

Dark Witch Study Guide

Dark Witch

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Plot Summary

The Dark Witch by Nora Roberts is the story of an 800-year old magical curse and the three dark witches who join together to break the spell and defeat evil once and for all.

In 2013, American-born Iona Sheehan moves to County Mayo, Ireland in search of her family. For her entire life, Iona has felt like she didn't belong, and as she aged, her grandmother confided in her that this is because she is a witch. Iona's grandmother convinces Iona that she has been chosen to embrace the magic, return to Ireland, and defeat the evil sorcerer that has been hunting her family for generations. When Iona moves to Ireland, she immediately connects with her two cousins, Branna and Connor O'Dwyer, moves in with them, and begins taking magic lessons to embrace her skills.

Branna and Connor are much more familiar with their family history. They know the legend of Sorcha, the dark witch who in 1263 first battled against Cabhan, the evil sorcerer. Cabhan lusted after Sorcha's body and power, and stalked her with the hopes of stealing her magick. Knowing that she and her children would never be safe while Cabhan still lived, Sorcha concocted a spell to sacrifice herself and protect her children in the hopes that she would destroy Cabhan. She didn't succeed and died in the process, but she did manage to protect her children. The spell that she cast allowed her magic to be passed on through the generations, until descendants from the three children would return to County Mayo and defeat Cabhan once and for all. With Iona's move to Ireland, it seems that the three have returned, and their magic is strong enough to challenge Cabhan's evil pursuit of their power.

When she moves to Ireland, Iona is eager not only to embrace what she truly is – a dark witch – but also to live an independent, “normal” life. Her magical guide is horses – she can communicate with them and understand their thoughts – so she takes a job at a local stable, run by the ruggedly handsome Boyle McGrath. On her first day, Boyle returns to the stable with a new stallion, Alastar, the same name as Sorcha's youngest daughter's horse. Iona takes this as a sign that she is meant to be here, and that Alastar is meant to be hers. When she sees Boyle riding the magnificent horse, she immediately falls in love with both of them. Since he needs the help and is a good friend of the O'Dwyers, Boyle hires Iona on the spot. She begins by mucking out stalls. When Boyle sees how easily she seems to communicate with the horses, he soon has her leading guided trails and teaching jumping lessons. Within a few days, Iona feels more at home with her new family, friends, and job, than she ever as.

Despite Iona's sense of comfort in Ireland, Cabhan is always lurking in the shadows, threatening to overpower her. His stalking begins by calling Iona's name in the fog, just as he had done with Sorcha, and occasionally surprise attacking her while she is in the woods. He tries to lure Iona away from her friends and family, toward Sorcha's old cottage, to attack her in the hopes of stealing the power passed down to her from Sorcha's spell. Every time, however, Iona surprises Cabhan (and even herself) by fighting back with a furious magic, more powerful than even she was aware of. She works hard in her lessons with Branna and soon masters enough spells to keep Cabhan



at bay. Branna, Connor, Iona, and their friends know that Cabhan is getting stronger and now is the time that they should attack. Along with Boyle, Finbar Burke – a descendent of Cabhan who has turned away from evil to embrace good – and a stable friend, Meara, the three dark witches create a plan to lure Cabhan into the woods where they will join the forces of their magic in the hopes of overpowering him. They wait until the winter solstice to act, but when they do, Cabhan transports them all back in time, when his magic was at his strongest. Although he is badly wounded during their battle, Cabhan manages to escape. The three dark witches must continue to plan in the hopes that next time, they will defeat Cabhan once and for all.



Chapters 1 & 2

Summary

Chapters 1 & 2

The Dark Witch by Nora Roberts in the Irish winter of 1263, with dark witch Sorcha leading her three children, Brannaugh, Eamon, and Teagan through the dark woods after the winter festival of Imbolg. The three children are weary after the day of festivities, and there's a hint of danger in the air. Sorcha has heard her name called in the air but she refuses to acknowledge it. She knows it's her job to protect the children since her man, Daithi, is off fighting a battle far away. Sorcha pushes away thoughts of Daithi and how deeply she aches for him. She hates war, and cannot wait for this battle to be over so she and Daithi can make another baby. She hopes that feeling a new life inside her will help heal the pain of the last pregnancy she lost, and is still mourning. She is still angry that even with her great healing powers, she was unable to save that tiny life. Still, Sorcha knows that she has been blessed with her three healthy children, all of whom are starting to show their magical gifts: Brannaugh with dogs, Eamon with hawks, and Teagan with horses.

As Sorcha quickens her pace home, she knows that the dark force, Cabhan, would come for her again. Cabhan lusts after Sorcha and her power, and visits her each night in the fire in an attempt to lure, or force, her to join powers with him. Sorcha does what she can to fight Cabhan off, but she knows that she is weakening against him. When the family returns to the cottage, Brannaugh, who is learning how to heal, makes her mother a strong tonic to strengthen her. After Eamon and Teagan fall asleep, she and Sorcha watch over their father in the fire. After Brannaugh falls asleep, Sorcha weeps.

Suddenly, Daithi's face in the fire morphs into Cabhan's face. He calls her name, as he did in the woods, beckoning her to join him. He hisses, "So alone you are, and burdened. Your man leaves you a cold bed. Come warm yourself in mine; feel the heat. Make that heat with me. Together, we rule all the world" (Page 7). Summoning what little power she has left, Sorcha casts a furious spell over the fire, banishing Cabhan, at least for now. In the morning, the three children wake, all having had similar nightmares in which Cabhan visited them. He killed Teagan's ponies, Eamon saw his black heart, and he tried to molest Brannaugh. Deep down, Sorcha knows that Cabhan is strengthening just as she is weakening, although she cannot figure out where he has derived this new power. She knows that she must cast the most powerful spell of all, one that will protect her family for good. That afternoon, she calls Brannaugh's dog, Eamon's hawk, and Teagan's pony, entreating them to each give her a drop of blood. She mixes it with drops of blood from the children and three copper amulets (one shaped like a dog, a hawk, and a horse) given to her by Daithi, mixing them in the fire. She promises her children that they will be safe, and with these amulets, they will pass their magical gifts on to their offspring.



For a week after, Sorcha feels strong and powerful. She visits Daithi in the fire but doesn't tell him about Cabhan's predatory advances. She continues to heal those in the village, and spends every spare moment teaching her children what she can about their magick. One afternoon while walking through the woods with Teagan, Cabhan suddenly appears, rising from the fog wearing a bright red amulet around his neck. Sorcha has never seen the amulet before and knows that it must contain his new dark power. As expected, Cabhan attempts to seduce Sorcha into his bed, saying that it is their destiny to rule together. He swears that he will give her the one thing Daithi cannot – another child – and for a moment, the yearning in Sorcha's womb gives her pause. In this moment of weakness, Cabhan reaches out, scratching at Sorcha's face, drawing blood. Without pause, little Teagan, only a few years old, bursts out her fists and lands a blow on Cabhan's shocked face. Infuriated, Cabhan swears that because of Sorcha's defiance, he will kill her children. In a flash, Cabhan transforms into a wolf and leaps upon them. When Teagan tumbles backward, her cloak falls open and a burst of blue flames shoots from the horse-shaped amulet around her neck. When the screams and fog settle, the wolf is nowhere to be seen, replaced by scorched earth. Teagan calls her horse, Alastar, using a telepathic sign, and the horse arrives to carry Teagan and her weak mother home.

That night, Brannaugh makes another strong tonic for her mother, but Sorcha knows it won't work. She needs her entire family together to battle against Cabhan and his forces. When she visits Daithi in the fire that night, she finally tells him the truth and urges him to come home at first light. She warns him not to travel in darkness, which Cabhan owns, but to hurry. The journey will take two days, but Daithi promises to return. In her dreams that night, Sorcha sees that her beloved Daithi does not wait for first light, but begins his journey almost immediately. It doesn't take long for the wolf to sniff Daithi out of the darkness and attack, and Sorcha wakes from her dreams screaming, knowing that her husband is dead. As soon as her children wake, Sorcha, weaker than ever, begins her work. She gathers the children around her and tells them that their father is dead. She calls on their animals, concocts a new, stronger spell of protection, and tells the children that they must leave the woods. The children are terrified and do not want to leave their mother, but she urges them, promising that one day, all three of them will return. With the children gone, Sorcha calls for Cabhan, who is there in moments. His greed and lust overtake him, and he sweeps her into his arms, crushing his lips to hers. With the last bit of her strength, Sorcha slips her tongue into his mouth, passing the poison she has created. Infuriated, Cabhan casts a spell to kill Sorcha, but she clings to life just long enough to curse "all who come from" Cabhan, and to watch him die.

Analysis

This section functions as a backdrop to the novel's main plot, which follows the descendants of Sorcha's children as they return to County Mayo, Ireland with the hopes of defeating Cabhan's curse once and for all. Sorcha is the original dark witch, and it is her unrelenting passion to keep evil at bay that creates the curse on her family. Sorcha, it seems, is the only dark witch powerful enough to resist Cabhan's salacious advances, and the novel suggests (although never clarifies) that Sorcha is the last dark witch, and



that if Cabhan were to succeed in stealing her powers, evil would triumph over good. In a way, Sorcha is protecting not just herself and her children, she is also protecting mankind. When she realizes that she cannot defeat Cabhan, Sorcha sacrifices herself to save her children, passing her magical powers onto them and their descendants. Sorcha casts her children away from the cabin in the woods, and protects them with powerful spells and magical amulets. When the three are strong enough to return, they must use the power inside them to defeat Cabhan's evil forever. This opening section sets the reader up for Iona Sheehan's return to County May 800 years later to fulfill this destiny.

Cabhan is an interesting character in that his only purpose in life seems to be to collect power, yet it is unclear, and remains unclear throughout the novel, what he hopes to do with that power. In this way, Roberts begins the novel with somewhat ambiguous motivations. She relies on stock characters and adventure novel tropes to propel the reader rather than creating a uniquely interesting or complex plot. Throughout the novel, characters are simply motivated by good or evil, which might leave some readers to question their personal motivations. Cabhan is simply presented as an evil force that seeks only to strengthen his own power. Yet the novel hints that while he is in the form of a man, he takes many sexual partners and creates a multitude of offspring. There is no analysis of Cabhan's human form, and there is little mention of his offspring until the reader meets Finbar Burke in later chapters.

It is also interesting to note that the majority of Sorcha's powers come from the spells she casts, often spells that require a communion with nature. Sorcha's power seems to brew inside herself, and it isn't until she creates the protective amulet that any real outward expression of magic is seen. When the wolf attacks Teagan in the woods, a bright blue flame of fire bursts from the amulet, which surprises everyone, including Sorcha. This suggests that love, particularly the love between Sorcha and Daithi that went into the amulet charm, is the most powerful force of all. While it's certainly possible that the magic has progressed throughout the generations since Sorcha's day, the later dark witches are able to levitate objects, control wind and fire, and time travel. All of these feats seem a bit far-fetched from the world created in this opening section. Keen readers should note how the use of magic changes over the generations and why those changes might have occurred.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Cabhan? What does he want from Sorcha?

Discussion Question 2

How does Sorcha protect her children from Cabhan's advances?



Discussion Question 3

How does the ending of Chapter 2 prepare readers for the narrative to jump 800 years in the future?

Vocabulary

Talisman, raring, mote, amulet, tallow, salve, brigand, whelp, imbue, feral, pentagram.



Chapters 3 & 4

Summary

Chapters 3 & 4

The narrative jumps ahead in time 800 years to 2013, in County Mayo, Ireland. Iona Sheehan has just arrived from America in search of her ancestors. Back home, her parents had always been dispassionate, even mildly annoyed by her, and she always longed for a deeper connection with family. Despite the fact that she has moved here for good, Iona books herself into the ancient castle in County Mayo, the very place her grandmother said their ancestors came from. Her grandmother had told her lots of things – stories about the Dark Witch – and Iona now vows to get to the bottom of her family mystery. She has never felt like she belonged back home, and she hopes she will find her place here.

