

Dancing at Midnight Study Guide

Dancing at Midnight by Julia Quinn

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Plot Summary

"Dancing at Midnight" is a romance novel set in the early nineteenth century, and tells the story of the romance between Lady Arabella Blydon and Lord John Blackwood. The novel begins with their meeting in the countryside, on John's estate. Belle has been visiting her cousin, whose husband owns the adjoining property, and does not realize that she was trespassing. The two are immediately drawn to one another and act so antagonistically that it can be hard to tell. John has to fight his attraction to Belle because he thinks it is his fault that a girl got raped during a war he was in as he did not prevent another officer from harming her. This event left him with psychological scars.

Nevertheless, John has to spend time with Belle, as he is old friends with Alex, her cousin Emma's husband, and so gets to know her and starts to fall in love with her. On his property one day, John and Emma are shot at by an unknown assailant, but John protects them. He has also been getting mysterious, anonymous letters. Scared both by what might happen to her and his own negative effect on women, John refuses to see Belle anymore, even after they have had a wonderful time together in several different contexts, and have even kissed several times. However, he tells her that he's hurt women in the past; even though she doesn't believe him, he still won't see her.

As the group moves to London, Belle decides to spread the rumor that she is engaged. John falls under the wrong impression that she is engaged to his brother, and is so relieved when this turns out not to be the case that he begins to court her himself. However, he is still being pursued. He and Belle progress physically to having sex, and then he insists that they be married right away, even though her parents still aren't home from their trip. She agrees, and they throw together a haphazard wedding. Still, someone is pursuing John; with Alex's help, he figures out that it is the rapist, George Spencer. John confronts him, but that doesn't stop George from his pursuit.

After an argument with John over his inability to give himself to her entirely, Belle gets injured in the park and falls deeply ill. John has to rescue her and nurse her back to health; once he has saved a life, he starts to believe that he is worthy of love again. This gives him the courage to trap Spencer at a party. Nevertheless, Spencer takes Belle's mother and then Belle hostage, with a gun. John is only able to save her once Persephone, Belle's chaperone, arrives with a gun, which John uses to save the day.

Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

"Dancing at Midnight" is the story of Belle Blydon and John, Lord Blackwood, who must overcome a number of obstacles to find love with one another. The book begins with Belle reading in a field, in Chapter One. John comes across her and challenges her right to be there, on his estate. The two of them get into an argument about whose estate it is, for she believes it belongs to Alex, the Duke with whom she is staying. They find each other very attractive; John has a limp from fighting in the Iberian war, and seems to push Belle away with his off-putting manner. Meanwhile, the novel gives Belle's backstory, of her coming out as a debutante in London and her frustration with the marriage mart, as many men want to marry her but she isn't in love with any of them. She returns to Alex's home, where Alex tells her that he knows John. Emma, his wife, is delighted, and they decide to invite John over for dinner.

In Chapter Two, Emma, who is pregnant, is experiencing morning sickness in Belle's room, and Belle starts to have a long conversation with Emma about whether or not she is a likeable person (which Emma agrees that she is). Belle has started to doubt herself after her argument with John the other day. Meanwhile, back at his home, Bletchford, John is thinking about his own family history. He is the youngest son of an Earl with little money to his own name, and has had to make a name for himself in the military. Now, there is a caller for him downstairs, and he is delighted to find that it is Alex, inviting him over. After Alex leaves, though, John has a letter stating, "I am in England," though he has no idea who it might be from. He sets it aside for the moment, and thinks back to his days in the war, and a horrific episode in which a fellow soldier of his, George Spencer, raped a girl John was supposed to be protecting. The girl, Ana, committed suicide a few days later, and her mother told John he was no better than a rapist himself.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

"Dancing at Midnight" immediately presents not only the plot of the story, but also the background information the reader needs to follow the plot, and the characterization to create more obstacles for the characters in the future. The themes are immediately visible, as well. Here, the love story between Belle and John is already hinted at, as the two fight their attraction for one another. However, though Belle is a well-balanced character, we immediately see that John has significant baggage which he must overcome before he can truly fall in love, or allow himself to be loved: namely, his witnessing of Ana's rape and his inability to prevent it. This background helps to explain his attitude and his choices towards a woman whom he is deeply attracted to, and makes more three-dimensional characters right from the start. However, the power of love has started to work its magic, as the strong woman takes lead to help John

overcome the hold the past has over him. These themes run throughout the book and are of the utmost importance to understanding the novel.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Awake before the rest of her household in Chapter Three, Belle decides that she will make John like her, and decides to go call upon him. However, to keep up appearances, she must take her maid with her. They arrive, to find that John has just woken up, though he won't admit this to Belle. He is disgruntled that she has come to see him, and cranky at being awoken. She tries to make small talk with him, only to find that he has no talent for small talk. Belle has brought him a basket of food to make amends and to welcome him to the neighborhood. However, just when the two of them seem to be getting on well, John tells her never to come again, and they argue once more before she leaves. Nevertheless, as she leaves, Belle thinks that he seems to need her.

