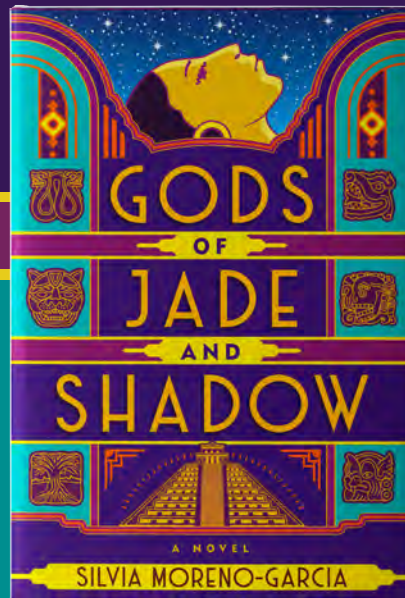


GODS OF JADE AND SHADOW



BY SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were your first impressions of Casiopea? Hun-Kamé? Martin? How did you feel about them by the end of the book?
2. How did you feel about the relationship between Casiopea and Hun-Kamé?
3. What did you think about the historical period and setting of the book? Could you see this as a modern-day adventure?
4. What did you think about the ending? Do you wish anything had been different? Would you read a sequel to this story? If so, would you prefer it feature Casiopea and Hun-Kamé, or would you prefer a story in the same world with new characters?
5. Discuss Martin's perception of the world versus Casiopea's. Why do you think, raised under the same roof, they see things so differently?

INTRODUCTION TO XIBALBA:

AKA THE MAYAN UNDERWORLD

To the pre-Columbian K'iche' people, Xibalba, or the Place of Fear, was an underground kingdom which was ruled by several underworld lords who were responsible for inflicting illnesses and death. Much of what is known about Xibalba comes from ceramic imagery—most written records of the Ancient Maya were destroyed, though a handful of codices and documents exist, such as the *Popol Vuh*, a post-colonial text which deals with Xibalba in some detail.

Xibalba is understood to be underground, but some imagery shows it to be underwater, reached via a canoe. The waterholes, or cenotes, can be interpreted as passages to this other realm. Dogs or owls serve as messengers for the inhabitants of this underworld. Thanks to the *Popol Vuh* we know it has several large buildings or houses, a ball court, trees, fantastic creatures, and perhaps most importantly, a political hierarchy. The *Popol Vuh* also states that there are twelve lords of Xibalba, who are mostly shown in codices and ceramic vessels as fleshless skeletons. Some representations show them with their skin and flesh intact. Two lords seem to rule over all the others: Hun-Kamé (One Death) and Yucub-Kamé (Seven Death).

The *Popol Vuh* indicates that mortals offered blood sacrifices to the lords of Xibalba until they were vanquished by the Hero Twins, and afterwards only broken ceramics and croton sap were available to them. This is a big deal because blood sacrifices and worship are incredibly important in Maya cosmology, which believed the only reason humans were created was so they could offer sacrifices to the gods and worship them. The relationship between creator and creation is never one of equality, it is instead ruled by social and even cosmic responsibilities, which are embroidered into community ties. Yet there is a sense of cycles, of giving and taking, to these narratives. After all, the gods may require blood but they also give the corn which nourishes.

GODS OF JADE AND SHADOW begins with a bone splinter and with blood, which seems appropriate. The Lords of Xibalba in the book are not nearly so frightful as the images on ceramic vessels. In fact, they are unnaturally beautiful and their kingdom, though at times ghastly, is amazing. But then again, as *The Poetic Popol Vuh* by Rob de Ridder states, Xibalba could also translate as the "Place of Astonishment."

THE SYMBOLISM IN GODS OF JADE AND SHADOWS:

OWLS AND OTHER ANIMALS OF MAYAN FOLKLORE



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GODS OF JADE AND SHADOW features an illustration of an owl by Mexican artist Monarobot. Owls appear as messengers of the Lords of Xibalba, the Underworld, in the *Popol Vuh*, which makes sense since owls are nocturnal. There are more than two dozen species of owls in southern Mexico and Central America, and the owls depicted in ancient Maya art are the great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*) and the screech owl (*Otus guatemalensis*). Owls are sometimes shown sitting atop the head of a deity. One of the most famous depictions of an owl in Maya art is the headdress of God L on the Princeton Vase. In the novel, Vucub-Kamé, who can see the future, is the master of the owls.

The screech of the owl was considered a message from the Underworld and a portent of bad luck. There's a famous saying: "Cuando el tecolote canta, el indio muere," which translates as: "When the owl hoots, the Indian dies."

Other animals appear in the novel and every character seems to share an association, whether explicit or more subtle, with an animal: The sorcerer Huay Chivo is linked with a goat, since that is literally what the name means; Casiopea Tun, the heroine, is nicknamed "firefly." Reading *Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture* by Andrea Joyce Stone and Marc Zender explains that there seems to be an association between the Underworld and fireflies: "The Maya saw a kinship between certain hard, shiny insect carapaces and bones." It's therefore rather fitting that Casiopea should thrust her hand into a chest and find it is filled with bones, hence beginning a magical quest.

GLOSSARY

Many elements of Maya mythology are woven throughout this novel, some more explicitly than others. However, this is a work of fantasy and should not be considered an anthropological text. Nevertheless, this short glossary below may be of interest to readers. Look for more terms at the back of the book.

CENOTE—A waterhole. Like caves, certain cenotes were considered entrances to the Underworld and were of ritual importance.

CHU'LEL—Vital energy. All animals and inanimate objects possess it.

HENEQUEN—A fiber plant woven since pre-Columbian times. It was the bedrock of the economy of Yucatán.

HERO TWINS—Two brothers who journey to Xibalba and, among other things, avenge the death of their father and uncle at the hands of the gods of the Underworld by besting them in several competitions. They are tied to the idea of cycles, of birth and rebirth.

JADE—Jade was associated with corn, hence with life. A jade bead was placed in the mouth of corpses as part of funerary rites. Jade was also associated with royalty.

DIVINE CASTE—Upper-class families of European descent who dominated the politics and economy of Yucatán.

GLOSSARY

MAMLAB (plural; singular *Mam*)—Huastec deities associated with rain and thunder. When the rivers overflow with rain, they use the bellies of swollen animals that have drowned in the currents to play the drums.

MIDDLEWORLD—In Ancient Maya cosmology, Earth is the land where humans reside.

POPOL VUH—A narrative of the creation myths of the K'iche' people originally passed down through oral tradition.

SACRIFICE—Stingray spines and other instruments were used by Maya nobles regularly in order to draw blood that would nourish the gods. When the Hero Twins defeated the Lords of Xibalba, they ordered that humans should no longer give them proper sacrifices, only croton sap and “dirty blood.” Sacrifice by humans is the engine that drives the universe, and proper sacrifices must always be made. Indeed, the reason humans were chosen to inhabit earth is so that they could provide such sacrifices.

TUN—Stone. Also, year. Stones are associated with time or cycles, since they are used to commemorate events.

XIBALBA—The Maya Underworld, full of terrifying sights, such as a river of blood and a river of pus. The Yucatec Maya referred to the Underworld as *Mitnal*. Owls or dogs are associated with death, hence the messengers of Xibalba are the four fearsome owls, including *Chabi-Tucur* and *Huracán-Tucur*, mentioned in the novel.