On her first day in Ireland, Iona braces herself against the storm and hikes down the pathway, through the woods, to where she has heard there is a shop called “The Dark Witch.” When she arrives, Iona is first greeted by a massive, unruly dog, and then by a beautiful woman who introduces herself as Branna O’Dwyer. When she learns that she and Iona are, in fact, cousins, Branna welcomes Iona into the shop, which is attached to her house, for a hot cup of tea. Branna lives with her brother, Connor, who is not at home, but whom she says will be eager to meet their long-lost cousin. Branna and Iona exchange pleasantries and get to know each other a bit better before Iona musters up the courage to blurt the real reason why she’s here: the dreams. She says that in her dreams, a man named Cabhan comes to try to kill her. Back in America, her grandmother told her that Cabhan had been real, and that the dreams prove that Iona has been selected to receive the gift. Nan (Grandma) says that it is Iona destiny to return to County Mayo, join powers with the missing two, and defeat Cabhan once and for all. Iona knows that all of this should sound insane, but for some reason, it makes enough sense to her that she decides to quit her job, sell her belongings, and travel halfway around the world. After telling her story, she looks tentatively at Branna and sees that there is no judgment on Branna’s face. All Branna wants to know is whether Nan gave Iona a gift before her travels. Iona nods and shows her the copper amulet, shaped like a horse, around her neck. When she sees the amulet, Branna takes a deep breath and nods: “There are three,” she says. “Three is good magic. So now we’re three. You and I, and Connor. But each must accept the whole, and themselves, and the legacy” (Page 47).

As further proof, Branna asks that Iona demonstrate her magic, which Iona is somewhat hesitant to reveal. After some prodding, she uses her fingertips to rile a candle’s flame, causing it to burn bright blue. She also claims to be able to levitate things (albeit irregularly) and to be able to communicate with horses. Branna nods, satisfied. She can see that Iona still has much to learn, and that she must practice harnessing her powers, but it’s clear that she is the selected one. She tells Iona that their goal is dangerous, and



that she must commit fully to the task: “Cabhan, what is left of him, may be worse than what was. And what is left wants what you have, what we have. And he wants our blood. Your power and your life, you’ll risk both, so think carefully, for it’s not a game we’d be playing” (Page 49). Iona swears that she understands the risks, but also that she knows that this is her calling, that it has been her calling her entire life, and that she won’t back down from the challenge. Branna nods again and says that they must keep their power united, and that the best way to do that would be for Iona to move in with her and Connor. Although everything is moving at breakneck speed, Iona listens to her gut and agrees.

Iona returns to the castle to eat a quick meal and send some emails. Flipping through a notebook Branna loaned to her, Iona succumbs to her jet lag and falls into a deep sleep. She has a vivid dream in which she travels to visit her “mother” in a foggy woods. The sign on her mother’s door reads “Sorcha, the Dark Witch.” There, she hears Cabhan’s voice, and sees his face. She feels as if she faced him once before, as a child. She feels stronger now, and lunges at the red amulet he wears around his neck. Before she can grasp it, he claws at her hands, drawing blood. “My blood will send you to hell,” Iona cries. Cradling her wounded hand, she calls her horse. She mounts him. Then, she warns Cabhan that his time is coming.

Iona wakes with a start from her vivid dream. She winces and sees that her hand is actually bleeding. Rushing to the bathroom, Iona watches in shocked horror as the bloody gash magically heals. Overwhelmed, Iona grabs her coat and rushes back to Branna’s home, hoping for answers. This time, Connor opens the door and wraps his cousin in a warm hug before introducing himself. The two make coffee and begin to cook breakfast, waiting for Branna to wake. They pass the time chatting pleasantly, as if they’ve known each other their whole lives, rather than just for a few moments. When Branna wakes, Iona can barely contain herself telling her cousin all about the dream. Branna isn’t surprised by what Iona has seen, and says that Iona and Teagan are closely twined. She says she can give Iona something to help with the visions, but that they will be a part of her now. She warns that Cabhan will try to kill her, and that she will have to fight back with her will, power, and the amulet she must always wear. Despite all that she’s experienced in the past 48-hours, Iona is more determined than ever to stay, and vows once again whatever the cost, she is dedicated to the mission. Branna is pleased, and the section ends with Branna announcing that she has arranged for Iona to interview with a man named Boyle at the local stable.

Analysis

There is an immediate bond between Iona and her cousin Branna when they first meet. To the reader, Iona’s claims about magical powers and haunted dreams sound insane, but to Branna, for whom magic has been a part of her everyday life, it is completely understandable. This shows readers that Iona has already found the one thing she craves: a sense of belonging. Perhaps this is why Iona is so eager to jump headlong into their new relationship, even agreeing to move in with a complete stranger, even if she is family. This section also hints at the connection between Iona and Teagan, the



youngest of Sorcha's three children. Readers will remember that Teagan held a blue flame inside her, just as Iona is able to shoot from her fingers, and that Teagan had a telepathic relationship with her horse, Alastar. Iona, too, claims to be able to commune with horses, and Nan has passed down to her Teagan's horse-shaped amulet. All of these clues, as well as Iona's dream in which she actually embodies Teagan, solidify to Branna and to the reader that Iona is the real-deal. At the same time, it can be assumed that since Branna works as a sort of medicine-man, concocting herbal medicines and healing tonics, that she is the descendant of Brannaugh – Branna also has a large, unruly dog – and that Connor, who works with hawks at the falconry school, is the descendant of Eamon. Just as Sorcha predicted, the three powers passed down to her children have reunited in County Mayo, and now is the time that they must battle against Cabhan.

Iona claims that Cabhan has visited her in her dreams. This was Iona's first clue into her magical powers, and must have been very unsettling. Cabhan owns the darkness, which means that he is most powerful at night, and he is somehow able to stalk his prey through their dreams. It is never revealed how Cabhan manages to integrate the dark witches' thoughts, or why is particularly drawn to Teagan's line (perhaps out of revenge for what happened in the woods?) which is just one more hole left in the narrative that is never returned to.

As soon as Iona moves to Ireland, it seems that Cabhan's connection to her thoughts strengthens as the distance between them lessens. Now, Cabhan is able to physically attack Iona while she sleeps, harming her physical body through her thoughts. This, too, is never explained in the text, nor is it explained why, if Cabhan wanted to kill Iona, he didn't simply do so while she was asleep and helpless. While the physical threat of Cabhan's intrusion into Iona's thoughts should amplify the novel's drama, Branna seems nonplussed by the attack, offering Iona a simple spell to keep the dreams at bay. If Branna is able to keep Cabhan so starkly separated from her life, readers may wonder what the threat truly is. If Branna's magic is strong enough to protect the three, what is the point of risking their lives to battle against him? Readers may find these narrative drops to be distracting and annoying, while other readers may simply read on the plot's surface, for entertainment rather than analysis.

Discussion Question 1

How does Iona feel when she first meets her cousins Branna and Connor? Does this surprise you?

Discussion Question 2

How does Branna know that Iona truly is the chosen one from Teagan's line?



Discussion Question 3

How does Cabhan's relationship with Iona change once she moves to Ireland?

Vocabulary

Mantra, coalesce.



Chapters 5 & 6

Summary

Chapters 5 & 6

The next morning, Iona nervously walks to the stable for her interview with Boyle. As soon as she sees the building, however, her nerves melt away; it's like she's walking home. She is immediately pleased with the obvious care of the horses, all of which seem healthy and well-groomed. As she's inspecting the horses, she's greeted by Meara Quinn, another stable hand, who kindly shows her around the stable until Boyle arrives. As she shows Iona around, Meara insinuates that she knows Connor and Branna O'Dwyer well, and that they have special powers. She immediately picks up on Iona's ability to speak to horses, and makes it clear that she is completely comfortable with it. As the two women chat, the stable owner, Boyle McGrath, rides up on the stallion named Alastar that his partner Finbar Burke has just purchased, and it's clear that the gorgeous stallion is in desperate need of some manners. Iona feels her breath escape her as she stands in awe – both of the horse and the man astride it. As she steps forward, Boyle warns her to stay away, the horse bites, but that doesn't stop Iona. She reaches out a hand and instantly calms the horse: "He's pissed off, that's all," she says to a stunned Boyle, "and making sure we all know it" (Page 74). Boyle is startled by the fact that Iona seems to be able to read the horse's thoughts, and hires her on the spot. When Boyle tries to pen the horse, Iona encourages him to let her exercise him first. Although he's weary to let a newly-hired hand ride such an unpredictable animal, he allows it. He is more than pleased to see the horse obey her commands.

After putting in a full day's work, Iona stops by Boyle's office to check her hours for the upcoming week. She makes small talk with him about the new stallion, saying that the horse thinks Boyle doesn't like him, but Iona knows he does: "You like his looks and his spirit, and wonder how you can smooth his temper without breaking that spirit ... You're a horseman. There's not a horseman alive who wouldn't look at that magnificent animal and think just what I said. You irritate each other, but that's because you're both big and gorgeous and strong-willed" (Page 81). It doesn't take long for Boyle to remark with hushed reverence that Iona must be the final third, the one Branna and Connor have been waiting for. He recounts the local myth of Sorcha, her three children, and Cabhan, and reckons that Iona must have sprung from Teagan's line. The fact that Boyle knows so much more about her than she does makes Iona uncomfortable, and she quickly steers the conversation back to work.

On her way to Branna's after work, Iona is passing through the woods and feels a strange pull toward where Sorcha's cottage was. Even though she promised Branna that she wouldn't approach it, Iona can't stop herself from taking a few hesitant steps toward it. Before she can get too close, however, a dog's loud barking pulls her from her reverie. Branna's dog, Kathel, snaps and snarls, pulling her away. Back at Branna's, Iona tells her cousin all about her first day's work, but Branna is only interested in the



fact that Boyle's partner, Fin, purchased a stallion named Alastar: "So.' She took a long breath, laid her hands on the counter for a moment. 'He knows" (Page 89). Branna tells her that even though her family and Fin are friendly, she doesn't trust him because he came from Cabhan's line. He is a black sorcerer. The fact that he brought back a horse named Alastar – the same name that Teagan's horse had – on Iona's first day tells her that he knows the great battle is imminent. The fact that Iona was drawn to the woods today, even though Kathel stopped her from entering it, also shows Branna that Cabhan is testing Iona's strength. All this makes Branna very nervous, and she is quick to begin Iona's magic lessons. She explains that magic is bound by the four forces: earth, air, wind, and fire. Iona must first master the four elements before she can move on to specific spells. They pass the afternoon levitating water from a bowl and floating feathers, leaving Iona giddy with pride.

That evening, Iona joins Connor at the local pub for a beer to celebrate her new job. They talk about Fin, especially about the fact that Connor trusts him much more than Branna does: "I'd like to know who doesn't have a twisted branch on his family tree. Coming from something doesn't make it what you are. You've choices, don't you? You've made your own" (Page 95). Connor is suggesting that Fin had the chance to embrace the dark forces that are in his blood, but that he chose loyalty and friendship instead. The rest of their evening passes very pleasantly, with Branna, Boyle, and Meara joining them for a meal. Iona feels more at home than she ever could have imagined, and soaks in the joy of uplifting conversation, laughter, and music that fills the room. Suddenly, it all comes to a screeching halt when Branna's eyes darken and she sees Finbar Burke walk through the door.

Analysis

As soon as Iona arrives at Boyle's stable, she feels like she has come home. This is not only due to her close relationship with horses. The narrative also suggests that it has to do with the immediate connection she feels to Boyle. At first, Iona's attraction to Boyle is strictly physical. She thinks he is the most gorgeous man she has ever met. She soon realizes that she feels safe and protected with him. Perhaps because of this instant connection, Iona has no verbal filter when she speaks to Boyle, stepping over the line of what is typically appropriate during first impressions to completely analyze his character. While this dialogue helps to characterize Boyle for the reader, it is quite clunky and may leave some readers with the impression that Iona is presumptuous and annoying. While Iona analyzes Boyle based on a three-second introduction, Boyle also seems to know a bit about Iona, but his knowledge is based in local myth and folklore. Despite the fact that Iona feels no restraint in openly analyzing her new boss, she is uncomfortable with the fact that Boyle is able to do the same about her. Although Roberts works diligently throughout the novel to convince readers of the passionate, magnetic pull between these two characters, it is clear from the onset that they simply don't communicate well, which may leave some readers questioning the reliability of their passion.