Later, as she is walking between the two estates, Belle has started to get a very uncomfortable blister. Not knowing that John can see her, she lifts her skirts up to get a better look at it. He is, though, watching from a distance, and comes to join her, aroused by the sight of her body. He helps her to lance the blister, despite her protests, and wash it to keep it clean. She wonders how he knows how to do this, and he explains that he had to learn many things during the war. For a moment, it seems like he's afraid of her, but then he flirts with her, and the two of them end up kissing. Afraid of his feelings, however, John quickly offends her by telling her not to go around throwing herself at men like that.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

The example of Emma and Alex that we see in these early chapters hints at the love story that is unfolding between John and Belle, providing a foil and foreshadowing for their later wedded bliss. This also provides them with further impetus to resolve their issues, especially Belle, as she witnesses their happy love each and every day. John's quickly changing moods are the major obstacle at the moment, though the fact that John and Belle kiss does provide the reader with some hope, at this point, that they will end up together. Moreover, the fact that John helps her when she is injured also shows how a strong woman can still rely upon a man, especially in the period in which the book is set.

Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

Furious, Belle goes home in Chapter Five, only to find that John is still coming to dinner. He arrives and the two of them are cold to each other, despite the best efforts of Alex and Emma to thaw the air. As they talk, however, Belle begins to warm to John, and he to her, once again. Alex and Emma go ahead, despite custom, into the dining room, and John is supposed to lead Belle. Instead, he apologizes to her, but tells her to beware, because he is not the man she thinks he is. They kiss once again, despite his best efforts, and then go into the dining room. He exaggerates his limp, and uses that as an excuse for why they have dallied behind the others. At dinner, the group begins to talk of poetry, and Belle tells John that he has the soul of a poet, and that he should write poetry, though he disagrees.

Soon after, Belle is amusing herself by pretending to greet Lord Blackwood as she rides on the estate, but is surprised, when she says his name, to find that he is there already. However, as they are standing together flirting, a shot rings out, and John must protect her from the unknown assailant. Later, as they return to her house, he explains his background in the war to her, but leaves out some important details. They kiss once they are home, and she suggests that they start dancing together.

Chapters 5-6 Analysis

The hidden nature of physical love in the era is at the forefront in this section, as the relationship between John and Belle develops. Even a simple act such as kissing needs to be hidden from view of all, but especially of society, who would judge an unmarried girl harshly for such actions. This highlights Belle's character as being very strong-willed, and Belle as someone who constantly walks the line of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. The dancing that they start is a good sign for the future, as John has been unable to dance up to this point. Just as he helped Belle with her injury, so too can she help him with his, if he will let her.

Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

In Chapter Seven, John responds to Belle's request from Chapter Six by claiming that he can't dance, due to his leg. She refuses to believe this and begins to give him a lesson. Emma comes in and sees them dancing together, and is happy for them; she leaves them alone, and when it is necessary for her to enter the room again, she talks to herself outside the door, loudly enough for the dancers to hear her. They then all have tea together, and talk about a fair that is in the area, deciding that the four of them will all go together. John is happy and excited about the turn of events with Belle, but still haunted. When he returns home, there is another letter waiting for him, proclaiming, "I am in Oxfordshire." That night, he dreams about Ana and her rape, but finds that she has turned into Belle.

In Chapter Eight, however, Alex's sister Sophie goes into labor earlier than expected, meaning that Alex and Emma will go join her elsewhere in the country. This leaves Belle on her own in the house, which is not acceptable. Nevertheless, surrounded by servants, she decides to stay all the same. She goes to the fair alone with John, despite everything, and they have a pleasant time together, buying ribbons for her and eating strawberry tarts. They talk again of poetry: he quotes a poem by Byron, which she recognizes. She insists that he make one up himself, but all he manages is a quick rhyme about tarts. He is then quick to warn her that she can't have him, as he's hurt women in the past. Belle, however, refuses to believe this. She goads him on into telling her what he wants to do to her, which he does, in explicit sexual detail. She tells him that he could do that, greatly upsetting him. Finally, they have an argument about how much more money she has than he does, and how it would not be a good match, anyway.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

John's refusal to dance in Chapter Seven can be read as a metaphor for his attitude to the entire affair with Belle. He is convinced that he cannot, or should not, dance, just as he is convinced that he cannot, or should not, allow himself to be in love. However, Belle guides him through it, and shows him that it is, in fact, possible for him, with her lessons. Emma and Alex again support the two lovers as they begin their romance. Later on, when Alex and Emma leave, Belle runs the risk of looking scandalous in front of society, which she does not seem to care about. However, John's defenses again prevent her from acting too inappropriately, as his terror that he will hurt her provides a stumbling block in their relationship. Other, smaller, issues, such as how much money she has compared to how much he does, serve just to reinforce the sense of inferiority that John has, and his belief that he is not good enough for her. Of course, this infuriates Belle.

Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

After her argument with John, Belle decides in Chapter Nine that she will go back to London. She is furious with him and wants to prove him wrong. Before she leaves for London, she visits with Emma, and persuades her cousin to come join her in town. Once installed in the family's townhouse with her cousin, Belle meets with an old friend, William Dunford. The two of them hatch a plan to make John jealous and hopefully spur him to action; they want to spread rumors that Belle is going to be married. However, they will need Emma's help with the plan, and Emma is only too glad to be of assistance.

Alex has sent an older relative, Persephone, to act as Belle's chaperone, in the meantime. She seems harmless and fun, and Belle accepts her; Persephone, meanwhile, has been paid handsomely to look after Belle. Emma starts to put Belle's plan into place by going to call upon John. She tells John that Belle is thinking about getting married. He replies that he won't be able to come, before she has even told him that Belle hasn't yet set a date. In a jealous rage, John then dreams of Belle with her new lover. Belle, in the meantime, is shopping with Persephone for dresses. They visit a dressmaker called Madame Lambert, who has a scandalous dress for Belle, of a backless midnight blue. Belle buys this, among other purchases. John goes to call upon his brother Damien in London, and is surprised to find him considering marriage - apparently, with Belle.

Chapters 9-10 Analysis

Belle's strong personality comes through in these chapters, as she is unwilling to take a passive, traditional, female role and wait for the man to come to her. Rather, Belle is somebody who needs adventure and danger at every point, and who longs for the reward of romance. Because of this, she hatches the plot to inflame John's jealousy. This, of course, is not at all appropriate for a woman of the time, but she hopes to make him learn some important lessons and value her as a part of his life.

Meanwhile, Alex is still concerned about propriety, though Belle seems to have forgotten all about it, buying a scandalous dress and hatching her plot. The mild-mannered Persephone actually serves as an excellent character to make Belle look like she is conforming to the mores of society, when she is in fact flouting them.

Chapters 11-12

Chapters 11-12 Summary

John tries to act as comfortable as possible with his brother's announcement in Chapter Eleven, and only mentions that he is familiar with Belle. That evening, the group has all been invited to a party at an aristocrat's London home. Both John and Belle show up, but John is unbelievably cold to Belle when they meet, and she can't figure out exactly why he is so angry, though she knows he has been caught in her plan. Finally, she confronts him, and gets him to explain about his brother. She confesses that it was all a ruse, and that she's never even met his brother, so he has no need to be jealous; his brother was simply considering her, as somebody he'd heard of, as a possible prospect. Though John doesn't approve of her manipulation, he is greatly relieved, and the pair make up. They passionately embrace, and John declares that he is going to court her. Later, in front of a condescending noblewoman who is trying to make John feel bad about the newness of his title, Belle sticks up for him and defends him, eventually winning the argument. After that, Damien sees that she is not an appropriate match for him, and explains his earlier thinking to his brother, on their way home.

John comes over to Belle's London home the next day to court her, bringing flowers and chocolates, which she finds cliché, though still accepts. Persephone comes to sit with them, to make sure everything is appropriate, but soon goes out. Belle reminds John that he still owes her a poem. They begin to kiss, and take things further, physically, than they have before, though they still cannot have sex, as Persephone is just outside the door, making a lot of noise. Belle asks John about his bad leg, and starts to rub it for him. She teases him, asking him if he has something to ask her, and he tells her that he just needs time to be creative. Later, he recites a poem to her, which she thinks he's written; however, Persephone enters, and recognizes it as a famous poem. Finally, that night, Belle is terrified, lying in bed, thinking that there is a prowler at the window. When she goes to see who it is, though, it is John, coming to visit her.

Chapters 11-12 Analysis

Belle's conniving overrides John's hesitations in Chapters Eleven and Twelve. Though she is manipulative and plays with him, leading him to believe that she is going to get married, she could not have anticipated that his own brother was also considering marrying her, though they had only met in passing and were simply part of the same social circle. Still, Belle's plan works, and gets John to finally confront her, bringing everything out into the open. His fear at losing her was adequately stoked, so that now she has convinced him to start courting her. In effect, she has made it so that his fear of losing her overrides his fear of the past repeating itself.

Chapters 13-14

Chapters 13-14 Summary

John has shimmied up the side of Belle's house, despite his bad leg, and she lets him in. Once inside, he proposes, giving her the grand, creative gesture, she had wanted. She accepts him, and the two of them go to bed together. However, instead of sleeping with her immediately, John teaches her oral sex, which delights her. He wants to be married very soon, though, which he reveals afterwards, to her frustration. Her parents are out of town and won't return for another couple weeks, and she wants them to be there. He gives her a grace period to set a date. As John leaves, he has the sense that somebody is following him home. Furious with himself, he swears that he will not put Belle in danger, no matter what it takes.

