

# Bittersweet Short Guide

## Bittersweet by Danielle Steel

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# Characters

Undoubtedly, the main character is India Taylor, a forty-three-year-old soccer mom in Westport, Connecticut. Like many of Steel's heroines, she is still beautiful and good at everything she does. She once lived an exciting life taking pictures in thirdworld countries, but her life now consists of keeping up with her four children aged nine to fourteen and taking care of her husband, Doug, whom she met while both were in the Peace Corps in Costa Rica. As a young woman, India had a promising career as a photojournalist, but at Doug's insistence, she gave it all up to get married.

India's desire to pursue some projects causes friction in her marriage, and her discovery that Doug thinks of her as nothing more than a caregiver for him and their children sends her into a depression that is lifted only when she meets Paul Ward in Cape Cod, the location of her summer home.

On Paul's boat, the Sea Star, India initially bonds with Paul, who, at the time, is happily married to the famous and glamorous novelist Serena Smith. India is somewhat attracted to Paul, but when she meets Serena a while later, she realizes how deeply in love they are. However, her talks with Paul, her photo shoot with Serena, and her own soul-searching lead her to reexamine her marriage and her choice of giving up her career. She begins to realize that she is not self-fulfilled, but her husband does not understand her needs.

India and Paul remain friends after that summer in Cape Cod, but India's life changes.

Her insistence to go back to work on a parttime basis only broadens the gulf between her and Doug, but her talks with Paul give her the strength to assert her desires and to cope with her husband's coldness and disapproval.

Paul proves to be an amazing pillar of support for India during her troubled times, but when his beloved wife Serena unexpectedly dies in a plane crash, their roles are reversed. Paul, traveling the world in the Sea Star, begins to seek comfort from India rather than provide support to her.

Although Doug begins to question their friendship, the relationship remains platonic until Doug leaves India and Paul comes to terms with his grief.

When Paul returns to New York for a short trip, he and India begin an affair, and India, who has finally found true love and self-fulfillment, is completely content, but her bliss is short-lived. Feeling guilty about being unfaithful to his dead wife, Paul breaks off the relationship with India and leaves her devastated.

India eventually recovers from this shock by taking an assignment that brings her to Rwanda. Here, she meets up with Paul again, and they both realize how much they love each other, though they do not act on these feelings. Although she lost her husband, India is happy to be an active photojournalist again, but she is not whole because she is



missing an important factor— her soul mate. At the end of the novel, Paul comes through both a literal and figurative hurricane to reunite with India, and in each other, their lives become complete.

While several characters, such as India's children, her agent Raoul, neighbors and friends, play roles in the novel, none are as important as India and Paul. In general, the book focuses on the individual development of these two characters and how that progress brings them together.

## Social Concerns

As in many of Steel's novels, there is an attempt to mark the setting with mention of social issues of the day. India Taylor, the main character, uses her talent as a photographer to expose some of the social ills blemishing the world in the late 1990's.

Her photographs provide the public with illustrations of important social issues.

India is no great reformer; she does not try to rid the world of any of its horrible problems, but she does capture concrete images of neglect, abuse, and poverty that shed light on evils in the world. India's assignments take her from exploring child abuse in Harlem, to exposing juvenile prostitution in London, to revealing ill-equipped medical facilities in Rwanda. Steel offers no extensive commentary on these problems; rather, she presents a heroine whose career and, in some cases, life choices are determined and fueled by a desire to be socially active and to make others aware of social issues.

Perhaps the larger concern explored here is the role of woman in society, a matter closely related to thematic points. Seventeen years ago, India sacrificed a career she loved to marry Doug Taylor and raise a family. India has been a model wife, mother, and homemaker, yet she finds after her youngest child is nine that she truly misses photojournalism. Her desire to again pursue her career causes much friction in her marriage because her husband sees their relationship as a "deal" that involves her devoting her life solely to home and family.