It's interesting to note that there are clear parallels drawn throughout the narrative between Alastar and Boyle. For example, Iona thinks (in a clear parallel) that both man



and horse are “big and beautiful ... [and] magnificent” (Page 73). Her immediate assessment of both is that they are strong and stubborn – that perhaps they both need to be “broken in”. This comparison carries on and deepens throughout the novel, not only to highlight the strong bond between Iona, Alastar, and Boyle, but also to underscore the extreme passion Iona feels for Boyle. Roberts clearly wants readers to view Boyle as a rough beast that needs to be tamed, much like Alastar, so she relies on this easy comparison rather than fostering Boyle’s character growth on its own.

The fact that Finbar Burke, a descendent of Cabhan, has send Boyle a horse named Alastar on the very same day that Iona, a descendent of Teagan, arrives at the stables, should signal to the reader that both sides, good and evil, are suddenly aware that the time has come for the final battle. Finbar Burke is an interesting character in that he comes from Cabhan’s evil line but seems to have aligned himself with good. Readers will spend the rest of the novel fluctuating on whether or not Finbar can be trusted, and this confusion is clearly represented in the characters. While Boyle trusts Fin enough to have gone into business with him, Branna doesn’t trust him at all, and it’s clear that if she could cut him out of her life, she would. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether Fin can be trusted, which adds to novel’s internal conflict. Fin’s character also calls into question the argument of nature versus nurture. Should Fin be considered evil simply because he has sprung from an evil line (nature), or is it possible for Fin to turn against what is in his blood and embrace the light, living a life of good (nurture)?

Cabhan attacks Iona in the flesh for the first time in this section, by luring her into the woods. It seems that Cabhan’s forces are stronger in the woods, near the cabin where Sorcha and her children once lived, which is why he wants to draw her there. Despite the fact that Cabhan seems to have the power to travel freely through time and space, he inexplicably lures Iona in the same way he lured Sorcha: by calling her name in the woods. Iona is initially enticed by the calling, but her trek into the woods is interrupted by Kathel, Branna’s dog. This interruption highlights the strong connection between the dark witches and their spirit animals. With Alastar, Kathel, and the hawk near, Iona is never alone, even when she is far away from Branna and Connor. There seems to be telepathic communication between the animals and their human companions, which strengthens the protective magick between them. Cabhan’s initial attack doesn’t seem to have been vindictive. It’s doubtful that he was actually going to try to overpower Iona (although keen readers may question why he wouldn’t overtake her when he had the chance). Rather, it seems as if Cabhan was simply testing Iona’s strength, her ability to withstand his advances, so that he could better understand the power that he is up against. Branna immediately sees the danger that Cabhan poses to Iona and their dark magick, so she ups the intensity of the magic lessons, which a feather-headed Iona still views as simply fun.

Discussion Question 1

What parallels are drawn between Iona and Teagan in this section?



Discussion Question 2

How do the residents of County Mayo react to the news that Iona is a dark witch? Does this surprise you?

Discussion Question 3

What comparisons does Roberts make between Boyle and Alastair upon Iona's first introduction? What is the narrative effect of this comparison?

Vocabulary

Sidele, muck, flora, fauna, bridle, geld, burnish, canter, equine, fulminate, expat, happenstance, residual, canny, peat, salve, rosin.



Chapters 7 & 8

Summary

Chapters 7 & 8

Everything about Finbar Burke is striking, from his sharp cheekbones to his bold green eyes. He wears a long, leather coat that skims his knees, and has a “sweep” of black hair. Everyone in the pub regards Fin, but Iona notices that many greet him with caution rather than warmth. Only Connor greets him affectionately, with a huge hug and a hearty “Welcome back.” As soon as he sits down, Fin introduces himself to Iona and inquires about Alastar. He seems very interested by the fact that Iona handled the horse with great ease, and that Alastar was a complete beast for anyone else who interacted with him. When Iona questions why Fin would buy such a magnificent horse – one clearly not meant to cart tourists around on local tours – he replies mysteriously, “He’s meant for other things ... Needed for other things ... You understand me” (Page 105). As they talk, Iona notices a spark between Fin and Branna; one clearly marked with history and heartache. Fin makes a few pointed attempts to flirt with Branna, but she dismisses each with growing frustration. Eventually, she storms out of the pub with Meara chasing after her.

When the night comes a close, Boyle offers to drive Iona home since it’s pouring rain. The whole way, Iona chatters mindlessly about her friends and family. She tries to inquire into the nature of Branna and Fin’s relationship, but Boyle isn’t interested in gossip. She also questions how Boyle knew she had powers, and why he seems okay with it. As they drive, Iona suddenly hears her voice being called in the fog and knows that it’s Cabhan. When she starts to panic, Boyle encourages her to just keep talking, to ignore the voice. As they drive through the fog, a wild howl erupts and Iona can feel cold fingers clawing at her spine. At the hotel, Boyle insists on seeing Iona all the way to her room - which makes Iona slightly uncomfortable yet excited - and reminds her not to be afraid: she’s more powerful than even Cabhan knows.

The next day at work, Iona can hardly keep her thoughts on her chores. Her mind is overrun with distracting romantic thoughts about Boyle, and she can’t help but confess her feelings to a giddy Meara. As the two giggle and gossip, their conversation is suddenly interrupted by Boyle engaging in a fistfight with another man. The man has come to the stable demanding that Boyle return the horse stolen from him, but Boyle claims he won the abused animal fair and square. When the man refuses to leave, Boyle punches him twice, knocking him unconscious. With Fin’s help, they load the unconscious man into his truck and a few minutes later, the man drives away. Later, Meara tells Iona that the man, Riley, is a horse trader “of the lowest sort” and that he had a skinny, abused mare that he was planning to sell for dog food. Boyle, who can’t stand the sight of an animal in pain, bet the man that he could out drink him, and if he did, would win the horse. Boyle won, but now Riley is angry that he didn’t get what he believes to be a fair price for the animal, whom Boyle has renamed Darling. Pushing the



butterflies in her stomach aside, Iona walks to Boyle's office and begins tending to Boyle's bloody knuckles, even though he asks her repeatedly to leave him alone. As she tends to his wounds, Iona flirts openly and aggressively, but Boyle still keeps her at a distance. When she leaves, Fin, who has approached the office to speak to Boyle, teases him about Iona's obvious romantic interest. Boyle claims that now is too important of a time to be distracted by romance, but Fin encourages him to "eat his dessert first" (Page 123).

The next day, Iona packs her belongings and prepares to move into Branna and Connor's home. As she waits for her ride to arrive, she practices floating feathers, and watches with great delight as she manages to control a cycle on feathers above her head. She is distracted when there's a knock at the door, sending all the feathers haphazardly to the floor. She is even more surprised to see that it is Boyle, not Connor, who has arrived to help her transport her things. Taking this as a sign, Iona leans in to kiss Boyle but he turns away, deeply embarrassing her. He quickly grabs her bags and walks out to the truck, with Iona following, like a dog with its tail between its legs. In the car, Iona blurts out a apology, saying that she's embarrassed and that Boyle doesn't have to make her feel worse. As she grumbles, Boyle whirls around, grabs her, and kisses her roughly, claiming it's to "shut her up." Then the two drive in silence to Branna's house. As she fumes with frustration in the passenger seat, the truck bounces on an invisible bump and Iona realizes she has just levitated the truck with her frustration. After Boyle drops her off, Iona tells Branna everything, in one jumble of confused emotions. While she listens to the romantic gossip with sisterly interest, Branna is far more concerned with returning to their lessons, as she knows Cabhan has a growing interest in Iona and it will only be a matter of time before he tests her strengths again.

Analysis

Nora Roberts is a best selling author who has published over 200 novels to date. She has a fierce fan base that eagerly awaits the release of her new novels. Her fans devour them hot off the press. Despite this, it's clear to many readers – both diehard Roberts fans and not – that in order to produce so many novels a year, Roberts must rely on formulaic plots and stock characters. This is abundantly clear in *Dark Witch*. All of the characters, without exception, are stock characters, lacking depth and genuine inner complication. The complications Roberts attempts to include come across as forced and trite, leaving readers with the feeling that the characters, their dialogue, and ultimately their relationships, are entirely unbelievable. Roberts relies on tropes – what she assumes readers already know about certain "types" of characters – to make up for her lack of writing depth. Boyle is a stereotypical alpha-male with a soft spot, Iona is a strong yet flawed heroine who ultimately needs a man's help to save her (and she welcomes this with open arms), Fin is the dark and mysterious bad guy, Connor is the bumbling good guy, Branna is the intelligent shrewd, and Meara is the beautiful best friend. From these short descriptions, readers can likely guesstimate the full extent of the relationships that will play out on the page, and Roberts does little to surprise the reader.



From the first time they meet, it's clear that Iona and Boyle have a passionate attraction and that they will become sexual partners. For modern feminist readers, the relationship is somewhat painful to watch unfold. Yet, for some, particularly Roberts' key audience of middle-aged housewives looking for a quick beach read, these niggling issues likely won't annoy. Iona, who is supposed to be the novel's strong heroine. She is constantly daydreaming about sexy Boyle. Whether or not Boyle is interested in her seems to be far more important than practicing magic or staying alert when a psychopathic dark sorcerer wants to kill her. As a result, she is constantly finding herself in situations from which she needs to be saved. Boyle's character is written in a way that is supposed to be sexy not only to Iona, but also to the female reader, which may leave some female audiences questioning why. Iona is turned on by the fact that Boyle doesn't want her touch. She simply views him as stubborn and stoic, two "attractive" qualities. Iona continues to pursue Boyle, physically touching him and flirting obnoxiously with him, even after he asks her to stop. In the novel, this is portrayed as coquettish and coy, but modern readers may be left wondering how the situation would be perceived if the roles were reversed: if Boyle continued to romantically pursue Iona after she had asked him to stop.

Iona's heart nearly leaps out of her chest with arousal when she watches Boyle in a fistfight. The fact that Boyle is able to knock a man unconscious with two punches is supposed to signal his alpha-strength and be a huge turn-on for the audience. The scene painfully continues with Iona insisting on "babying" Boyle by nursing his wounded knuckles. This scene is particularly annoying for modern readers because it perpetuates the stereotype of women as nursemaids. Iona caring for Boyle's wounds – which he is clearly able to tend to himself, and has even asked Iona not to bother with – is ultimately what leads to the couple's first kiss, which sends the message that the nursemaid getup is far more irresistible than the strong horsewoman or the empowered traveler. When Boyle kisses Iona for the first time, it is described as rough, with him "grabbing" her shoulders. While this scene is meant to convey that Boyle can't control himself around Iona, it continues the trope of the alpha-male overpowering the women, and underscores the novel's obsession with portraying violence as sexy.

The idea of alpha-male strength being best is also underscored with the treatment of the horses. When Iona begins braiding the horses' manes, a common practice for show horses, Meara suggests that Boyle would be deeply offended if Iona were to braid the male horses' hair, even going so far as to say that he would geld them. Roberts seems to go out of her way to suggest that for characters like Boyle, being seen as effeminate, even for a horse, makes one less masculine, further perpetuating the novel's clear gender roles and veneration for alpha-male strength.

Discussion Question 1

How is masculinity presented in the novel?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss Iona's method of flirting with Boyle. What does this tell you about the novel's gender roles?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Finbar Burke should be trusted? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Illusion, tyrant, bout, innate, filly, preen, gelding, dandy, shagging, publican, hone, sulk, glower, jamb, bollocks, wheedle, cajole, serpentine, brusque, lorry, daft, ramble.



