

## Background

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Mexican upper class enjoyed a privileged lifestyle, a lifestyle that was forever changed when the dictatorial reign of Porfirio Díaz, president of Mexico for almost thirty-five years, came to an end. Revolutionaries, most of them Indians and *mestizos*, wanted equality in all areas of life, but particularly in land distribution (at that time about 800 landowners, in a country of 15 million people, owned 90 percent of the rural land). The war that started with gunfire on November 20, 1910, and ended with the signing of the Constitution of 1918, took more than a million lives and wreaked havoc on every stratum of society, sending almost half a million Mexican immigrants to the United States.

## The Story

The Guzmán Martínez family belongs to the upper class of northern Mexican society, although their wealth does not insulate them from family strife. Sisters Dolores and Alicia approach life very differently and, as females in a male dominated society, their “career” choices are limited to wife and mother. Their personal traumas ensue amidst a political firestorm in Monterrey, a movement instigated by their brother, Arturo, to oust the incumbent Nuevo León governor, a precursor of the war to come. The Revolution forces the family out of their privileged and complacent lifestyle, but despite its horrors, the war opens new avenues for future generations, particularly for Alicia's eldest children, Ana and Miguel.

## The Author

Cynthia Leal Massey is a second generation American of Mexican descent. *Fire Lilies*, her first novel, is winner of the 2002 Independent E-Book Award for Best Romance and 2002 EPIC Award finalist for Best Historical Novel. Massey is also the author of *The Caballeros of Ruby, Texas*, a 2003 WILLA Award finalist for Best Original Softcover fiction. Massey has published fiction and nonfiction in national and regional magazines.

## Discussion/Writing Prompts

1. Dolores and Alicia are two major viewpoint characters. Describe them. How are they similar? How are they different? Do you find one more sympathetic than the other? Explain.
2. Who are other major viewpoint characters? Describe them and explain how their actions propel the plot.
3. There are several minor characters who, nevertheless, have important roles in the novel. Name some of them and explain what their roles are.
4. When Dolores returns to Monterrey at the start of the Revolution, she confronts her father. Why does she feel it necessary to do this?
5. Raul's sister, Blanca, is a "thorn in his side." Explain why.
6. Arturo brings his bride home for the first time and when he introduces her to his family and friends, his mother faints. Explain why.
7. Describe Don Félix. Do you consider him to be a loving father, or an arrogant autocrat? Cite passages to support your contention.
8. Although Doña Isabel's marriage to Don Félix was arranged, did she love him? Cite passages to support your point.
9. Dolores believes that her husband, Don Francisco, is cruel because of his kidnapping as a young boy by Apaches. Do you agree with this assertion? Explain.
10. Is Arturo "foolhardy," as his brother-in-law Raul thinks, or is he courageous? Explain.
11. "God made the world for all, but a few have appropriated it." Explain what this quote means and how it relates to the novel.

12. "One bright man and a thousand fools, that is a revolution!" Cite passages in the novel that support this quote.

13. "It is better to go from sandal to boot, than to go from boot to sandal." Explain what it means and how it relates to the last section of the novel.

14. In a passage starting on page 217, Raul and his father-in-law meet Pancho Villa for the first time. This passage is based on a true incident that occurred in Monterrey in the Spring of 1915 when Villa took over the city. How does Raul describe Villa? Do you believe his account to be objective? Explain.

15. Explain Ana's aversion to marriage.

16. One theme of the novel is "the need for forgiveness." Who is in need of forgiveness in this novel?

17. Who is the heroine of this story? Explain.

18. Analyze the varying images of women as the novel develops before, during, and after the Revolution.

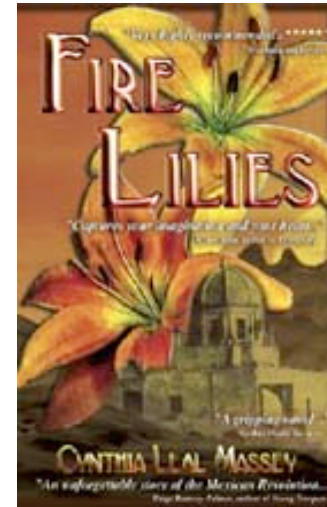
19. The Mexican Revolution was a convoluted period in the history of Mexico. The character of Doctor Homero Treviño in Part III says "the Revolution did nothing but spawn another breed of corrupt men." From your knowledge of Mexican history and this period, in particular, do you believe this comment to be accurate?

20. At the end of the novel, Miguel goes to Texas. Explain why he feels it necessary to move to the United States.

### Theme & Topics

- Class envy
- Family relations
- Forgiveness
- Mexican Revolution
- Patriarchy
- Women's & girls' roles in the early twentieth century

## A Reader's Guide to



### Fire Lilies

by  
Cynthia Leal Massey

Historical Fiction

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