does Molly stay with Sarah?
3. **Divine Sarah** takes place in California in the year 1906 when Sarah Bernhardt is banned from performing in Los Angeles because she has "loose morals." How do the actions of the bishop and politicians in Los Angeles compare to the reactions of religious groups and government now to "indecent" (i.e., Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction at the Super Bowl or pop music censorship on the radio)?
4. Do you find Sarah selfish? Self-absorbed? Overly dramatic? Disturbed? Do you like and admire her despite her negative qualities? Why? Does artistic genius require at least a certain amount of the qualities listed above or can an artist be "normal"?
5. Sarah is surrounded by an entourage, all of whom have their own agendas: Abbot Kinney with his ambitions for Venice, Vince Baker and his desire to be a journalistic "star," and even the bishop of Los Angeles. Discuss the various ways they are all dependent on Sarah, the artistic -- and public relations -- genius.
6. How does Sarah's childhood and relationship to Mother Superior and the Catholic Church shape her behavior in **Divine Sarah**? Were you shocked by the "fish mask" incident? Do you believe this incident is a sign of mental disturbance, emotional expression, artistic genius, or is it just a publicity stunt designed to get back at Vince Baker? Is it all of the above?
7. Sarah thinks about her younger self as if it were a separate entity, a role she used to play. What does this reveal about Sarah? Is it just another natural stage of growing older?
8. One of Sarah's frustrations with her performances is that she believes: "Her presence had overshadowed her art." Audiences were going to cheer for her even if she stood speechless for three hours straight. Do you think she is accurate in her assessment or does she underestimate the power of her performances?
9. The author includes a vignette of Sarah meeting Thomas Edison early in her career. They spend an enchanted evening together, finding each other to be kindred creative spirits, which surprises them both. How is theater and other arts similar to science? Are scientists artists?
10. A prominent thought for both Sarah and Vince Baker is to "walk away" -- Sarah, to leave the theater and Vince, the newspaper. What is behind this impulse on their parts? Compare how Vince and Sarah are similar. How are they different?
11. Are you surprised when you learn at the end that Sarah went on to perform for nearly 20 more years after the year in which **Divine Sarah** occurs? Why? How does it change your feelings about Sarah?

### About the Author

Adam Braver is the author of **Mr. Lincoln's Wars**. He holds an MFA from Goddard College, and his stories have been published in the *Cimarron Review* and *Pittsburgh Quarterly*. He teaches at Roger Williams College in Bristol, Rhode Island.