Chapters 9 & 10

Summary

Chapters 9 & 10

Iona is called to visit Boyle's big stable a short ride away from the smaller stable where she works. She mounts Alastar to prepare for the journey, eager to let him run with abandon. She kicks her heels and lets him take off, and is amazed when they seem to lift off the ground: "Power, she realized, his and hers, spurred them both so that for an instant, jut an instant more, she felt them both life above the ground. Flying truly now, the wind whipping her hair, his mane" (Page 135). She arrives at the stable out of breath and beaming, just in time to learn that she will be teaching a new student how to course jump. While she waits for the student to arrive, Iona asks Boyle if she can see Darling, the horse he won in the drinking bet. Begrudgingly, Boyle agrees. As soon as Iona lays eyes on the horse, she knows how deeply Darling loves Boyle. She also sees Boyle's gruff exterior melt away when he's near his beloved horse, and it warms her heart to see him showing the animal such compassion. Sensing the tension between them beginning to thaw, Iona broaches the topic of their kiss, frustratingly questioning why, if it's clear they're both interested, they can't take it any further. Boyle claims that it's not a good idea to mix work and pleasure, especially with the cousin of his best friend, but then grabs Iona with all his force and crushes his mouth to hers. The pair kiss passionately until another stable hand awkwardly announces that Iona's student has arrived.

After work, Iona walks back home pleased with her day. Her mind wanders as she thinks about the kiss in the stable, and daydreaming about asking Boyle on a proper date. Suddenly, she looks around and realizes that she has no idea where she is – she's veered off her path and is now deeper in the woods than she had ever been. Quickly, she turns back to retrace her steps and is shocked when a snarling wolf, Cabhan in animal form, steps into her path. Knowing that she will never outrun the wolf, Iona pulls all the power she can muster into her hands, creating two fire balls in her fists. She hurls the fireballs at the wolf but misses. The wolf crouches, ready to spring, when another animal snarls behind her. Iona whirls around to see Kathel, Branna's dog, has arrived, along with Connor and Branna. The wolf cowers as Branna challenges the beast to a fight, then vaporizes back into fog. Branna whirls angrily around and begins marching back to the house. When Iona tries to explain herself, Branna silences her. Back at the house, Branna lambastes Iona for not calling on their for support. She is lucky that Connor's hawk saw what was happening and was able to call them, or it might have ended very differently. She is equally angered by the fact that Iona has failed, once again, to wear her protective amulet.

The next day, Branna increases her lessons ten-fold. She takes Iona into the dark, rainy woods and teaches her how to cast the water away from her, creating a warm dry bubble of protection. When they go back inside, Branna teaches her how to glamor



herself dry and how to apply make-up with magic. When Meara comes over, the three women pass a few hours chatting about their lives and, of course, gossiping about other people's love lives. Their gab session is interrupted when Connor, Fin, and Boyle barge through the door, soaking wet, hoping for dinner. As they cook and prepare the meal, Iona continues her barrage of questions, claiming that if she's ever going to understand what has happened in County Mayo, or her place in the legacy, she needs some straight answers. She learns that Branna and Fin were once in a romantic relationship, but when Cabhan's mark appeared on Fin at the age of eighteen, Branna broke things off and hasn't been able to look past the mark, regardless of how Fin tries to prove his loyalty to the light. Even now, Branna struggles to be in the same room as Fin, which deeply bothers Connor.

Analysis

The connection between the animal guides and the witches is strong, thanks to Sorsha's spell all those years ago. Branna is able to converse with dogs (although that isn't explored in this text), Connor with hawks, and Iona with horses. The spell Sorsha cast is a bit unclear, but it seems that the blood forged them together, and the animals are now bound to protect their charges with their lives. It's interesting to note that when Iona arrives, Branna questions Iona repeatedly whether she is willing to risk her life for the cause, saying that Iona must dedicate herself to the fight by choice. The animals, however, are not given a choice and appear to be naturally obligated through their blood to protect and serve. While the novel itself isn't deep enough to reflect on the sacrifice of war animals, it could be an interesting investigation for keen readers to explore.

The constraints of the witches' magic, or the "rules" of the novel's world, seem to slip away from Roberts in this section with the suggestion that Alastar can fly. Despite the fact that there are magical elements in the novel, a flying horse seems a bit farfetched, especially since readers were initially told that Alastar is a regular, albeit beautiful, stallion. This detail seems particularly sloppy because it is never returned to. Alastar flies in this scene alone. Why ask the reader to suspend their disbelief to accept a flying horse and then never use the tool you've created? The novel opens with a carefully constructed magical world that sets the novel's constraints. Sorcha is described as a powerful witch who has passed her magic on to her offspring. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that the offspring have inherited the same type of magical ability. Sorsha's magic was based on spells and potions, not magical powers like flying, transformation, and levitation. It's alarming, then, to see Iona flying through space, and using magic to apply makeup or change her clothes, because this type of magic is so different from what has already been established as believable in the magical world. As a result, the magical scenes often take on a cartoon-like atmosphere, and readers may struggle to invest in the created tension. Roberts' lazy writing, in which the witches suddenly have new magical powers without discovering or earning them, will likely prevent readers from truly engaging with the characters or their journeys.

In this section, Roberts continues to cast Iona as an insipid, feather-headed heroine who, as soon as a handsome man waltzes into her life, is too busy daydreaming about



romance to focus on the task at hand, saving her own life. Iona daydreams her way into the woods where Cabhan, who has transformed into a wolf, is waiting for her. Once again, it's unclear why, when given the opportunity to finish Iona off, Cabhan waits. There is no explanation given as to why Cabhan is generous enough to continually test Iona's strength, giving her ample time to learn, grow, and prepare for their final battle, but this seems to be the case. Once again, Iona does little to save herself and relies entirely on others to save her. While this dynamic isn't necessarily an issue on its own, it may be annoying to readers that Roberts intends for Iona to be a fierce, independent heroine, yet whenever Iona is given a chance to actually showcase some power, she flounders around until someone else saves her. All this could be redeemed if, at the end of the novel, Iona actually fights for herself, but readers should be prepared to know that this never happens. As a result, Iona appears to be a weak, unchanging character throughout the novel, which is frustrating for the reader.

Finally, in this section, Roberts explores whether love is enough to sustain a relationship. Fin and Branna's failed relationship is used as a foil to compare Iona and Boyle's relationship. Boyle does not want to pursue a romantic relationship with Iona because he fears it will distract them from the mission of defeating Cabhan. Despite this, he seems unable to resist Iona's feminine charms and continues to roughly kiss and overpower her – remember Roberts' fascination with strict gender roles and the “alpha male” – whenever she flutters her eyelashes at him. Readers will immediately recognize this as lust rather than love, yet the narrative insists that Iona and Boyle are in love, which is yet another example of lazy writing. The “love” between Boyle and Iona hasn't been earned, and therefore feels cheap and superficial. As a result, readers likely won't care, at least not deeply, whether the relationship works out. It is frustrating that Roberts fails to give her characters any real internal conflict, and instead simply states what the problems are and expects the readers to blindly invest their emotions. Readers have seen no real build-up or tension in the relationship between Iona and Boyle, so it's not an emotional climax when it's announced that the pair are in love. This is a pattern throughout the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What parallels are drawn between the characters and the horses?

Discussion Question 2

How are animals used in the fight between good and evil?

Discussion Question 3

How does the novel explore the concept of love in romantic relationships?



Vocabulary

Bugle, turret, lope, ballast, bigot, equine, taciturn, octogenarian, bawdy, forge, fraught, gorge, hilt.



Chapters 11 & 12

Summary

Chapters 11 & 12

Iona looks around and realizes that this is not a simple family dinner; it is a power summit. Branna advises Boyle and Meara that their blood is not mixed in the battle, and that they face great danger in supporting their side of the fight. Both friends brush off Branna's warning and ask what they can do to help. Iona learns that Fin can communicate with Cabhan because they share the dark mark, but that Cabhan has blocked Fin from reading his thoughts now that Fin has chosen to side with the light. The fact that Fin hasn't blocked Cabhan from him is one of the main reasons why Branna refuses to trust him, despite the love they once shared. The tension mounts as Fin tries to convince Branna that he can be trusted, and Iona intervenes by blurting out that she trusts Fin and views him as one of the family. Although Branna is shamed by Iona's willingness to accept Fin, she realizes that she cannot let her personal feelings break the circle of trust that has formed between the six friends. With Branna's agreement, the six begin formulating their plan, realizing that they don't really know when or how to attack Cabhan. They mention Sorcha's cabin in the woods – and that Iona isn't yet strong enough to travel there – but there is a strong mysticism around the place that no one quite understands. Before he leaves that night, Boyle once again “grabs” Iona and kisses her, and then asks her on a proper date: out for dinner.

The next morning, Iona wakes to find a pile of dead rats outside their house. Immediately, she knows Cabhan has sent them. She and her cousins burn the rats and bury the ashes, covering the earth with salt, knowing that Cabhan watches them the entire time.

Later that day, Boyle and Iona take the horses out for a ride in the woods. As they ride and playfully flirt, they are surprised and terrified when Cabhan, in wolf form, leaps into their path. Immediately, Iona conjures up a tornado, making it as strong as she can muster, shouting to Cabhan, “You think I don't have it ... you're wrong” (Page 192). The tornado rips through the woods, felling and splintering a large tree, before picking up the wolf and whisking him away. The power surges through Iona's body and she knows she laid it on too strong. She still needs to learn control, but at least she knows she has the strength. After the conflict, Boyle takes Iona home, makes her dinner, and then the two have sex for the first time.

Analysis

In this section, the power summit of friends is called together for the first time with an acknowledgement of their task. Since Cabhan attacked Iona, they know the time is near for their battle against him. Immediately, everyone decides that Iona is not to be left



alone – she is too vulnerable and valuable to risk another attack. Iona is the only person who challenges this arrangement, but it is eventually decided that Iona cannot be trusted to travel anywhere unattended. Once again, this sets Iona up as a “damsel in distress” who needs the strength of others – particularly Connor and Boyle – to keep her safe. It is always the men who volunteer to escort Iona, suggesting that women are weaker or inferior.

During their mission discussion, there is also more mention of Fin’s connection with Cabhan. Fin is the most complicated and interesting character in the novel. Although Roberts deals primarily with stock characters and clichés – and Fin certainly is one – there is just enough doubt cast on Fin’s characters to keep him interesting. He refuses to block Cabhan from his mind claiming that this connection provides Fin with unique opportunity to learn something about Cabhan that could lead to his destruction. Branna doesn’t trust Fin’s motives, and some of the readers might not either. If Fin is working as a double-agent, it would be unexpected, and could provide a bit of literary suspense in an otherwise one-dimensional novel. Their discussion also makes brief mention of the cabin in the woods. Connor says that, “It’s not tightly bound to the world, to the here. Without the knowing, a person might be caught there, in that other, that alone. And it’s there he might come, stronger for it, and take what you are” (Page 173). This quote seems to be suggesting a strong power that is present only at this place, although the power is never fully explored. In the final battle, readers will be sideswiped by the idea that Cabhan and the witches can time travel (Roberts once again changes the magical constraints of the novel without warning), and this passage could be interpreted as a weak suggestion of the skill. If frustrated readers search hard enough for contextual clues about the novel’s “rules”, they can be found, although clues like these might also be considered a reach.

Finally, in this section, Cabhan confronts Boyle and Iona during a horseback ride in the woods. During this ride, the narrator constantly portrays Boyle as a savior, both of Darling, the horse he saved, and of Iona. There are clear parallels drawn between Boyle and Alastar, Iona’s horse, and it is suggested that the same parallel is being made between Iona and Darling. For example, both gaze at Boyle through long, fluttering lashes. Both are undervalued for their skills. Both are unlikely recipients of Boyle’s affections, etc. This comparison, along with the alpha-male tendencies Roberts perpetuates, there is a clear message being sent to readers of female subservience. This message persists throughout the next chapter, as Boyle and Iona are making love, and their bodies are constantly referred to in horseback, animal riding terms. While Roberts may be trying to be clever with her metaphors, the constant comparison to wild animals that need to be tamed may leave readers frustrated in the message that women must be dominated by men, and that they should find their rough bumbling romantic.

