

The Conqueror

by Georgette Heyer

A novel of William the Conqueror, the bastard son who overpowered a kingdom and the woman who melted his heart

About the Author

The late Georgette Heyer was a very private woman. Her historical novels have charmed and delighted millions of readers for decades, though she rarely reached out to the public to discuss her works or private life. It is known that she was born in Wimbledon in August 1902, and her first novel, *The Black Moth*, was published in 1921.

Heyer published 56 books over the next 53 years, until her death from lung cancer in 1974. Heyer's large volume of works included Regency romances, mysteries and historical fiction. Known also as the Queen of Regency romance, Heyer was legendary for her research, historical accuracy and her extraordinary plots and characterizations. Her last book, *My Lord John*, was published posthumously in 1975. She was married to George Ronald Rougier, a mining engineer, and they had one son together, Richard.

Reading Group Guide

The stirring history of William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, who invaded England and became the King. His victory, concluded at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, is known as the Norman Conquest.

Known for her exhaustive research and ability to bring past eras to life, bestselling author Georgette Heyer tells the story of William the Conqueror, who became King of England in 1066, and his queen Matilda, the high-born noblewoman who at first scornfully spurned him. William was an illegitimate child of a nobleman, who won his dukedom through force of will, and went on to bring European feudalism to England, along with a program of building and fortification that included the building of the Tower of London.

The historical novel includes Heyer's brilliant period language and her perfect grasp of the details of the day - clothing, armor, weapons, and food - making for a fascinating and blood-stirring read.

1. At the beginning of the book *Herlava*, just before she gives birth, dreams of a tree that grows from her womb to stretch its branches over both Normandy and England. She then proclaims, "My son will be a King. He shall grasp and hold, and he shall rule over Normandy and England, even as the tree stretched out its branches." How is William's life affected by this vision, announced at his birth? Do you think that his life would have taken a different path without this announcement? In what way?
2. Not long out of boyhood, Raoul de Harcourt stops his older brother from terrorizing a peasant family on another man's lands. When brought up before his father for this action, he declares that he is going to serve Duke William in the hopes of seeing a more lawful Normandy. In what ways did William fulfill Raoul's hopes? In what ways did he let him down?

3. Raoul takes upon himself the position of William's Watcher without, at first not mentioning it to the Duke and not looking for any reward for his service. In what ways is Raoul different from all the other men in William's court? How does the guileless behavior serve him? Do you think that he would have been more successful had he been less honest or idealistic?
4. William goes to his suzerain, King Henry of France for help when Guy of Burgundy attempts to kill William in his sleep. What does the King's response and subsequent actions tell you about the King's relationship to his vassals? About their relationship to him? Does it hurt William later to continue to consider Henry his suzerain even after Henry attacks Normandy?
5. At Alencon the Duke, enraged by their insults of a group of men, calling him "byblow of Normandy" orders their hands and feet cut off when they are finally captured. Raoul is upset by this, saying that though the Duke is usually wise and merciful, acts like this cruelty are what will be remembered. What do you remember most about Duke William at the end of the book? How does history remember him?
6. Lanfranc, Prior of the Abbey of Herluin at Bec, turns out to be one of William's most cunning advisors in matters of politics. What do you think of the involvement of clergymen of the time in politics? What advantages do they have? What disadvantages?
7. On page 106 Edgar reflects on the differences between Norman and English (Saxon) culture. Which do you consider to be the more civilized culture? Why?
8. Near the beginning of Edgar's exile in Normandy he tells Raoul that the "little loves and hatreds" of men are nothing compared to loyalty to one's lord and country. Raoul counters, "But friendship may endure." Do you have any loyalties in your life that would make you oppose a close friend? Would you react like Edgar or like Raoul in the face of such a conflict?
9. William and Matilda's relationship has a very rocky and slightly violent beginning. Does her personality, and their marriage, serve to calm William or to encourage his hasty nature? What things does William do that he might not have had he married someone else?
10. William's military prowess is widely acknowledged. Gilbert d'Aufay says of William, "He has all manner of odd notions and plans, and they always seem to end just as he says they will, though everything else thinks them folly." What "odd notions" is Gilbert referring to? In what ways did William revolutionize the way battles were fought?
11. Count Guy of Ponthieu says of Duke William, "If I had been so sure of myself as that man I believe I might have conquered the world." What do you think of this statement?
12. Harold agrees to swear to hold the crown of England for William, but intends to betray his oath. William tricks Harold into swearing on the bones of a saint. Who do you side with on this issue? Who was more in the wrong? Why?
13. When William first proposes to invade and conquer England, many of his nobles vehemently protest his plans. How does William turn the mood of the crowd and build an enthusiastic army to invade England?

14. When William and Harold see the prodigy with two torsos on one set of legs, one of the torsos has died and Galet, the fool, predicts that prodigy symbolizes Normandy and England should William conquer England, with Normandy as the dead half. Many people close to William seem to believe this as well, yet William perseveres with his plans of conquest. Why does William do this? Does he not have the same fears or does the glory of being a King blind him to the potential consequences?
15. As William sails for England, Matilda begins to plan a great tapestry showing William's adventures. This is the Bayeux tapestry, which can be viewed at www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk. Looking at the tapestry, does it tell the same story that the author tells? What differences are there?
16. Harold refuses to let either of his brothers take his place leading his army against William's invaders. Ultimately, this is Harold's downfall as he is killed in battle. Do you think that William was right to say that he was a greater man than Harold because Harold was ruled by his heart and William by his head? When do William's actions show more heart than head?
17. After the final battle Raoul finds Edgar dying. Edgar confirms that their friendship did last and commends his sister to Raoul's care. Raoul wraps Edgar in his cloak and bids a monk send him home to Marwell. When Raoul travels to Marwell, Elfrida at first rejects him, saying he has blood on his hands because her brother came home wrapped in his cloak. In her place, how would you react? Would you be able to accept and forgive a person who had fought against your countrymen, your sibling?