The next day, John sends her a note that he is unable to take her and Persephone to the theatre that evening, as he had planned to do. She is annoyed, but goes with Dunford anyway. However, later he sends her another letter saying that he won't be able to see her for some time. Conniving as ever, Belle sends her own letter to Emma, asking her how to climb a tree. Later, when Belle and Persephone are shopping together, a man grabs Belle as she is going out of a shop, and abducts her. However, she fights him off, and gets him to admit that a blond man paid him to take her, though he knows no more. Belle is happy to get Emma's answer about how to climb trees, and gets Dunford to go along with her, albeit unwillingly, in a plot she is hatching.

Chapters 13-14 Analysis

In these chapters, John begins to redeem himself by making grand gestures to Belle. This proves his love, and reassures the reader (as well as Belle) that his feelings are real, giving him a more sympathetic character, for though he has been stubborn and gone back and forth up to this point, his behavior now proves that it was all to protect Belle, who he really does love. His insistence on being married so soon also highlights this, though his stubbornness in insisting they do it soon, rather than waiting for her parents to come home, once again shows that stubborn side of his character.

Still, not even John can override his own fears about the past catching up with him, and the fact that he refuses to see Belle to protect her - after having proved how much he loves her - demonstrates the depth of this love, though the reader may find it as frustrating as Belle does. For this reason, the fact that Belle hatches another plot to get John to see her again is understandable, and even laudable. Note that Belle needs Dunford's help with this plot, as there are still many things a woman cannot do and remain appropriate while in public.

Chapters 15-16

Chapters 15-16 Summary

Dunford has promised to stay until Belle gets inside John's house, which is of course why she had wanted to learn how to climb trees. He is unwilling to participate in the plan, but finally agrees to, only for her own good, and makes sure that John will walk her home before he leaves. John, meanwhile, is jumpy, and nearly mistakes Belle for a prowler, but luckily recognizes her in time. He is angry, but she tells him what happened with her near-abduction, and he becomes protective of her once again. He can't think of any enemies he might have, and she begs him to accept help from Alex, which he agrees to do. They agree to ignore the matter until the morning, and make love for the first time.

The next morning, Belle goes home. Shortly afterwards, John comes to her with a marriage license, which he has procured especially quickly. He insists on being married almost immediately, and reminds Belle that she might be pregnant after the other night. She finally agrees because of this last factor, and writes in haste to her brother, Ned, and to Emma, to come see her married. Persephone, meanwhile, worries that she has not done her duty as a chaperone, but Belle convinces her that she has helped her procure the ultimate reward: marriage. The chapter ends as Belle gets ready, in her last-minute dress from Madame Lambert's, with Emma, on her wedding day.

Chapters 15-16 Analysis

Belle's plot saves the day in these chapters, allowing the characters to finally unite and understand each other so that they can overcome the obstacles in their way. By climbing into John's window, important aspects of Belle's character once again come to the surface. Notably, she is a strong woman who appears to believe firmly in equality. Therefore, since John climbed into her window, she sees no reason why she shouldn't climb into his. Furthermore, she has the guts to seek out instructions for how to do it, even when she doesn't know how to. She is risking both her body and her reputation as she climbs up to him, but insists on doing so, proving that her stubbornness matches hers. He, meanwhile, begins to come to terms with her in his life, despite the risk, as he sees that she is at risk no matter what, and he wants to be able to protect her. This comes to pass as the two of them finally get married in the culmination of their love story, but in reality, they have more obstacles to overcome.

Chapters 17-18

Chapters 17-18 Summary

Unfortunately, Ned has still not arrived, and Belle's parents do not even know about the ceremony, but Belle feels that they have to start, all the same. Persephone plays the piano and the minister appears to be drunk as they start the ceremony in Belle's house. Ned arrives shortly after they've begun, though, and they decide to start all over again. After the semi-disastrous ceremony, Belle realizes that she's forgotten all about a reception, and has nothing to serve her guests. It is a good opportunity, however, for John to talk with Alex, and enlist his help, which he does. He tells Alex all about George Spencer, and how this man might be him. Alex promises to help, and will be back in touch with John later on. Finally, Belle and John spend their wedding night together.

The next morning, John tells Belle that he has figured out who has been trying to kill him. He later gets a note from Alex telling him where Spencer is staying, and confirming that it is Spencer who is out to harm John. John then writes to Spencer, inviting him over for tea, but Spencer refuses, insisting that they must meet on neutral ground. Meanwhile, Belle's parents come home from their vacation, absolutely shocked that Belle has married in their absence. Belle's mother, Caroline, is further appalled by the name of Bletchford Manor.

Chapters 17-18 Analysis

Some issues are resolved in these chapters, while other obstacles develop further complexity. Here, for example, Belle's family finally learns about her marriage, and doesn't disown her. They still haven't accepted it, but have resolved to make the best of it; her brother, Ned, even shows up at the ceremony. Moreover, John is no longer alone in his fight against Spencer, for by sharing the information with Belle and with Alex, he has recruited two people to help him overcome his assailant, whether he wants their help or not. However, Spencer is zeroing in on John, and he must make a move shortly. Meanwhile, John still doesn't believe that he is worthy of Belle's love.