Discussion Question 1

How is Meara and Boyle’s fight against Cabhan different than the rest of the characters’?



Discussion Question 2

How could Fin's connection to Cabhan be manipulated by both sides in the battle?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Fin should be trusted? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Contingency, palette, lough, magpie, isthmus, quibble, thwack, reap.



Chapters 13 & 14

Summary

Chapters 13 & 14

After their lovemaking session, Boyle drives Iona home where she promptly tells Branna all the details of her tryst. Later that afternoon, Iona walks to Branna's store and sees Branna selling a young woman a love potion, which Iona didn't even know Branna made. Later that night, the power summit is called again for dinner at Branna's house, where Iona and Boyle recount the details of Cabhan's latest attack. Connor states that Cabhan probably won't kill Iona outright even if he has the chance. He will likely torture her in the hopes that she will hand over her powers to end the pain. If he kills her, he will have only one split second to grab as much of her power as he can before her soul slips away, and he likely doesn't fancy those chances. Once again, the witches discuss the possibility that Cabhan can time travel. When Iona asks what Cabhan has been doing for all these centuries, Boyle says, "Fin thinks he goes back and forth, when he's a mind to, between times, or worlds. Or both" (Page 217). Later, they decide that the upcoming solstice will be the best time to lay their attack, although their not yet sure how to lure Cabhan into their presence.

That night, Iona spends the evening in bed with Boyle. When she climaxes during their lovemaking session, flames shoot from her fingertips, surprising both of them. As they sleep, Cabhan comes to both of them and they share a vision of being lost in the cold woods. Suddenly, Cabhan leaps from the dark fog and attacks Boyle. Iona wakes from the dream with a start, and is horrified to see Boyle's real hand wet with blood. Iona grabs Boyle's hand and knows that the wound must be sealed with light magick, or Cabhan will soon control Boyle's blood. Iona does her best to clean the dark magick from the wound, but it is her first try, so she calls Branna for help.

Analysis

Much of this short section is spent recapping Cabhan's rise to power and describing Iona and Boyle's increasingly physical relationship. Once again, the witches discuss the possibility of time travel, which helps prepare the reader for the shock of it in the novel's final scenes. Connor states that Cabhan can only travel through time at the cottage, suggesting that the woods is the only place he can inhabit throughout history. While this detail constrains Cabhan's ability, it also introduces a variety of questions that are never really answered. For example, why doesn't Cabhan travel back in time to when Sorcha was alive, and finish her off in a different way? Branna suggests that Cabhan cannot change what was, which begs the question: then why travel back in time at all? The witches all discuss the morality of time travel, and whether or not it would be noble to kill someone evil, like Hitler.



The physical connection between Iona and Boyle reaches fever pitch when Cabhan is able to attack both of them in the same dream. It seems as if Cabhan pulls Iona into his dark dream world, and because her soul has bonded with Boyle, who sleeps beside her, he is pulled in as well. During the attack, Boyle, not Iona, fights Cabhan off, and receives a bloody wound as a result. When they return to reality, Iona, always the damsel in distress, flutters, “You knew what to do ... You knew we needed fire, and you stayed so calm. I needed you to stay calm. I’m going to believe you’d know what to do if and when he comes at us again” (Page 230). Once again, Iona is cast in a helpless role and the suggestion is made that she wouldn’t have survived without strong, brave Boyle around to protect her.

Discussion Question 1

How does Iona and Boyle’s relationship change now that it has become physical?

Discussion Question 2

Were you expecting the possibility of time travel in the novel? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What plot holes or flaws, if any, have you found thus far in the novel? How does this affect your enjoyment of the novel?

Vocabulary

Avid, agile, hull, shunt, besotted, shunt, horde, kin, paradox, volatile, feign, Equinox.



Chapters 15 & 16

Summary

Chapters 15 & 16

The next day, Boyle takes Iona to some nearby ruins, giving her mind a break from the battle with Cabhan. As Boyle drives, Iona gazes out the window at the beautiful Irish countryside and, like the daffodils in the fields, is determined to bloom. When they arrive at Ballintubber Abbey, Iona is filled with the strange sensation that she has been here before. Boyle tells her that “her blood”, meaning her ancestors, helped to build the place, and his ancestors helped to maintain it. This is likely why she feels such a strong connection. Iona uses her cell phone to take a picture of herself and Boyle in front of the ruins, and when she looks at the photo, she sees a white haze, like a ghost, surrounding them. The image startles her, yet Iona knows it is “good light” there to protect them. At the next stop, Ross Abbey, Iona experiences a possession. She knows her ancestors have been here as well, but the place is far more sinister; her ancestors were murdered here. A spirit overtakes Iona’s body and she begins speaking unintelligibly about the past, then as her eyes blacken, the babbling turns to Irish as she speaks about a grandmother and the power of three. As Iona’s eyes roll back in her head and her legs give out, Boyle grabs her and carries her to the car. Predictably, Iona thanks Boyle for “catching me before I fell” (Page 240). Boyle rushes Iona home, where she tells her cousins all the details she can remember from her vision. She also tells her cousins that she is in love with Boyle.

The next morning, Connor walks Iona to the stables for work. The two discuss Iona’s new love and their history of relationships. Meanwhile, at the stables, Boyle is brooding over his inability to come to terms with his strong emotions for Iona. He knows that he is falling in love with her, but he’s so unaccustomed to love that he can’t quite cope with its enormity. When Fin asks Boyle what’s bothering him, Boyle explodes saying that Iona must have tricked him into falling in love with her, and that she must have drugged him with a love spell. Suddenly, Iona interrupts Boyle’s angry tirade to announce her presence. Her eyes are filled with angry tears, and it’s clear that she’s overheard everything. She immediately breaks things off with Boyle, turns on her heel, and marches back home. Once there, she, Branna, and Meara open a bottle of wine and commence complaining about men, while Connor and Fin drink whiskey and stout with Boyle to help ease his broken heart. Connor and Fin give Boyle their best apology advice, encouraging him to buy her flowers or “something with some shine to it to show you understand the depth of your mistake” (Page 257).

Analysis

As she does with her characters, Roberts often relies on clichés to describe the novel’s setting. The Ireland described in *Dark Witch* is a fairytale version of the country, which



relies on stereotypes of the landscape and people to interest international readers. Based on the novel's inclusion of modern technology (iPads, for example), the reader knows the story is set in the 21st century. Yet, based on the setting descriptions, the novel could have easily been set 200 years ago. This authorial choice may have been made to heighten the fantastical, magical elements of the novel. For example, "[Ireland] settled into her like a sip of whiskey on a cold night, warm and comforting. Green hills rolled under a sky layered with clouds, stacked like sheets of linen. The sun shimmered through them, making intermittent swirls of blue luminous as opals. Fat cows and woolly sheep dotted emerald fields bisected with rough hedgerows or silvery gray rock walls. Farmhouses, barns, pretty little cottages scattered over the land with postcard charm as the road twisted and curved" (Page 231). While descriptions like this are lovely on their own, when partnered with other descriptions of people and place – everyone drinks stout and whiskey, walks Irish setter dogs, wears tartan clothes, etc – the reader may feel that they are receiving a watered-down illustration of Ireland that doesn't truly represent the country's modern complexities or achievements.

Iona's trip to the ruins again highlights the strength of her family's magical blood. She is able to remember and viscerally experience events from her family's history. This, in a way, is a form of time travel, but Iona experiences these memories as visions. The visions don't have much of a purpose other than to clue readers in on the family's past, but they are certainly interesting to read. If Iona is able to physically feel her ancestor's emotions, it could also be assumed that she is able to feel, and garner, their strength. The connection of the blood may explain why Iona has grown leaps and bounds in her magical abilities since moving to Ireland.

While on her trip, Iona realizes that she is in love with Boyle. This may come as a surprise to readers since there has been no emotional growth in the couple's relationship. Until now, their encounters have been strictly physical. Readers are also given little insight into Boyle's character, other than the fact that he is the brooding silent type, which may leave some audience members questioning exactly why Iona has fallen in love with him. In traditional romance novels, the author will create a somewhat complicated male lead with the hope that the female reader will fall in love as the heroine does, but this isn't the case with *Dark Witch*. Boyle is a two-dimensional stock character with little depth, which may leave the reader feeling that the love Iona feels for him is as superficial as their characters. The superficiality of their love is further highlighted during the breakup, when it is suggested that Boyle's severe insult could be simply repaired with a shiny piece of jewelry. At no point does Boyle attempt to explain himself to Iona, nor does Iona attempt to communicate openly with Boyle. Despite the fact that the pair claim to be in love with each other, their relationship is clearly based on physical attraction alone, not communication or connection.

The breakup also highlights the ridiculous gender roles Roberts employs in many of her novels. The girls sit around gossiping about men, drinking wine, and eating cookie dough ice cream out of the container, while the guys drink whiskey, munch pizza and potato chips, and threaten to punch each other over the women's honor. At this point in the novel, such stereotypes are to be expected.



Discussion Question 1

Do you think "Dark Witch" presents an accurate portrayal of modern Ireland? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why are the events at Ross Abbey significant to Iona's journey?

Discussion Question 3

How is Iona and Boyle's breakup characterized through gender expectations?

Vocabulary

Luminous, oxymoron, nefarious, antiquity, kitschy, continuity, friary, pillage, cloister, pious, balustrade, mediocre, covet, flue, encroach, gom, grovel, brood, bauble, cynicism.



Chapters 17 & 18

Summary

Chapters 17 & 18

The next morning, Iona fights off a hangover but is determined to go to work as usual. She won't give Boyle the satisfaction of quitting, and she hopes he won't fire her now that they've split up. The narrative jumps back and forth between Boyle and Iona's perspective, giving readers insight into both of their thoughts. Iona works diligently throughout the day, giving Boyle the silent treatment, and feeling a small sense of joy knowing that her behavior bothers him. When she returns home that afternoon, Branna has a special surprise for her. She's going to teach Iona how to travel through space. Immediately, Iona says that she wants to visit Nan, the only person she feels has ever loved her. All Iona has to do is focus her mind on something concrete in Nan's home, and suddenly she whisks through the dimensions and finds herself in Nan's kitchen. When Connor tells Nan that Iona is feeling down because she's had a disagreement with Boyle, Nan says that's too bad because she's "very fond of him" (Page 274). They can only stay for a few moments, but before she leaves, Iona pockets a lemon from Nan's windowsill. A few moments later she is back in Branna's kitchen, the lemon still safely tucked in her pocket.

As soon as they arrive, Branna gives Iona a tonic to settle her body after the journey, and a list of weapons she has hidden around their property. She asks Iona to find each of the weapons using a seeking spell, another skill that could be helpful in her fight against Cabhan. As Iona runs around the property in search of her quarry, Branna and Connor once again discuss Fin and whether or not he can be trusted. When Iona has found all the weapons, Branna announces that they are hers to keep: "Every witch needs her own tools" (Page 280). After dinner, Iona is basking in the glory of her good day: she faced Boyle and didn't wilt, visited Nan, completed the seeking spell, and enjoyed her cousins' company. As she walks down to the shop to finish a few chores, she gasps to see Boyle waiting there for her, a beautiful bouquet in hand. Boyle apologizes for what he said, but Iona isn't ready to accept. Iona claims that she's not ready to be loved yet, and that the breakup with Boyle has made her realize that she needs to focus on her magic. She can't let her emotions about their relationship distract her from the real reason she's here: defeating Cabhan. She tells Boyle that she needs to stay friends with him – they work together and have agreed to fight together – so he can't let his emotions get in the way, either. When Boyle leaves, Iona sighs, knowing that she desperately loves him but cannot have him.

Analysis

In this section, Iona travels through space for the first time. With their magical powers, the dark witches are able to teleport. Iona uses the opportunity to visit her Nan. It's



interesting to note that Nan, who is not surprised by Iona's visit, hadn't told her granddaughter about the ability earlier. It's also interesting to note that Nan, who also has the power, has never come to visit Iona, relying on letter-writing to stay in contact instead. Little happens during Iona's visit with Nan, but Nan makes a curious statement about "being fond of" Boyle. The way she phrases it, it sounds as if Nan knows Boyle, Connor, and Branna well, yet the narrative leads readers to believe that Nan has lived in America for all of Iona's life. It's unclear how Nan could have forged such strong relationships with the characters in Ireland, or why she never mentioned any of them to Iona when she was growing up. This is yet another plot hole in the novel that may frustrate and trip-up readers.

