

Ana Teresa Torres

MALENA DE CINCO MUNDOS



Literal Books

Malena de cinco mundos,
by Ana Teresa Torres.
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1997.

Malena de cinco mundos, a charming new novel by Venezuelan writer Ana Teresa Torres, is a humorous, but biting account of the condition of women over the centuries. Malena, a thirty-five-year old, divorced, working mother, is spending a brief vacation with her boyfriend, Martín, on a Caribbean island. The skies are blue and the breezes heavenly, but the irritants of everyday life persist, even here in this

earthly paradise. Malena cannot escape psychologically from her nagging mother, her critical ex-husband, her resentful siblings, her needy son. Furthermore, the rich but insecure Martín requires constant reassurance of his power and importance. Divorced and of immigrant stock, he must prove himself over and over

again, complaining about the service, insulting the help, flaunting his money. When he and Malena run into friends of his, he can't resist accepting their invitation to lunch, even though he and Malena have gone to the island to be alone. Malena doesn't fit in—Martín's friends know his ex-wife and see her as the other woman—yet Martín continues to put her in awkward social situations. Although he views himself as

“hip” and open minded, Martín feels threatened by Malena's previous sexual experiences, and his possessiveness produces tension. Shopping in expensive tourist shops or dozing in the sun, Malena finds her mind drifting toward an old flame, Alfredo Rivero.

Malena is a modern woman. She is an executive in an insurance company. She uses contraceptives, and she makes her own decisions. Yet, in reality, she is no different from women through the ages. Episodes from Malena's previous lives, interspersed among scenes of her Caribbean vacation, reveal that since Roman times she has been as she is now: emotionally dependent on men, a slave to love and sex.

For, indeed, Malena is in her fifth incarnation. As Giulia Metella, wife of the Roman consul, Lucio Quinto Lucarnio, she was ambitious for her husband and guided him into an exalted political position. When his career fell apart, and he decided to retire to his country estate in order to devote himself to the quiet, scholarly life he had always wanted, she supported him entirely. She solved family problems, ran the household, and took care that no one disturb or distract him. And yet, when she died (possibly murdered by him), he condemned her for making his happiness her own, for catering to his every whim, and thereby robbing him of his will. In other words, no matter how hard she tried to meet her man's expectations, she wound up doing the wrong thing.

As Juanita Redondo, in eighteenth-century Caracas,

Malena finds herself in a different, although equally pernicious situation. Born in Seville, she is abandoned at a convent door and raised by nuns but escapes and eventually makes her way to the New World, where she is mistreated, exploited, falsely accused, and executed for a crime she didn't commit. In spite of Juanita's intelligence and spirit, she is poor and powerless against the malice of others. Worse yet, she lacks a man to take care of her.

Isabella Bruni, Malena's sixteenth-century incarnation, has a brilliant mind, the only child of a doctor who passes on his medical knowledge to her. After her father's death, Isabella devotes herself to the study of unwanted pregnancy and discovers the relationship between a woman's menstrual cycle and her periods of fecundity. Yet, she is never given credit for her findings, and only her young lover's memoir-biography saves her from complete anonymity. As a late nineteenth-century Venezuelan romantic, Malena makes her way to Vienna to be analyzed by Sigmund Freud. A severely depressed widow, she arrives prepared to describe the symptoms of her obsessive passion, bringing with her letters she wrote to her dead husband. However, in some of the book's most hilarious passages, the doctor, who fancies he knows Spanish because he read *Don Quijote* in the original, keeps interrupting her for definitions of Venezuelan slang.

What all these versions of Malena have in common is their dependence on men. In

all of her lives, Malena lives in function of men. No matter how brilliant or educated they are, without men, these women are doomed.

When the present-day Malena dies in a car accident on her way to visit Alfredo Rivero, she appears before the Lords of Destiny, who have been watching her all the while from above, and demands that they, for once, allow her to live as a modern woman. The Lords, one of which is a rabid misogynist, don't understand. Didn't she have a good job and an active sex life, they want to know. How much more modern can she get? They offer to give her a new life as a male, but that's not what she wants. She enjoys being female, but for once, she would like a life with no Alfredo Romeros, a life in which she won't be emotionally bound by any man, a life in which she can enjoy—even love men—and yet not feel that her fate depends on them. It's time, she suggests, to bring some new blood into the crew; what is needed is a Lady of Destiny who really understands the situation.

Much of the humor in this entertaining novel derives from the Lords' comments on Malena's predicaments. Even the kindest of them really just doesn't "get it." By keeping her tone light and her language colloquial, Torres, a psychoanalyst by training, has produced a highly readable novel, and yet tackles difficult social and psychological issues.