

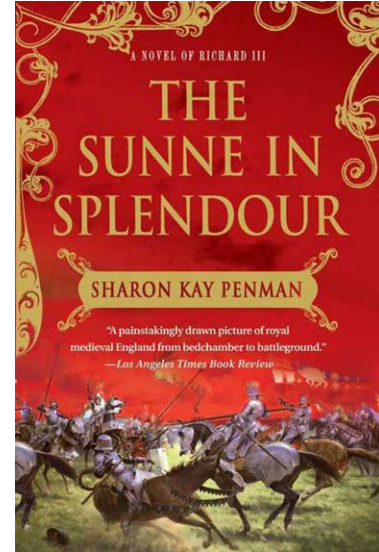
READING GROUP GUIDE

The Sunne In Splendour

By Sharon Kay Penman

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Sunne in Splendour* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Sunne in Splendour*.

About the Book

A glorious novel of the controversial Richard III---a monarch betrayed in life by his allies and betrayed in death by history

In this beautifully rendered modern classic, Sharon Kay Penman redeems Richard III---vilified as the bitter, twisted, scheming hunchback who murdered his nephews, the princes in the Tower---from his maligned place in history with a dazzling combination of research and storytelling.

Born into the treacherous courts of fifteenth-century England, in the midst of what history has called The War of the Roses, Richard was raised in the shadow of his charismatic brother, King Edward IV. Loyal to his friends and passionately in love with the one woman who was denied him, Richard emerges as a gifted man far more sinned against than sinning.

This magnificent retelling of his life is filled with all of the sights and sounds of battle, the customs and lore of the fifteenth century, the rigors of court politics, and the passions and prejudices of royalty.



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About the Author

For many years while she was a student and then a tax lawyer, Sharon Kay Penman slowly but steadily worked on a novel about the life of Richard III. After finishing the manuscript, however, her only copy was stolen from her car in a busy parking lot. Penman rewrote the entire novel that would become *The Sunne in Splendour*. When it was originally published in 1982, she quit her job to write full-time. Penman is the author of six critically acclaimed historical novels and four medieval mysteries, one of which was a finalist for an Edgar Award for Best First Mystery from the Mystery Writers of America.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Discuss the interplay between Richard, Edward, and Edmund in the opening sequence of the book. How does the author foreshadow what is to come? How do the events of the first chapter set the scene and frame the rest of the story?
- 2) Why does the author choose the point of view of secondary characters, such as Rob Percy and Francis Lovell, to help tell the story? Keeping in mind the relationship between the observer and those observed, to what extent are they good, trustworthy narrators?
- 3) Many believed Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville was the result of witchcraft. Why do you think Edward chose Elizabeth for his queen?
- 4) Medieval society was rigidly stratified, and upward mobility was an alien concept. Can Americans identify with a world in which a man or woman's destiny was almost always determined by birth?
- 5) What sort of confinements did women live within in medieval society? Although the position of women in society has changed dramatically since the Middle Ages, do you feel there are similarities between the way women live in society today and the way they lived then?
- 6) Look at the exchange between Anne and Isabel on pages 216 and 217. What does each woman reveal about herself?
- 7) Discuss the differences, and similarities, among Elizabeth Woodville, Cecily Neville, and Marguerite d'Anjou. What are their motivations, and how do they each seek to further their ambitions?
- 8) After returning from exile in Burgundy, Edward gains entry into York by promising that he wishes only to reclaim that which is rightfully his—the duchy of York. On page 262, Richard explains that this clever tactic was used once before: "Harry of Lancaster's grandfather did return from exile to claim only his duchy of Lancaster and, of course, deposed a King. My brother thought it only fitting that a gambit used by the first Lancastrian King should now serve York!"



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Discuss the instances throughout the book in which history is used as a lesson and touchstone, a guiding light for the present.

9) What does the book say about the trustworthiness of history? Should we retain a healthy degree of skepticism about accounts of bygone events?

10) How did the adulation Edward initially inspired in court compare to the subsequent attitudes his courtiers later held toward him? In which ways was he burdened by unrealistic expectations? How did the King manipulate his early reputation to his advantage?

11) Throughout the story, characters struggle to do what is honorable and right in the face of impending danger. As time goes by, the line between what is right and what is wrong often becomes blurred beyond the point of recognition. For example, early in his reign, Edward embraced a standard of mercy, despite his own losses, that was out of step with the warfare of his time. Discuss his later speech to Richard on page 406, in which he defends his decision to execute Harry of Lancaster: "I was unwilling to see coming trouble till it did have me by the throat... No, I was too quick to trust, too slow to suspect. And I came close, Christ, so close to losing all." Is it ever possible to be both right *and* dishonorable, both honorable *and* wrong?

12) What other characters lose their innocence during the course of the book? How do they change? How do their decisions mirror these changes?

13) Richard remains Edward's closest ally, even after death, yet he fails as much, if not more so, than he succeeds; He loses as much as he wins. But, given the time and place, what were Richard's alternatives?

14) After spending some time in the fifteenth-century, do you think that human nature has changed much over the centuries? Can you identify with the characters in *The Sunne in Splendour*? What were the most striking similarities between that society and ours? The greatest differences?

15) How does the book change your impressions of life in the courts of Edward and Richard III?

16) What is the responsibility of the historical novelist? Should the author feel free to make drastic or dramatic changes to known facts? If the author takes a position unsupported by historical evidence or academic interpretation, should he or she then offer an explanation in an Author's Note?

17) Do you agree with the author that a historical novel requires a solid factual foundation?

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