Upon returning home, Iona completes a seeking spell, which will be useful when she battles Cabhan. Despite her natural ability to seek what has been hidden, the dark witches all agree that it should be Fin who seeks out Cabhan when it is time to attack. They feel that his blood connection will make the seeking stronger and will lessen the risk of Cabhan discovering their plan before they have found him. Throughout the novel, Branna and Connor have been shocked to learn that Cabhan can be wounded by physical force. They are flabbergasted, for example, to hear that Boyle drew blood when he punched Cabhan. They seemed to believe that Cabhan was simply a spirit that took on magical form and could only be defeated by magic, so it's unclear why Branna has suddenly loaded Iona up with physical weapons – like knives and swords – for the battle rather than magical ones. This is yet another narrative conflict that is never addressed.

Finally, in this section Boyle attempts to apologize to Iona for what he said. Iona, who has had an unexplained change in character and has suddenly decided to focus on battling Cabhan alone, rejects him. Roberts has created a real opportunity for both Iona and Boyle to express themselves, and for their character motivations to be made clear to the reader, but the opportunity is lost. Rather than expanding on their characters, Roberts allows them to remain two-dimensional, simplistic characters. Iona's sudden change of heart is never explained and may not seem believable to the reader. Nevertheless, it is nice to see Iona embracing her true mission in Ireland rather than being constantly distracted by romance. However, the shift in ambition would likely be more rewarding to the reader if it came about organically and not as a "game" Iona is playing to get back at Boyle.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Iona break up with Boyle? Do you agree with her motivations?

Discussion Question 2

What does the reader learn about Nan through Iona's visit? Does anything about the visit surprise you? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

How might the seeking spell help Iona in her battle against Cabhan?

Vocabulary

Staunch, finagle, cordial, yen, sultry, hearth, brandish, elude, cull, imbue.



Chapters 19 & 20

Summary

Chapters 19 & 20

Spring reaches County Mayo and Iona passes the days working at the stable, taking sword fighting lessons from Meara, and working on repairing on her relationship with Boyle. Although the two are doing their best to adhere to the rules of friendship, it's clear to everyone around them that Iona and Boyle are still in love. One evening, Boyle, Connor, and Fin arrive driving a battered old car up the drive. They jump out and shout "Happy Birthday!" to Iona, who hasn't told anyone it is her special day. Iona is touched, not only that they found out her birthday without having to be told, but also for pooling their money to buy her a car and give her a bit more independence. A package with a hand-knitted sweater also arrives from Nan, which she says has been knitted with an added protection spell.

At dinner that night, the friends meet for their final power summit before the Equinox. They go over all the steps of their plan, and how they will keep Iona safe. First, Fin will seek out Cabhan and draw him to the cottage. There will be a circle of protection that Meara, Boyle, and Fin must stay inside at all times, leaving the three, the dark witches, to battle him outside. Branna has concocted a spell she hopes will overpower Cabhan, but it is too risky to practice before their battle. She will rely on her expertise, rather than proven results, on the day.

The day before the solstice, Iona rises with a nervous energy. She knows Cabhan can feel her energy, so she goes about her morning routine with a bit more caution. She heads to the stables earlier than usual, hoping to work the nerves out of her system. When she arrives, the doors slam shut behind her and the lights flash off. Out of nowhere, the wolf, Cabhan, leaps on her, sending her crashing to the ground. Iona throws off a shield with just enough force to throw the wolf off her. Cabhan returns to his human form and tries to lure the magic out of her with seductive words. Iona can hear Boyle rushing toward the stables, but so can Cabhan. He vanishes before Boyle arrives, but not before he warns Iona that she will have the blood of her friends and family on her hands if she continues to refuse him. When she looks down, Iona's hands are wet with blood.

Despite the attack, Iona insists on finishing her day's work. She cannot go home and watch the hours tick away until tomorrow. She has to stay busy. At the end of the work day, Boyle surprises her with a custom made saddle he had built for her birthday. It is the most beautiful thing Iona has ever seen, and she is deeply moved. In that moment, Iona decides that if it is her last night on earth, she wants to spend it with Boyle, feeling truly alive, truly in love, even if its just an illusion. She asks Boyle if she can spend the night with him, and he accepts.



Analysis

The novel is setting up for the grand battle that will take place in the novel's final setting. Cabhan has finally attacked Iona with the intention of harming her, not just testing her, and Iona was able to fight him off on her own. Iona is finally coming into her own and holding her own strength as a heroine, which is a welcome change for her character. Even though Iona is able to defend herself against Cabhan, it's clear that she is not strong enough to defeat him on her own. For that, she needs her friends and family near. One of the resounding messages of the novel is that you are stronger in a pack than on your own. Iona has spent her entire life feeling like an outsider and now that she has found where she belongs, she feels invincible. This section functions to show readers just how tight and bonded the group is before the fight. They learn of Iona's birthday without being told, and gift her with the one thing she lacks: independence. On Iona's first day of independence, she is attacked, but manages to hold her own, without Boyle, Connor, or Fin rushing in to save her. Iona truly has grown since moving to Ireland, and it's nice to see her embracing her role as the heroine rather than as the damsel in distress.

Perhaps because Iona is finally being portrayed as strong and independent, it is somewhat disheartening to see that she immediately runs to Boyle's arms, and bed, for assurance. Some readers may interpret this decision as Iona embracing and owning her sexuality, others may interpret it is a desperate cry to be loved despite her independent streak. Does Iona truly believe that she can exist as a strong woman without a man's affection? That is up to the reader to decide. Nevertheless, the night of passion before the battle is a surefire way for Roberts to quickly rekindle the love lost between Iona and Boyle that will be necessary to give the novel a sense of emotional completion.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Iona and Boyle are good romantic match? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How has Iona come into her own since moving to Ireland?

Discussion Question 3

Can Iona be viewed as a heroine, or is she cast as a damsel in distress? What is the difference?

Vocabulary

Bleat, ply, parry, besotted, eke, finite.



Chapters 21 & Epilogue

Summary

Chapters 21 & Epilogue

The next morning, Boyle sits in the kitchen thinking about how much easier his life would be if Iona had never walked into it. When Iona wakes and joins him at the table, he realizes that an easy life is not what he wants. He notices that Iona acts like a guest in his home now, not as comfortable as she was before their fight. Iona is cool toward Boyle, focused on the fight at hand. She thanks him for being there for her the night before, and leaves without eating breakfast. Iona spends the morning at the stalls, brushing and prepping Alastar for the battle ahead. She is filled with nerves, but feels confident that they will defeat Cabhan. In the afternoon, the circle meets to discuss the plan one final time. An hour before moonrise, the circle meets. Branna casts a spell of protection, and Fin uses his blood to seek out Cabhan. He lures Cabhan to the cabin using Iona's scent, which he knows Cabhan will follow. Iona mounts Alastar and gallops through the woods toward the cabin, using her sword to slash away the vines and branches that hang in her path. When she arrives, she quickly begins casting a spell with flowers, wine, and candles to call forth the power of her ancestors. Before she can light all the candles, Cabhan appears and the ground shifts. Suddenly, Iona is tumbling through time, into the past, but she manages to light all four candles. Iona looks around for the rest of the circle to join her, but they are nowhere to be seen. She lashes out at Cabhan with her sword but misses. It isn't until Cabhan threatens to set Alastar on fire that she feels the power surge in her. She shouts that she is Sorcha's, and the magic is hers, that she will never give Cabhan what he desires. She pulls out her knife and plunges it into Cabhan's side. Cabhan roars with fury and wraps his hands around her neck, strangling her. Out of nowhere, Boyle comes rushing through the fog. He pummels Cabhan's face, despite the flames that leap out and burn his skin. Cabhan transforms back into a wolf and runs away. Moments later, the rest of the circle arrive and Branna performs a spell to take them all home.

At home, the circle members sit around a fire and drink whiskey, Boyle and Iona nursing their wounds with tonics Branna has prepared. Iona has realized that despite what they thought, Cabhan couldn't take the magic from her no matter how hard he tried. He needed her to give it to him, so she knows that as long as they stay resolute in their resolve to never give in, he cannot touch them. Meara and Branna were also smart enough to save samples of Cabhan's blood and ash to use in spells against him later. After discussing the fight briefly, Boyle pulls Iona aside and proposes to her. It is shocking for everyone in the room, but Iona accepts. They agree to get married at Ballintubber Abbey next year.



Analysis

Most readers will be disappointed by the anticlimactic “battle” at the end of the novel. Despite the fact that the entire plot has been building toward this moment for over 300 pages, the fight itself lasts only four pages and only involves Iona. The rest of the circle are stuck in present time once Cabhan pulls Iona into the past. They are nowhere to be seen. It is also disappointing that no magic is actually used in the fight. Iona tries to slash Cabhan with a sword and ends up stabbing him with her knife. Boyle, always the hero, ends the fight by punching Cabhan in the face. It is also interesting to note that despite all the build-up, the family ancestors, including Sorcha, at whose home the battle takes place, have no influence on the outcome of the fight. Iona fights to light the four candles, but then nothing happens and nothing else about the spell is mentioned.

Rather than ending in the battle of good-versus-evil that has been promised, Roberts offers an emotional climax in the form of the engagement of Boyle and Iona. The proposal comes as a surprise for the characters, and, perhaps, for the reader. It’s surprising that Iona and Boyle should agree to get married when they’ve only known each other for a few months and have never said that they loved each other. For the entire novel, Roberts has pressed readers to accept that Boyle and Iona have a passionate connection. However, it is not demonstrated by the characters’ thoughts, words, or actions. As a result, the proposal will likely have little effect on the reader. This storyline is a set up for the next novel in the series.

Discussion Question 1

Is the final battle with Cabhan what you expected? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is the climax of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Iona should have accepted Boyle's wedding proposal? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Ordain, pewter, consecrate, vial, vengeance, addle.



Characters

Iona Sheehan

Iona Sheehan is the novel's protagonist and heroine. Iona is in her mid-twenties. She has just arrived in County Mayo, Ireland, from her hometown in America. Iona has short blonde hair, a pretty but not remarkable face, and an athletic body. She says whatever is on her mind without filtering for situational appropriateness, which could make her character annoying to some readers. She is very good with horses, having worked with them her whole life, and can even hear their thoughts. Iona spent her entire life feeling like she didn't belong. She was raised by indifferent parents and always felt like an outsider. That is until her grandmother (Nan) told Iona that she had special powers, which could be traced back to the original dark witch, Sorcha. When Iona begins to have lucid dreams in which she's being stalked by Cabhan, Sorcha's nemesis, Iona decides to pack up her life, move to Ireland, and search for her ancestors. There, she finds her cousins, Branna and Connor, and begins a mission with them to defeat Cabhan once and for all. Despite the fact that she is cast as the novel's heroine, Iona is a bit feather-headed, more concerned with her burgeoning romance with Boyle McGraff, the local stable owner, than in saving her own life. Frustratingly, Iona always finds herself in "damsel in distress" situations that require others, usually Boyle, to save her when she should be able to save herself. Even though Iona studies magic and becomes quite a capable witch, the reader never sees her display her powers because she is always in need of rescuing. At the end of the novel, Iona and Boyle become engaged, despite the fact that they have never said they love each other and have recently broken up after Boyle deeply disrespected her. For all of these reasons, Iona makes a questionable heroine. Many readers will likely struggle to engage with her.

