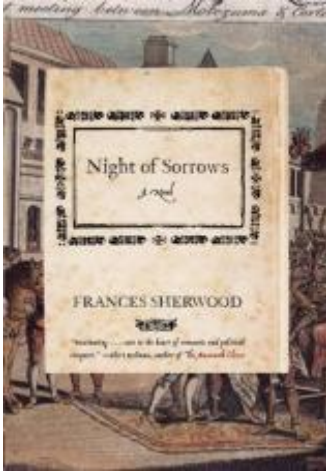


Night of Sorrows

by Frances Sherwood



About the Book

A tale of love and conquest, "full of page-turning situations...worthy of a García Lorca drama" (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

A historical novel about the conquistador Cortés and the Aztec princess Malintzín, by a "stunning" (*New York Times Book Review*) writer. **Night of Sorrows** plunges readers into the conflicting New Worlds of the mysterious Malintzín, born as an Aztec princess and sold as a slave, and her dashing and ruthless lover-master, conquistador Hernán Cortés. As they march through the Empire of the Sun to the shimmering island metropolis, Tenochtitlan (Mexico City), Cortés advances his cause by winning friends through Machiavellian conniving and confronting enemies in merciless battle. We witness the volatile dynamics and multifarious intrigues of the commander and his temperamental compadres, and weather the heartbreaking inner odyssey of Malintzín. Set at the twilight of the Aztec empire?April 1519 through the night of sorrows, la noche triste, June 30, 1520?Night of Sorrows explores the nature of slavery and imperialism, prostitution, friendship, feminine identity, and the macho ideal. Combining historical and fictional characters, Frances Sherwood's new novel is the story of a spectacular clash of traditions, imbued with her characteristic humor and bringing to life the colors, smells, and sounds of Mexico.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the storytelling approach used in **Night of Sorrows**. Did you find the third-person narrative effective or limiting in any way?
2. Compare and contrast Cuy and Malintzín. How do their outlooks on their circumstances differ? To what extent does Cuy envy or resent?or support?Malintzín?s confidence and behavior with the Spaniards?
3. The Franciscan monk, Francisco, is among the most conflicted of the characters, and, as Sherwood explains, in the

end he, ?unable to identify with the conquistador mentality, chooses the harshest of alternatives.? Do you see Francisco?s death as a suicide? Is there anything in text that warned you this was coming? To what degree does Francisco?s intense piety influence his ultimate choice?

4. While Cortés suffered enormous defeat on the Night of Sorrows, the conquistadores? intentional military efforts were surpassed by the biological weapons they unintentionally used: agents like smallpox were what most decisively destroyed the populations of the New World. Given that the Spanish ostensibly had Christian missionary goals, too, do you believe that they truly wanted to eliminate the native populations? How do the interactions between Cortés and Francisco in this novel make you feel about the sincerity of Cortés?s efforts at converting the Maya?

5. While the documentation of Cortés and Malintzín?s journey is spotty, Sherwood?s novel is based on real historic events. Consider what was lost because of the destruction wrought by Cortés and others. How convincing is the picture Sherwood draws of Maya civilization? How might today?s world be different, had the ancient cultures of the Americas survived into the present?

6. The European conquest in general, and certainly Cortés?s mission in Mexico, despite his cunning, was often based on erroneous assumptions about the land, the religion, and the nature of the races of peoples encountered. In Sherwood?s telling, what are some of the specific mistakes and misinterpretations Cortés makes? Which of these, in your reading, were personal flaws? And which, on the other hand, do you think reflected the mentality of all Europeans at the time? How convincingly does Sherwood convey the nuances of sixteenth-century racism?

7. History now remembers Hernan Cortés as a ruthless racist who destroyed a culture in a quest for mere material riches. But Sherwood?s portrait of this man is much more nuanced. What positive qualities did you recognize in the Cortés character? Is it possible to sympathize with him in spite of his ultimate goals?

8. Likewise, in Mexico the Spanish term malinchista is used to describe someone who would treason Mexico to outside influences: history remembers primarily Malintzín?s betrayal of her own people to a foreign power. But to what extent is her character also sympathetic? Are her actions understandable given the circumstances? Is she a traitor or a victim?

9. Discuss the role of women in the various societies portrayed. Would Malintzín be a typical example of women of her time and place?

10. Hold a mock trial of Malintzín. She is accused of treason. Have some members of your group act as the defense, others as the prosecution, with one person remaining as a judge or several as a jury. Alternate using quotes from characters in the book as ?testimony? from witnesses, and present other information from the novel as evidence. When each side has presented its arguments, have the jury render a verdict.

Author Bio

Frances Sherwood is a teacher in South Bend, Indiana, where she lives with her husband. She has written a book of short stories and three previous novels, including **The Book of Splendor and Vindication**, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Critical Praise

?In her hands, Cortés becomes much more than a one-dimensional brute in search of riches?.Cortés and his band of conquistadors are brilliantly evoked, and with a good deal of wit. . .The linguistic and narrative riches of the book enhance its moral complexity: Sherwood has refused to settle for the black-and-white thinking that so often mars this sort of historical fiction.?

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