Like many women of the later twentieth century, India firmly believes she can be wife, mother, and career-woman at the same time, but Doug's old-fashioned notions disallow her from exploring this option without a tremendous amount of grief from him. Doug is incapable of taking a modern view of women's opportunities; as a result, he leaves India and eventually divorces her because she becomes adamant about revisiting her professional possibilities. In this struggle, two very different definitions of a woman's role emerge: an antiquated notion limiting women primarily to caregiving duties at the expense of personal satisfaction, and secondly, a contemporary view including both a nurturing role and a chance for self-expression and self-fulfillment. Over all, in India Taylor, we see encapsulated the struggles a woman sometimes encounters as she attempts to maintain a balance in her life, often pitting societal expectations or familial responsibilities against individual desires (this is an issue often addressed in Steel's work).



# Techniques

In *Bittersweet*, Steel allows for the unfolding of the action through the voice of a third-person, limited-omniscience narrator.

The narrative technique allows the reader to get into the head of India Taylor and learn all that she is thinking, saying, feeling, and doing. Other characters are developed through their relationship with and reaction to India. The thoughts of characters besides India are sometimes revealed, but typically, this occurs only when the feelings involve her in some way. For example, the unnamed narrator may jump into Paul's consciousness momentarily to divulge his thoughts, but usually this will occur only when Paul is thinking of India; the same goes for other characters. This type of narrative style allows much of the focus to remain on India as she is the main character of this novel and this is, essentially, her story.

The plot is arranged in chronological order. The only interruption in the sequence occurs when a character will reminisce about a past event, but there are no extensive flashbacks. Some of the most effective flashbacks, however, are those that center on India's past life, her life as a photojournalist.

These scenes clearly depict India's passion for her work and underscore what she gave up for the love of an ungrateful man. Also, some flashbacks include her father, a photographer who lost his life on a dangerous assignment in war-torn Vietnam. While his memory serves as inspiration to India, it also provides Doug with a vivid example of the dangers of his wife's chosen career (the image of India's fallen father may be the closest element to a leit motif found in the work).

The combination of the omniscient narrator and chronological plot structure allows the reader to follow along as India finds herself, and this pattern of self-discovery neatly defines the novel as a sort of bildungsroman or perhaps a story of initiation. In an initiation story, a young, naive, somewhat inexperienced protagonist meets with some life-altering incident that introduces him/her into maturity, experience, and/or the adult world. Although India is certainly an adult at the beginning of the book, she is naive to her husband's expectations of her marital role. Doug's announcement that he sees marriage as a business contract and not a loving covenant forces India to open her eyes; this marks her initiation into a world she was unaware of beforehand. As a result, she begins a journey of self-discovery and eventually enters a new world and another level of maturity.

Without the linear structure and omniscient narrator, the reader could not have followed India's maturation process so closely and intimately.

Some weakness, however, is exposed through the constant and full attention placed on India. The reader quickly becomes aware of a repetitive pattern of India's thoughts and, oftentimes, her words.



Although some repetition can add muchneeded emphasis to ideas and situations, the duplication here usually is redundant and ineffectual to both character and plot development.



# Themes

The major themes of the novel are closely tied to the concern with a woman's role in society. Steel often writes about women's self-fulfillment, and society's expectations of a woman's place are often at odds with the heroine's desire to forge her own place and live by her own rules. Certainly, India Taylor is no extremist who wishes to redefine the definition of womanhood by radical means; rather, she simply wants what most modern women want today—the ability to find a delicate and gratifying balance among the various roles she plays: wife, mother, career woman, and individual.

Characteristically, Steel also explores the theme of marital relationships. Doug and India's marriage, at least in Doug's mind, is more business contract than loving covenant. He feels that his wife must completely sacrifice herself for marriage and family and, thus, completely lose her "selfhood."

India, on the other hand, truly believes in love; she willingly gives of herself totally throughout seventeen years of marriage because she loves Doug and their children, and, in turn, she assumes Doug loves her just as deeply. Their marriage ultimately falls apart when she discovers she and her husband have built a relationship based on two entirely different definitions of "marriage." In order for this marriage to survive, India must cease to be India. She must continue to be simply "Doug's wife" or "the mother of Doug's children."

Steel provides contrasts to the Taylor marriage to offer different takes on marital relationships. India's friend Gail remains happily married by seeking fulfillment, particularly sexual gratification, through her affairs with various men. Also, Dick and Jenny Parker, the Taylors' neighbors in Cape Cod, have a seemingly perfect marriage.