Boyle McGraff

Boyle McGraff is the local stable owner in County Mayo, Ireland. The reader receives very little description about Boyle except that he is strong, handsome, and gruff. Boyle is the "strong and silent" type who would rather brood about his emotions than talk about them. He has a bit of a temper and is known to throw punches during disagreements. Despite the fact that he is rough around the edges, the reader knows that he has a soft heart, as demonstrated by his rescuing of Darling, the abused and neglected mare that was destined for death at the glue factory. Boyle is the typical "alpha male" character that Roberts loves to cast in her novels. The attractiveness of his character is somewhat cliché, and modern female readers may struggle to understand what is so alluring about him. Boyle spends the entire novel not speaking his true feelings to Iona, yet the reader is meant to believe that he is deeply in love with her, and that she is opening him up in a way he never expected. The reader never sees a reason, other than his physical attraction to Iona, as to why Boyle might be in love with her, change his life, and want to marry her. Nevertheless, Boyle is willing to put his life on the line to save Iona and always strides in at the last moment to save Iona from



Cabhan's evil grasp. When Boyle realizes that he might be falling in love with Iona, he accuses her of using a love potion on him, and she breaks up with him. Even though he never apologizes or explains himself, Iona accepts Boyle's marriage proposal at the end of the novel.

Branna O'Dwyer

Branna O'Dwyer is the current dark witch in County Mayo. Like Iona, she is a descendent of Sorcha, the original dark witch, and is the modern embodiment of Brannaugh. Branna is described as tall, dark, and desperately beautiful. She is also a wonderful fiddle player and cook. Like Brannaugh, Branna is connected to dogs and creates strong tonics that are known to heal many ails. Branna is more focused and dedicated to defeating Cabhan than Iona is, which is why she is tasked with teaching Iona the tricks of the trade once she arrives in Ireland. Branna is a bit stern, perhaps because she suffered a broken heart when her relationship with Finbar Burke fell apart years ago. After the relationship ends, Branna dedicates herself full time to defeating Cabhan.

Connor O'Dwyer

Connor O'Dwyer is one of the descendents of Sorcha, the original dark witch. He has inherited magical powers. Connor is also a descendent of Eamon. As such, he is able to communicate in a special way with hawks. Despite the fact that Connor has magical abilities, the reader never once sees him cast a spell or exhibit his powers. Connor is described as affable and handsome, with a friendly and affectionate personality.

Meara

Meara is a dear friend of the O'Dwyer family and an employee at Boyle McGraff's stable. Meara is described as an Amazon, tall, blonde, and beautiful. She is unwaveringly dedicated to the O'Dwyer family and their mission of defeating Cabhan. She even vows to risk her life in the battle against him, even though she has no magical powers. Meara is fierce with a sword and gives Iona her wielding lessons, as well as teaching her to drive. It appears that Meara is in love with Connor but that relationship is not explored in the text.

Finbar Burke

Finbar Burke is the only living descendant of Cabhan mentioned in the novel. Despite the fact that he was born of dark blood, Finbar dedicated himself to the light when he fell in love with Branna O'Dwyer as a teenager. Once he turned eighteen, however, Cabhan branded him with a dark mark, outing him as an evil spawn to Branna. Cabhan tried to force Finbar to steal Branna's magick, but he refused. Even though Finbar has sworn his allegiance to the light, Branna does not trust him and refuses to continue her



relationship with him. Throughout the novel, it is hinted that Finbar may be working as a double agent, but in the end, he comes through for the dark witches and lends his powers in the battle against Cabhan.

Sorcha

Sorcha is the original dark witch. She lived in a cabin in the woods of County Mayo during the 13th century and was the original quarry in Cabhan's hunt for power. To protect her children, Sorcha cast a strong spell allowing them to pass their magick on through the generations in the hopes that the three would one day return to the woods and defeat Cabhan once and for all.

Nan

Nan is Iona's grandmother, who was raised in Ireland but lived in America throughout Iona's childhood. It appears that Nan, like Iona, had magical powers (she is able to knit Iona a sweater strengthened with a protection charm) but was unable to use them to fight against Cabhan. Instead, she passed on what little knowledge she had to Iona before encouraging her to embrace her ancestors in Ireland.

Cabhan

Cabhan is the evil force that the dark witches battle throughout the novel. Cabhan is seductive and handsome, using these characteristics to seduce women for sex and to steal their power. Only Sorcha is able to resist him, which infuriates Cabhan and leads him to pursue a centuries-long vendetta against her offspring. Cabhan travels through the woods using fog, and is able to transform into a vicious wolf during attacks. He wears a red amulet around his neck, which is thought to contain his power.



Symbols and Symbolism

Fog

Fog is what Cabhan uses to travel through the woods unnoticed.

A Wolf

Cabhan can morph into a wolf. He often turns into a wolf in the moments before attacking one of the dark witches.

Alastar

Alastar is Iona's horse, with whom she has a strong emotional connection. Alastar was also the name of Teagan's horse, which is why it is so fitting that Fin should have bought this particular stallion only days before Iona's arrival in County Mayo.

Hawks

Connor has an emotional connection with hawks which allows him to communicate with them in a special way.

Dogs

Branna has an emotional connection with dogs which allows her to communicate with them in a special way.

Horses

Iona's emotional connection with horses allows her to communicate with them in a special way.

Darling

Darling is the horse that Boyle rescued from certain death by out-drinking an unscrupulous horse trader. Darling is forever grateful to Boyle for saving her. She remains loyal and loving to him for the duration of the novel.



The Red Amulet

The Red Amulet is a jeweled necklace Cabhan wears that glows with his power. After some of his attacks against Iona, the light in the amulet weakens, suggesting that Iona has the ability to wound Cabhan. It is suggested that if the dark witches can steal Cabhan's light, they will be able to defeat him once and for all.

Ballintubber Abbey

Ballintubber Abbey is the site of the old ruins where Boyle takes Iona for a day of sightseeing and where Iona has an experience with the "light" of her ancestors. This is also where Iona and Boyle agree to get married at the end of the novel.

Ross Abbey

Ross Abbey is the second abbey Boyle takes Iona to on their sightseeing adventure. Here, Iona has a visceral reaction to the ruins' energy, knowing that her ancestors were killed here. She has a strong vision of their pain and even begins speaking in tongues.

Ostara

Ostara is the Summer Equinox, when day and night – dark and light – are perfectly balanced. This is when the dark witches decide to challenge Cabhan for their power.

A Car

The circle of friends gives a car to Iona on her first birthday in Ireland. The car is ten years old and bit beat-up, but it means so much to Iona because it symbolizes her freedom.

Time Travel

Time travel is the special ability that all of the witches, including Cabhan, have in the novel. They use time travel to visit Nan in America. Cabhan uses it to transport Iona away from the circle's protective powers in the novel's final battle scene.



Settings

Ireland

Ireland is the country in which the novel is set. As she does with her characters, Roberts often relies on cliché to describe the novel's setting. The Ireland described in *Dark Witch* is a fairytale version of the country, which relies on clichés and stereotypes of the landscape and people to interest international readers. While descriptions of the countryside are often lovely on their own, when partnered with other descriptions of people and place – everyone drinks stout and whiskey, walks Irish setter dogs, wears tartan clothes, etc – the reader may feel that they are receiving a cheapened, watered-down illustration of Ireland that doesn't truly represent the country's modern complexities or achievements.

County Mayo

County Mayo is the small town in which the novel is set. It has a rustic, Irish charm that conjures images of a magical countryside. The O'Dwyer family has lived here for hundreds of years, which is why the dark witches have such a strong connection to the place.

Branna's House

Branna's House is where all three of the dark witches – Branna, Connor, and Iona – live. Iona moves into Branna's house only a few days after arriving in Ireland because Branna believed that their magic would be stronger if it were kept together. Because Branna's house is constantly covered with a protective spell, it is actually the safest place for Iona to be, and where she feels most at home.

Boyle's Stable

Boyle's Stable is where Iona finds work after moving to Ireland. Because she has spent her entire life around horses, it is a natural place for her to find work. She starts out mucking the stalls but soon graduates to leading guided tours of the woods and giving jumping lessons. The stables is also where Iona falls in love with Boyle, her boss, and where Cabhan seriously attacks her for the first time.

The Cabin in the Woods

The cabin in the woods is the strongest magical site in the novel. The cabin once belonged to Sorcha and is the site of her demise. Iona has a very strong connection to the cabin, and Cabhan often tries to lure her here, which is why Branna demands that

Iona stay as far away as she can until her powers are stronger. At the end of the novel, Cabhan successfully transports Iona to the cabin for the final battle.



Themes and Motifs

Embracing Your Identity

Throughout her life, Iona Sheehan has always felt like an outsider. She was raised by indifferent parents who may have loved her, but never really bothered to tell her or show her. If they wanted her to do well in life or be safe in abrupt move to Ireland, they never bothered to mention it. As a result, Iona has grown to be a somewhat clingy, socially awkward adult. The only adult who ever showed Iona any affection was her grandmother, Nan, who was the first to tell Iona that she was a witch. As soon as Iona heard that there were more people like her in Ireland, she decided to move there, search out her family, and make a new life for herself. As soon as she arrives in Ireland, Iona feels like she belongs, and when she meets her cousins, Branna and Connor, they welcome her to move into their home despite the fact that she is a stranger. All the people in County Mayo welcome Iona as one of their own, and she has no trouble finding work, making friends, and falling in love, despite the fact that she is somewhat annoying, feather-headed, and is completely lacking a verbal filter. Nevertheless, Iona likely feels at home in County Mayo because she shares blood with Sorcha, the original dark witch. Once she arrives in Ireland, the bond between Iona and her ancestors is strengthened and Iona is suddenly able to tap into deep emotional memories shared through her blood. For example, Iona is able to see her ancestor Teagan's experiences with Cabhan in a dream, feels the presence of her ancestors at Ballintubber Abbey, and feel her ancestors' pain at Ross Abbey.

Because Iona is finally in a place where she feels like she belongs, she begins to discover what she truly excels at (even though she is constantly fighting distracting romantic thoughts about her boss). She is a wonderful jumping coach and finds great satisfaction in her work at the stables. She is also a quick study during her magic lessons and soon discovers that she has more power than she even dreamed. It would be a nice ending to the story if Iona were able to rally her power, embracing her true self, to defeat evil Cabhan. That is not the case. Instead, Roberts wastes the opportunity by constraining Iona to a "damsel in distress" role in which Boyle saves her during the final fight. Iona finally feels valuable at the end of the novel when Boyle proposes. It will likely be frustrating for modern readers that Roberts has belittled her heroine's journey so deeply that an outsider (Boyle) must give Iona's life value rather than having Iona discover the value in her own identity.

Gender Roles

Despite the fact that *Dark Witch* is written for a modern reader, the characters and gender roles presented in the novel are better suited to a patriarchal, 1950s novel. All of the characters, without exception, are stock characters, lacking depth and genuine inner complication. The complications Roberts attempts to include come across as forced and trite, leaving readers with the feeling that the characters, their dialogue, and ultimately



their relationships, are entirely unbelievable. Roberts relies on tropes – what she assumes readers already know about certain “types” of characters – to make up for her lack of writing depth. Boyle is a stereotypical alpha-male with a soft spot, Iona is a strong yet flawed heroine who ultimately needs a man’s help to save her (and she welcomes this with open arms), Fin is the dark and mysterious bad guy, Connor is the bumbling good guy, Branna is the intelligent shrewd, and Meara is the beautiful best friend.