Chapters 19-20

Chapters 19-20 Summary

Having decided to meet on neutral ground, at a coffee shop, John waits for Spencer to arrive. Once Spencer does, the two men dance around one another, extremely cold. Spencer still insists that what he did was nothing, and that the girl would have slept with anybody; this enrages John. Then, however, Belle, Emma, and Persephone appear, and sit at a nearby table. This, of course, upsets John, who later scolds Belle for putting herself in danger like that, and explaining to her how worried she made him. She retorts that she can run fast - faster than he can, which offends him, given his leg. To show how dangerous Spencer is, John explains to Belle about the incident with Ana, which she refuses to blame him for. However, John is convinced that his soul has been 'blackened' by the events. He won't let Belle tell her that she loves him, which leads to an enormous argument between the two of them, greatly upsetting the lovers.

Still furious at home, Belle makes her maid, Mary, go out for a walk with her, though it will rain. The weather is bad as they go to the park, and notice that there is a blond man following them. Trying to flee as fast as they can, Belle hits her head on a low-hanging tree branch, and knocks herself out. Unsure of what to do, Mary leaves her there as it begins to rain and runs to go get help. However, as Mary gets John, Belle wakes up and starts trying to drag herself home by crawling. Luckily, John comes as fast as he can to save her, and makes her stay awake until he can get her home. There, he tries to warm her up, though her body temperature is varying widely, and she is feverish. In her fever, she tells him that she'll always love him, and that it doesn't matter if he loves her back.

Chapters 19-20 Analysis

Here, Belle reveals that she can't be controlled, even as a wife, unless she wants to be, as she goes to stand by John during his confrontation with Spencer at the coffee shop. This also proves Spencer's cold-bloodedness, as he doesn't hesitate to mock John and even threaten his wife. However, her behavior - atypical for a woman of her day - leads to an argument with John, who is worried about her, and worried that he won't be able to protect her - perhaps as he was unable to protect Ana from Spencer. This leads to their greatest argument yet, as John refuses to accept Belle's love, believing he is still unworthy of it.

However, he will have a chance to redeem himself, as Belle falls ill and he goes to her rescue. Nevertheless, this introduces yet one more obstacle to the protagonists ending up happily married.

Chapters 21-22

Chapters 21-22 Summary

In Chapter Twenty-One, Belle's condition gets worse and worse, as her fever deepens. Her mother is there to try to nurse her, though she is becoming delirious. John sits with her constantly, trying to nurse her back to health. Finally, after a long time lying ill, Belle starts to get better, and her fever breaks very suddenly one day. Caroline has thanked John for all of his help, and admired how much he appears to truly love her daughter. Once Belle awakes, John is certain that he hears Ana's voice telling him that he is forgiven, and that he has saved a life, thus redeeming himself. He tries to explain this to Belle, but she insists that he never owed anything in the first place. No matter what, he has finally thrown off his psychological baggage.

Now that Belle is better, John must deal with George Spencer. They decide to enlist Alex and Emma for a plot to take place at a party. Emma arrives to pick them up, speaking very loudly to let any bystander know that John and Belle will be riding in her carriage, with her and Alex. Certain that Spencer would never do anything to harm a whole group of people, the group proceeds together to the party, but is surprised to find the wheel of the carriage comes off on the way there. Nevertheless, nobody is hurt, though they are all shaken up and become nervous about the events of the party itself.

Chapters 21-22 Analysis

In these chapters, John is finally able to shed the shades of the past that have followed him up to this point. This proves their power, for even though his love for Belle (and hers for him) is extremely strong, he did not believe that he deserved it until he was able to save Belle's life. Whether or not things "work like that," as Belle insists they don't, John is finally able to forgive himself as his wife returns to strength and health. This finally gives him the strength in himself to confront Spencer for the last time, removing the last obstacle to the couple's romance.

Chapters 23-24

Chapters 23-24 Summary

At the party, Spencer arrives, and everybody has been on the watch for him. He comes over and insists on dancing with Belle, who accepts. She tries to talk to him and figure out his motives, but stomps on his foot when he is dismissive of her husband. She reminds him that he is ruining his own life by trying to kill John, but he tells her that he would rather have vengeance than society. She leaves him, but as she and John watch him, they realize that he has taken her mother hostage. Unable to cut through the crowd, Belle and John have to dance through it to be able to get to the other side of the room.

Once they find Spencer holding Caroline hostage, Spencer trades Caroline for Belle, who is helpless, despite Alex and Emma's arrival, as well as John's presence. Belle asks if she might kiss John goodbye; as she does, Persephone arrives, and sneakily slips a gun into Belle's hand as she is kissing John. Belle gives the gun to John, who immediately shoots Spencer's gun out of his own hand, allowing Alex and John to tie Spencer up. Persephone, apparently, overheard the group's plots at home, and decided that she would be around as a backup, in case they needed her. Belle has her own plans to thank Persephone.