They are both surgeons, and they have a child. Their marriage represents what India desires: mutual encouragement and acceptance. Additionally, the marriage of Wall Street wizard Paul Ward and best-selling novelist Serena Smith provides a vehicle through which to explore the theme of marriage. Paul and Serena both actively pursue their careers and their individual interests, yet they remain a couple sincerely devoted to each other and their marriage. While they may each want different things at times, they manage to find common ground to build a strong bond. This greatly contrasts India's relationship with Doug, for he demands that she have and pursue no activities outside of their marriage and family.

Almost inextricably linked with the theme of marriage is self-fulfillment. Those characters content with who they are have the strongest relationships. Doug's ultimatum that India must give up photography to be his wife puts an end to her career, and ultimately, her means of self-gratification.

Her later desire to return to work and self-satisfaction first disrupts the thin layer of nuptial bliss she seemingly enjoyed; then, it ends her marriage. Paul and Serena, on the





other hand, discover pleasure in their careers and in hobbies; this allows them, in turn, to be happy with each other. Consequently, they enjoy a solid marriage.

Furthermore, Steel probes the function of art. In many of her novels, characters express themselves through some artistic medium, and often this articulation leads to self-fulfillment. India is an artist who expresses herself through her photography, a medium that not only serves a social function, but it also fulfils a personal desire.

India's ability to create art feeds her soul.

When she gives up her career, she relinquishes a part of herself, and she can feel whole again only when she returns to her craft. Even after Doug leaves her, she is able to uncover some joy through her work.

# Adaptations

No plans to adapt the novel to film or television are presently in the works. The book, however, is available on both compact disk and cassette through BDD Audio.



## Key Questions

Steel's books have such a popular appeal to female readers because they often explore themes and introduce characters with whom women can identify. Although many of these women may not have summer homes in Cape Cod and aspirations to win a Pulitzer Prize, they can still relate to many of the struggles and desires experienced by the characters in this book.

1. How does India Taylor epitomize the dilemma of the modern woman?
2. Must the reader be a woman to understand and appreciate the conflicts faced by the characters?
3. What does Steel have to say about both the social and personal function of art?
4. Are Doug's demands on India so unreasonable? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast all of the marriages portrayed in the book. What is Steel trying to say about the nature of marital relationships through these various depictions?
6. How many different images of women are seen? Do these various portraits of women underscore any feminist notions/ themes /concerns?

## Literary Precedents

Steel's novels are often classified as romances in bookstores, shelved alongside works by Belva Plain, Nora Roberts, and Jayne Ann Krentz, and like the works of these aforementioned writers, they do share some characteristics of a romance novel. A prototypical romance novel contains a moderately foreseeable plot that develops through an almost ritualistic pattern of love-heartbreak-loss-restoration-new love/new hope.

The characters usually suffer, but the good, deserving characters win in the end and enjoy a happy conclusion. Surely, this pattern is evident in *Bittersweet*, but there is more to India's journey than just finding new love; she sets out to find a new love of herself. This factor seemingly sets Steel's novel apart from other romances and aligns it with more serious works of fiction by writers such as Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin who often portray heroines awakened to the desire for self-discovery and fulfillment.

Furthermore, as in a romance, the major themes of *Bittersweet* revolve around love, and Paul Ward is a bit of a modern knight in shining armor who comes to rescue damsel in distress India from her dissatisfying life.

Generally, however, Steel's characters are more well developed than the stock characters or caricatures typically found in romances. Additionally, while *Bittersweet* is more fiction than romance, Steel does not really include any profound imagery, meaningful symbolism, or witty figurative devices.



## Related Titles

Most of Steel's novels explore the theme of love and relationships; *Bittersweet* is no exception. Many of her heroines are like India Taylor, trapped in a loveless marriage and fiercely desiring to find a mate who appreciates her for who she is while allowing her to pursue interests deeply important to her. India is somewhat reminiscent of Paxton Andrews of *Message from Nam*.

Both are women who risk personal safety by traveling to unstable countries and situations so that they may pursue the kinds of stories and images upon which their careers and, consequently, their passions, rely.

One thing that exhibits the development of Steel's work is the age of the main character. Unlike the twenty-and thirty-somethings of previous books, India is forty-three and has already settled down with a husband and children. The characters seem to be getting older as the writer herself and her career are aging.

# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994