For modern feminist readers, the relationship between Iona and Boyle will be a major sticking-point when discussing expected gender roles. Iona, who is supposed to be the novel’s strong heroine, is constantly daydreaming about how sexy Boyle is, and whether or not Boyle is interested in her seems to be far more important than practicing magic or staying alert when a psychopathic dark sorcerer wants to kill her. As a result, she is constantly finding herself in situations from which she needs to be saved, including in the final battle when it is Boyle, not Iona, who defeats Cabhan. Boyle’s character is written in a way that is supposed to be sexy not only to Iona, but also to the female reader, which may leave some female audiences questioning why. Iona views Boyle as stubborn and stoic, two “attractive” qualities. Iona continues to pursue Boyle, physically touching him and flirting obnoxiously with him, even after he asks her to stop. In the novel, this is portrayed as coquettish and coy, but modern readers may be left wondering how the situation would be perceived if the roles were reversed: if Boyle continued to romantically pursue Iona after she had asked him to stop. Additionally, Iona’s heart nearly leaps out of her chest with arousal when she watches Boyle in a fistfight. The fact that Boyle is able to knock a man unconscious with two punches is supposed to signal his alpha-strength and be a huge turn-on for the audience. The scene painfully continues with Iona insisting on “babying” Boyle by nursing his wounded knuckles. This scene is particularly annoying for modern readers because it perpetuates the stereotype of women as nursemaids. Iona caring for Boyle’s wounds – which he is clearly able to tend to himself, and has even asked Iona not to bother with – is ultimately what leads to the couple’s first kiss, which sends the message that the nursemaid getup is far more irresistible than the strong horsewoman or the empowered traveler. When Boyle kisses Iona for the first time, it is described as rough, with him “grabbing” her shoulders. While this scene is meant to convey that Boyle can’t control himself around Iona, it continues the trope of the alpha-male overpowering the women, and underscores the novel’s obsession with portraying violence as sexy.

The idea of alpha-male strength being best is also underscored with the treatment of the horses. When Iona begins braiding the horses’ manes, a common practice for show horses, Meara suggests that Boyle would be deeply offended if Iona were to braid the male horses’ hair, even going so far as to say that he would geld them. Roberts seems to go out of her way to suggest that for characters like Boyle, being seen as effeminate, even for a horse, makes one less masculine, further perpetuating the novel’s clear gender roles and veneration for alpha-male strength. Iona and Boyle’s eventual breakup also highlights the ridiculous gender roles Roberts employs in many of her novels. The girls sit around gossiping about men, drinking wine, and eating cookie dough ice cream out of the container, while the guys drink whiskey, munch pizza and potato chips, and

threaten to punch each other over the women's honor. For readers of Roberts' novels, such stereotypes are to be expected.



Styles

Point of View

Dark Witch is told from a third-person, limited omniscient narrator's point of view, from Iona's perspective. This means that the narrator has access to Iona's thoughts and emotions alone. Inexplicably, the narrator is suddenly given access to Boyle's thoughts and emotions once he and Iona begin sleeping together, and the reader is treated to a few scenes from Boyle's perspective throughout the novel. The jump into Boyle's mind is somewhat jarring because it happens late in the novel and without warning. It may be that the leap is used to symbolize the deep connection between Iona and Boyle. Once the pair begins sleeping together, Cabhan is able to pull Boyle into Iona's dreams, so it's possible that the dual narration is another clue to the romantic connection being made. This dueling narrative is particularly helpful once Iona and Boyle break up. Because their characters are unable to speak their true emotions to each other, the reader still understands what is going on in each of their heads, although this prevents any real tension from building.

The novel is written in present tense, and there are a few awkward details included to inform the reader that this is, in fact, modern day. Branna uses an iPad, for example, and Iona receives a Mini Cooper for her birthday. These details are especially jarring because it's not necessary for the novel to be set in modern times, and such details actually pull the reader away from the sense of fairytale magic Roberts has worked so hard to create.

Language and Meaning

The language of Dark Witch is very simple and easy to understand. Dark Witch, like many of Nora Roberts's novels, is written as a quick beach read. As such, the novel is designed to be read effortlessly, with nothing to trip readers up in the plot, characters, or language. While the novels are clearly marketed to adult readers, the grammar and language is very simplistic.

Nora Roberts is a best selling author who has published over 200 novels to date. She has a fierce fan base that eagerly awaits the release of her new novels and devour them hot off the press. Despite this, it's clear to many readers – both diehard Roberts fans and not – that in order to produce so many novels a year, Roberts must rely on formulaic plots and stock characters. This is abundantly clear in Dark Witch. All of the characters, without exception, are stock characters, lacking depth and genuine inner complication. The complications Roberts attempts to include come across as forced and trite, leaving readers with the feeling that the characters, their dialogue, and ultimately their relationships, are entirely unbelievable. Roberts relies on tropes – what she assumes readers already know about certain “types” of characters – to make up for her lack of writing depth. Boyle is a stereotypical alpha-male with a soft spot, Iona is a



strong yet flawed heroine who ultimately needs a man's help to save her (and she welcomes this with open arms), Fin is the dark and mysterious bad guy, Connor is the bumbling good guy, Branna is the intelligent shrewd, and Meara is the beautiful best friend. From these short descriptions, readers can likely guesstimate the full extent of the relationships that will play out on the page, and Roberts does little to surprise the reader.

Roberts is at her best when describing the rolling Irish landscape, although she also relies heavily on stereotype and cliché in such descriptions. The Ireland described in *Dark Witch* is a fairytale version of the country to interest international readers. While descriptions of the countryside are often lovely on their own, when partnered with other descriptions of people and place – everyone drinks stout and whiskey, walks Irish setter dogs, wears tartan clothes, etc – the reader may feel that they are receiving a cheapened, watered-down illustration of Ireland that doesn't truly represent the country's modern complexities or achievements.

Structure

Dark Witch has a traditional linear storyline that follows Iona's arrival to Ireland, her realization of self, and her battle against Cabhan. Throughout the novel, there are two dueling plot lines, Iona's relationship with Boyle and her battle against Cabhan. For the majority of the novel, Iona is far more concerned with flirting with Boyle than she is in saving her own life. Iona daydreams about making dinner for Boyle and walks mindlessly into the woods where Cabhan, who has transformed into a wolf, is waiting to attack her. While scenes like this aren't necessarily an issue on their own, Roberts' intentions for Iona to be a fierce, independent heroine are not supported by them. Also, the "love" between Boyle and Iona doesn't seem to have been earned. It feels superficial. The characters lack real internal conflict. Their problems are stated without any emotional buildup. For instance, there is a lack of tension in the relationship between Iona and Cabhan. Although he corners Iona many times and could easily end her life, he seems to be generously giving her time to "test" her powers, which makes no sense.

The novel opens with a section telling the reader about the original dark witch, Sorcha. So much time and detail is dedicated to her character and story that most readers will feel certain that she, or at least her memory, will return somewhere in the novel. During the final battle between Iona and Cabhan at Sorcha's old cabin, Iona uses wine, candles, and flowers to call forth the strength of her ancestors, yet nothing comes of this spell and it is not returned to in the narrative. Despite all the build-up, the family ancestors, including Sorcha, at whose home the battle takes place, have no influence on the outcome of the fight. Iona fights to light the four candles, but then nothing happens and nothing else about the spell is mentioned.

Boyle's proposal to Iona comes as a surprise for the characters, and likely the reader as well. It's surprising that Iona and Boyle should agree to get married when they've only

known each other for a few months and have never said that they loved each other. The storyline is a setup for the next novel in the series.



Quotes

Magic isn't every answer. A body must know how to fend for himself without it as well. A gift should never be squandered on what you can do with your wit and your hands or your back.

-- Sorcha (Page 18)

Importance: In this quote, Sorcha is urging her children not to rely on their magic alone. Although it isn't clear at the time what other forces they could use to defend themselves, it prepares the reader for the circle of friends created later in the novel. Even though Branna, Connor, and Iona have strong magic, they should count on friendship, loyalty, and love to strengthen their side against evil.

What people know, what they believe, what they accept? Those are all different matters, aren't they?

-- Meara (Page 72)

Importance: In this quote, Meara succinctly separates the three camps of thought regarding magic. Even though it's undeniable in their county, there are still many who will not, or cannot, believe that it is real, leaving them vulnerable to the evil. It also highlights the many rifts in relationships, particularly Branna and Fin, that could be mended if they would simply look past what they believe, changing what they know and accept about each other.

A dark one, the last of the three. All here together now, with hound and hawk, and by God horse.

-- Boyle McGrath (Page 84)

Importance: In this quote, Boyle notes that the three powers handed down through Sorcha's three children have finally converged in Mayo County with Iona's arrival. Boyle, who is a local with no powers of his own, knows the legacy of the family history better than even Iona, which highlights how much she still must learn before facing Cabhan for their final battle.

I'd like to know who doesn't have a twisted branch on his family tree. Coming from something doesn't make it what you are. You've choices, don't you? You've made your own.

-- Connor O'Dwyer (Page 95)

Importance: Connor is suggesting that Finbar Burke, a descendent of Cabhan, had the chance to embrace the dark forces that are in his blood, but that he chose to honor his loyalty and friendship to the O'Dwyers instead. For this reason, Connor (and eventually Iona) have chosen to trust him, but Branna is more hesitant.

We each of us have our guide, but we're stronger when we connect with each, and they with all of us.



-- Branna O'Dwyer (Page 133)

Importance: In this quote, Branna references the fact that she, Connor, and Iona are all strong in their own rights, but much stronger when connected to each other, and stronger still with all three of them are connected to their animal guides: the dog, the hawk, and the horse. This is clearly due to the initial spell of protection that Sorcha cast in which she claimed that “three is good magick.”

It's what I want. To forge something, and to earn respect, to have people who matter know they can depend on me.

-- Iona Sheehan (Page 159)

Importance: In this quote, Iona verbalizes her greatest desire in life. For as long as she can remember, she's felt like an outsider. She was born an only child to apathetic parents, and the only true friend she ever had was her grandmother. Now that she has moved to Ireland, Iona has felt a sense of family in her long-lost cousins, yet she recognizes that she must still earn their respect. They will protect her because she is family and because she has the gift, but Iona still wants more. When she feels she has earned the right to fight Cabhan beside them, only then will she feel like she truly belongs.

It's not tightly bound to the world, to the here. Without the knowing, a person might be caught there, in that other, that alone. And it's there he might come, stronger for it, and take what you are.

-- Connor O'Dwyer (Page 173)

Importance: In this quote, Connor explains to Iona the true danger of Cabhan's powers. He is able to manipulate time and space. This means that Cabhan can travel back and forth in time, bringing unsuspecting victims with him. This is the only time any character attempts to explain Cabhan's powers, and if readers don't remember it, they may be confused when the final battle comes at the end of the novel.

He laughed at her, but she only smiled. She felt something here. A kinship, a recognition, and now a kind of knowing. She'd come here before, she realized, or her blood had come.

-- Narrator (Page 235)

Importance: In this quote, the narrator points out the strong connection Iona feels to her ancestors, particularly those from Teagan's line. The blood of the dark witch is strong and binds them together through generations. Perhaps this is why Iona and her cousins are able to communicate telepathically, and why Iona feels so strongly that she belongs in County Mayo.

She wouldn't fear the woods, she told herself. She wouldn't fear what came. And she wouldn't fear living her life alone if that's what destiny handed her.

-- Narrator (Page 268)



Importance: In the wake of her breakup with Boyle, Iona realizes that she has more important things to worry about than romance. She is finally coming to embrace who she truly is: a dark witch. She is ready to sacrifice almost anything to accomplish her goal of defeating Cabhan. That said, she refuses to let Cabhan rule her through fear, which is why she refuses to fear the woods – one of the most beautiful parts of County Mayo, and the place where Iona’s ancestors were born. Iona hopes to reclaim the woods as her own, whether Cabhan lurks there or not.

It doesn't seem real, does it? That come the solstice we'll try to end all this by whatever means we can. Blood and magick, blade and fang. It's not life, but a story. And yet it is. I'm caught up in that, I think. Above that, when it comes, I'll be with people I trust more than any others So, the fear's not there. Yet.

-- Meara (Page 291)

Importance: In this quote, Meara highlights how the battle against Cabhan is different for her than for the dark witches. Meara does not have magical blood, and has joined the fight out of support for her family and friends. Yet, Meara doesn't have the connection to Cabhan in her blood, like the dark witches do. She views the battle against him the same way one might a battle against a dragon, or some other mythical creature. The novel preaches that loyalty and love are the two most important qualities a person can have. Through this statement, Meara proves that she has both.

I know what love is, damn it, because you put it in me, and you've given it to me. And I'll never be the same again. I'll never feel it for anyone else.

-- Boyle McGrath (Page 340)

Importance: In this quote, Boyle reveals the change his character has undergone since meeting Iona. Roberts closes the novel by having Boyle propose marriage to Iona.