Later, at Bletchford, newly renamed Persephone Park, John comes to Belle with a poem he wrote for her. It is so terrible that she knows he truly must love her.

Chapters 23-24 Analysis

Here, everything comes together in the book's climax and denouement. Notice that it is Persephone who saves the day here, acting as one more example of a strong woman acting unlike she is expected to. Luckily, in this case she is working with other strong women, including Caroline and Belle, and with John's help, they are able to capture Spencer in his nefarious acts and get him out of their lives forever. The path is clear, and John and Belle can now live happily ever after.

Characters

Arabella Blydon

The heroine of the novel, Arabella "Belle" Blydon is a strong, outspoken woman who knows what she wants. She is very much concerned with her self-improvement, as evidenced by her working her way through Shakespeare's works. She is well-bred and most likely rich. Though she knows society's conventions well, she is not afraid to stretch them to their limits in order to get what she wants. Hence, she goes to call upon Lord Blackwood (John) under sketchy circumstances. However, she rarely flouts convention altogether at the beginning of the book. As the novel goes on, she grows in important ways, and begins to see her love with John as more important than these conventions. Therefore, she does things such as climbing into his room at night, demanding certain things from him, and even marrying him before her parents return home. While these are not 'proper' behaviors, Belle has become more concerned with her romance for John than with anything else. Sometimes, however, this can get her in trouble, such as when she gets involved in the Spencer affair. For the most part, however, her actions simply serve to reinforce her as a spunky, sharp-witted heroine madly in love with her hero.

Duke of Ashbourne

The Duke of Ashbourne is known, throughout the novel, as Alex. He is a dear friend of Belle's, being married to her cousin Emma, with whom she is exceptionally close. Alex was in the army with John, which is how the two of them know each other, thus providing a convenient pretext for the two to meet. Moreover, his vast estates border Lord Blackwood's, making them neighbors in Oxfordshire, as well. Alex is not the main focus of "Dancing at Midnight," but he does serve as a protector for Belle, a confidante and aide to John, and, of course, Emma's husband, making his importance as a secondary character understood.

John, Lord Blackwood

John, Lord Blackwood, is the romantic hero of "Dancing at Midnight." A war hero, John is nevertheless haunted by his past, for a variety of reasons. In the first place, he is the youngest son of a poor aristocrat, who has left him nothing of his own. Everything that John has, including his title, he had to earn. He has only recently saved up enough money to buy his new house, Bletchford. John feels responsible for the rape of a young girl, Ana, while he was serving in the army, even though he himself did not rape her. He did nothing to prevent the rape until it was too late, and feels that it might as well have been him. Thus, he doesn't feel worthy of Belle's love, and pushes off her advances, even though he desperately wants to be with her. He finally gives in, but still feels that he does not deserve her until he is finally able to redeem himself when Belle is sick,

thus saving a life. John's foil is George Spencer, the rapist who has followed him back to England, and who has none of the noble scruples of Lord Blackwood. Nevertheless, John's true nobility of character comes through as he and Alex, along with the help of the women, capture Spencer.

Emma

Emma is Belle's American cousin. She has recently gotten married to Alex and is delighted with her husband and her life in England. She is also pregnant, and suffers from morning sickness from time to time. Emma is extremely outgoing and unconventional, just like her cousin. She helps Belle learn how to climb a tree, so that Belle can find John again and resume their love affair. Moreover, Emma is witty and clever - sometimes too much so, such as when she helps Belle hatch the plan to fool John into thinking that she is engaged. All the same, Emma has a good heart, and very much wants to see her cousin find true love. Therefore, she often helps her whenever she can, letting her stay at Westonbrit, leaving her and John alone together for a few moments, and so forth. Furthermore, even though Emma is pregnant and must look after herself, she also has a taste for adventure, and goes with Belle to see John and Spencer at the cafe, and aids them with their plan to capture Spencer later, at the part.

Caroline, Countess of Worth, and Henry, Earl of Worth

Belle's parents. They are more conventional than she is, particularly her mother; however, when her mother sees how much John loves her, and to what lengths he is willing to go for her, she accepts him into the family.

Ned Blydon

Belle's brother, who appears only briefly in the story.

Norwood

John's butler.

Sophie

Alex's sister, who has her baby early.

Lady Westborough

A fellow aristocrat.



George Spencer

The man who raped Ana in the Iberian war, while serving with John. Now, knowing that John knows and disapproves of his crime, he has come back to England with the intention of killing Blackwood, even though it will ruin him.

Ana

The Spanish girl who was raped by George Spencer and later died.

Ana's mother

The woman who told John that he was as good as a rapist for letting this happen to Ana.

Amber

Belle's horse.

Mary

Belle's maid.

William Dunford

A good friend of Belle's, who helps her with her plots. Belle is convinced he will get married within the next year.

