



## A Sundial in a Grave: 1610

By Mary Gentle  
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### Introduction

1610: Continental Europe is briefly at peace after years of war, but Henri IV of France is planning to invade the German principalities. In England, only five years earlier, conspirators nearly succeeded in blowing up King James I and his Parliament. The seeds of the English Civil War and the Thirty Years War are visibly being sown, and the possibility for both enlightenment and disaster abounds.

Robert Fludd, astrologer and esoteric mathematician, has calculated the future of the world and has come to the conclusion that in 500 years, a comet will hit Earth and destroy the planet. However, the only way to divert this disaster is for King James I to die, putting his son Prince Henry into power and therefore resetting the components of the future. While plotting the king's death, Fludd's equation points to the successful assassin of the King of France -- Valentin Rochefort.

Valentin Rochefort, duelist, down-at-heels aristocrat and spy for the Duc de Sully, France's powerful finance minister, unbeknownst to Fludd's plan, is drawn into the plot to kill King James I -- and to save him. Rochefort's journey will take him as far away as the distant Nippons, and as close as the truths of his own heart. Along the way, Rochefort acquires two unwanted companions -- foe and duelist Dariole and rescued samurai warrior, Saburo -- both are not whom they appear to be.

This swordsman without a conscience will soon find himself caught between loyalty, love, and blackmail, between kings, queens, politicians and Rosicrucians -- and the woman he has, unknowingly, crossed land and sea to meet.

A heroic and epic tale featuring duels, double-crosses, cross-dressing, assassinations and assignations, love, murder, blackmail, and fortune-telling, **A Sundial In A Grave: 1610** is a stunning historical adventure.

### Questions for Discussion

1. "Time is a sea, vaster than the Atlantic. I am a man attempting to control its tides" (page 6). Put aside the opinions of Rochefort and Dariole and decide for yourself whether Robert Fludd is the novel's villain or not. What motivates him to protect the fate of a world he will never see?
2. Consider the characters of Rochefort, Dariole, and Saburo. How do their individual secrets affect their personal quests? Of the three, whom do you consider to be the most honorable? Explain your answer.
3. "It was a wrench that split the world apart. Once I saw it, I could not stop seeing it. Could not understand how I had ever failed to see it" (page 88). How is it that Rochefort doesn't see Dariole's true identity from the beginning while others, like Saburo, see it so clearly?
4. "Sunlight casting a shadow from the gnomon onto the sundial's face ... And the worn letters cut into the bronze: ME UMBRA REGIT VOS LUMEN. I am ruled by shadow, you are ruled by light" (page 141). Discuss the meaning of the book's title and the symbolism of sundials in the novel.
5. "You may go about and about as you please; you will end in the same place" (page 162). Does this book support the idea of fate, free will, or both? Which do you believe in?
6. Rochefort is a murderer and a spy. How is it that the author has created a hero out of such a man? What personality traits has she given him to make readers care about him? Is it his flaws or his strengths that make him a likeable character?
7. "Sometimes it is better not to know what is possible, Valentin. Better to wait, and discover what is" (page 298). How is it that Caterina can say this when her life's work has been calculating the future?
8. If you could change one historical event, what would it be? What would be the chain reaction of that alteration? How would the world be different today? Would it affect you personally?
9. "I must decide what use I will make of a man who -- given time -- can tell what Time itself will do" (page 566). Weigh Rochefort's options regarding the fate of Fludd. Do you think his loyalty to Sully, and his plan to use Fludd as a bargaining chip, were his only reasons not to kill Fludd?
10. How does this book deal with the issues of gender and sex? What are their roles in the novel?
11. "A man cannot ignore knowledge once he has it" (page 634). Is Rochefort's conclusion the true theme of the novel? Does his self-realization make him more like Fludd? If so, does that redeem Fludd of his actions to change the future?

### About the Author

Born in 1956, Mary Gentle has worked as a cinema projectionist, a clerk, and a cook. She wrote her first novel at age 15. Although it wasn't published, a year later, the publishing house wrote back to her, asking whether she was working on anything else. She sent them the first part of what would become **A Hawk in Silver**, published in 1977. Since then, she has published numerous pieces of short fiction and novels, including the award-winning **Ash**. She holds two Master's degrees -- one in 17th century studies and one in war studies. An expert sword-fighter, Ms. Gentle lives in Stevenage, England with her partner Dean Wayland.