Persephone

Belle's "chaperone," who is rather lenient but nevertheless saves the day.

Madame Lambert

The dressmaker in London who outfits Belle.

Lady Forthright

A hostess who condescends to John.

Mr. Dawes

The minister who marries John and Belle; seems to be drunk at the time.

Lady Tumbley

The hostess of the party where John and Belle confront Spencer.



Objects/Places

Shakespeare's Works

Belle's project has been to read all of Shakespeare's works in alphabetical order. She is reading *The Winter's Tale* when she and John meet for the first time.

Spectacles

Belle is near-sighted, but has a hard time admitting it at first, though she finally has to get glasses or spectacles.

Westonbirt

The country estate of Alex and Emma, bordering on John's.

London

The city where the majority of the action takes place.

Iberian Peninsula

The war that John fought that resulted in him having a limp.

Bletchford

John's estate, which he recently bought. Characters repeatedly comment on how terrible the name is.

Lord Byron

One of the poets whose work John tries to pass off as his own.

The Poem

Belle wants John to write her a poem to prove his love.



Tumbley Party

The party where everything comes to a head and Spencer tries to kill Belle.

Hardimann's Tea and Pastry Shoppe

The cafe where John and Spencer meet face-to-face in London

Pistol

Persephone brings a pistol to save the day.

Themes

Romantic Love

Romantic love, and overcoming obstacles to find it, is by far the most overarching theme of "Dancing at Midnight." Here, the book begins with the picture of a happily married aristocratic couple, Alex and Emma, allowing the reader a glimpse of what Belle herself might hope to find one day. Her immediate attraction to John - and his for her - is nevertheless tested by a series of obstacles, including his gruffness, her fake engagement to another, his brother's infatuation with her, his feeling that he does not deserve her, and his worry that he is putting her life in danger. Nevertheless, they overcome each obstacle, proving that their love can conquer all. This is further emphasized by the symbol of the poem, which runs as a separate thread throughout the novel. Belle is convinced that John should write her a poem to prove his love, and he keeps stealing poems from famous writers, hoping to convince her. All the same, when he finally does write a poem - albeit not a very good one - at the end of the novel, she knows that he has done it for her, proving the strength and depth of his love. Though it is hard for him to say it at first, eventually John can admit his love for Belle, and the two of them can be happily married.

Strong Women

Though the book is a period romance, author Quinn turns some of the reader's expectations on their head by showing such strong leading women in the novel. Here, Belle is of course the most notable example, as she flouts convention to get what she wants. However, she does so in a way that appears to "keep up appearances," though she becomes less and less concerned with this as the novel goes on. She is not afraid to speak her mind, either, and stoutly defends John when a fellow aristocrat appears to question the provenance of John's title. She is, as well, a woman with strong opinions, and doesn't hesitate to present them to John from the first chapter, nor to argue back when John picks fights with her. She is similar, in this way, to her cousin Emma, the American who is married to Alex and who, though pregnant, helps Belle with her adventures, schemes, and plots. In both cases, the women are conquered, but not cowed, by love, as they submit to their husbands as per the period without losing their own identities in the process.

The Power of the Past

The power of the past, particularly as a romantic obstacle, is another theme that "Dancing at Midnight" treats. In this case, the past bears an almost exclusively negative connotation for the characters, and nearly prevents John and Belle from being together. The most notable aspect of this is, of course, Ana's rape. John still has nightmares about it, and can't bear to think about his own role in allowing the young girl to be raped

- and eventually to die. The power this has on the present is apparent in the shifting dreams he has throughout the book: as he falls more and more in love with Belle, the more it becomes her who is in danger, instead of Ana. Furthermore, the power of the past is literally personified in the character of George Spencer, who has come back to get rid of John, the one man alive who knows what he did. In this sense, John is both literally and metaphorically haunted by the past, as he must overcome both his psychological issues, as well as stop this man from murdering him, to be able to find happiness in the present and future with Belle.

Style

Point of View

The vast majority of the novel is recounted from the third-person and limited perspective, from Belle's point of view. This allows the reader an entree into a seemingly unfamiliar world of the past, with a sympathetic and likable character as a guide. Moreover, it helps the reader to understand some of the radical decisions Belle makes in order to get what she wants. The third person limited does not provide as much subjectivity as the first person, and thus seems much more objective. This objectivity is highlighted by the shifts in point of view that regularly occur throughout the narration. In these shifts, John's narration also takes over from time to time, which gives the reader more perspective on the situation as a whole. This also explains many things to the reader that Belle couldn't know about: for example, his past in the war, or his brother's statement that he is thinking about marrying Belle. The letters in the novel also provide other perspectives, if only in passing: through them, we have access to Emma's voice, and George Spencer's as well. Finally, although the narration is by necessity limited, the other characters also make their points of view known through the dialogue, of which the book has plenty.

Setting

The setting of the book takes place in three specific locales: Oxfordshire and London, in England, and the Iberian Peninsula. Events in the former two locations take place in 1816, when the majority of the action in the novel is set, while the events on the Iberian Peninsula take place several years before, during John's military service and the war. The two first locations can also be distinguished as having many different component parts. For example, in Oxfordshire, the action takes place not only at Westonbrit, Alex's estate, but Bletchford, as well, and includes the land between the two manors, where John and Belle pass many of their first moments together, when he accuses her of trespassing. In London, action shifts dramatically from Belle's townhouse, to John's brother's, to the shopping streets, coffee houses, and parties that the characters attend. Overall, the changing scenes create a larger world than one might expect from characters of this time period, and thus serves to highlight their wealth, aristocracy, and the opportunities available to them that were not perhaps available to the general public at this time. This rarified world helps reinforce the romance between John and Belle.

Language and Meaning

For the most part, "Dancing at Midnight" uses language that is easy to understand for the contemporary reader. The sentences are rather short, and tend to use basic vocabulary words. Moreover, the characters' dialogue is very understandable and sounds quite modern, perhaps running contrary to the reader's expectations for a period

romance novel. This modern syntax, particularly in dialogue, is off-set by some of the antiquated terms and expressions that Quinn uses for authenticity, such as "funning" instead of kidding. The novel does not use a lot of exposition or explanation, but instead allows characters to express themselves through dialogue, and by explaining their actions. In this way, though some background story is given in exposition, the vast majority of what the reader learns is instead communicated through what the characters say, and what they tell others about their own pasts.

Structure

Written in twenty-four chapters, "Dancing at Midnight" has more of a modern structure than other period books. For example, the chapters are numbered, rather than titled, such as one might expect to find in a period piece. The action of the book is also quite contemporary, as the characters have to overcome a variety of obstacles, rather than just one, in order to get to their goals (here, the union of John and Belle). For example, Belle is ill, John is being pursued by a murderer, and so on. Rather than just one obstacle, the characters keep fighting and have to prove their love for each other over and over again. There are plenty of cliff-hangers and plot twists from chapter to chapter.

The structure of the novel works for a stand-alone piece, though "Dancing at Midnight" is indeed part of a series of romances, the first of which dealt with Alex and Emma's relationship. Other characters in the novel will get involved at a later date, such as Belle's friend William, though this is just hinted at (and not dwelled upon) in the novel.

Quotes

"He smiled, but it was a small one, and Belle got the impression that he was not a man who smiled often" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"Bella smiled archly, his apology somehow relieving her tension. 'I am rather uncommon myself'" (Chapter 3, p. 41).

"I am certain you have the soul of a poet," she persisted" (Chapter 5, p. 80).

"John was awakened by the sound of his screams. Gasping for air, he clutched his arms to his stomach. He rolled back and forth, his body racked by silent sobs" (Chapter 7, p. 110).

"He heard his older brother Damien's voice pounding in his head. 'You are not a titled gentleman'" (Chapter 8, p. 120).

"I have reason to believe that he," Belle chose her words carefully, "cares for me, but he feels that he cannot act on that emotion" (Chapter 9, p. 135).

"I shall send a note round to Lady Forthright immediately. Oh, and you shall be able to meet the woman I am thinking of courting. It is high time I got myself a wife, you know. I really do need an heir" (Chapter 11, p. 156).

"What happens now?' he repeated with a jaunty grin. 'Why, I court you. Isn't that what's supposed to happen next?'" (Chapter 11, p. 169).

"I thought you were supposed to be the practical and pragmatic one in your family. I thought you wouldn't want weepy words of love and all that" (Chapter 12, p. 184).

"I will not be available for some time. I cannot explain why. Please be patient with me" (Chapter 14, p. 211).

"I love you."

It felt as if his throat were about to close. 'No, Belle, you don't,' he gasped. 'You can't. You'" (Chapter 15, p. 234).

"'You can't do that,' she said, each word a hoarse little stab of pain. 'You're not allowed. You can't say that and not let me do the same. It isn't fair' (Chapter 19, p. 300).

"That he had labored so long on a task for which he obviously had no aptitude, and just because she'd asked him to - she couldn't help it, she started to sniffle, and fat tears rolled down her cheeks" (Chapter 24, p. 374-5).

Topics for Discussion

What is the basis for the romance between John and Belle? Are they well suited? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast John and Belle's relationship to Alex and Emma's. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

What is the tone of the novel? Does the writer show sympathy towards any one character, or group of characters? How does this reinforce the themes of the book?

How is Belle an unconventional woman for her time? Are there moments where she conforms to what is expected of her? How does she bypass these expectations?

Examine the character of George Spencer. Is he in any way understandable? Why is he important to the novel?

Diagram the plot arc of the book. Does it follow a traditional narrative pattern? What obstacles are in the way of the protagonists?

Describe the character of John. In what way is he defined by his actions in the past? What does it mean to be 'guilty'? In your opinion, IS John guilty of the crime that he thinks he is? Why or why not? Use textual support for your opinion.