

Dark Angels by Karleen Koen

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Reading Group Guide

About This Guide

The long-awaited prequel to Koen's beloved *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Dark Angels* is a feast of a novel that sparkles with all the passion, extravagance, danger, and scandal of seventeenth-century England. Unforgettable in its dramatic force, here is a novel of love and politics, of romance and betrayal, of power and succession—and of a resourceful young woman who risks everything for pride and status in an era in which women were afforded little of either.

The questions in this guide are intended as a framework for your group's discussion of *Dark Angels*.

Reading Group Guide

1. What is your first impression of Alice? How does your opinion of her change throughout the novel? What about Renée? In what ways did she surprise you, and in what ways did your initial impression hold true?
2. Alice is a young woman with stringent standards for herself and her friends. On p. 96, she declares that "[she] despised moral cowardice" and that "when she gave her loyalty, she meant it." To what degree do you see this as a positive trait, and to what degree do you think this strictness in her judgments of people holds Alice back? Could she thrive as she has in the court without these standards? Is she ever wrong in her judgments? What causes these blind spots?
3. Compare Alice's skill as a courtier to that of her father. Why is it that those around him are consistently suspicious of his motives, but she can pull strings and manipulate situations a bit more easily? How much of the difference is a result of their gender, and how much is in the approach? In what ways are they similar, and where do they differ?
4. Consider the character of Gracen. Do her actions ever surprise you? What is it that motivates her choices? Do you think she is happy in the end? What does she really want?
5. Do you fault Renée for the choice she makes to become the king's mistress? Did you see it as inevitable or more complex than that? Is Renée simply a pawn (to Charles, to Thomas Verney, to the French), or has she learned to act with the skill of the courtiers around her? What do you think her future holds?
6. Consider the issue of religion in *Dark Angels*. What does Catholicism mean to those who practice it and why do the others fear it so? Who do we see that is

strongest in their faith, and why? Does fear of persecution ever strengthen faith? What other historical or literary examples of this can you think of?

7. Why does Richard insist that his love for Renée can withstand the pressure of the king's attentions? What is the point of the stand he takes, and when does he finally see that it is a lost cause? Why does he hold out so long, despite the fact that everyone around him can see the writing on the wall?

8. On p. 258, Thomas Verney says to his daughter, "Life isn't filled with easy choices. We all of us get our hands dirty after a time." To what degree do you think this is true in the context of *Dark Angels*? Does everyone get their hands dirty at one time or another? Is anyone above the games? In a world of moral complexity and constantly shifting power, how can a person maintain their self-respect and still feed their family? Are the machinations and schemes a necessary byproduct of success, or is Thomas just making excuses?

9. Why does Alice so detest the idea of Barbara marrying John Sidney, despite the love she has for her friend? Why is she so intent on finding Barbara a better match, even though it is clear how much she adores him? Do you think Alice would have reacted this way no matter whom her friend chose, or is the disapproval specific to John Sidney?

10. Compare those that are, or have been in the past, mistresses to King Charles: Renée, Frances, the Duchess of Cleveland, Nellie Gwynn. Do they have anything in common besides the king's attentions? What does each gain or lose by their relationship with him? What do you think he sees in each of them?

11. What meaning does his family home of Tamworth hold for Richard, and why do you think his connection to the place is so strong? Would you have expected Jerusalem Saylor to accept Alice as she does, despite the fact that Alice has been deceitful, even hurting their own family with her manipulations? What does Jerusalem want for Richard? How is it similar to or different from what Thomas wants for Alice?

12. Consider the character of Queen Catherine. Given her role in her marriage, as stated by Charles on pp. 431—32, what is her place in the court? What do you see as the most important role she fills in the lives of those around her? Do you think it is enough to be happy, or is her existence doomed to be sad and empty, that of a political pawn in an always-dangerous position that holds no real power? How is she in a better or worse place than Princesse Henriette, and to what degree are their experiences similar?

13. In describing his imagined life with Renée, Richard says, "I have this dream, she and I side by side in life, turning front to front in lovemaking, back to back in threat, protecting each other" (p. 356). Alice tells him this dream is a false ideal that he'll break his heart on. Do you think she really believes that this dream is false? Do you believe that it's false? Or is it just a matter of choosing the right partner?

14. Consider the character of Balmoral. What does he want from Alice? Why do you think he finally proposes? Does he want to marry her? Does he love her? What, if

anything, would bring him happiness at this point in his life? What is it that stands in the way?

15. What motivates the men who scheme and manipulate politics in this novel? For whom is it a matter of self-interest, and for whom is it more than that? What drives the politics of Charles's court? Whom would you trust with your life? Who are the "good guys" here?

16. The poison-maker Henri Ange is the first to comment on the fact that Alice has fallen in love with Richard, taunting her with it before she herself has realized her feelings. Why is he the first to see? Why have those closer to her not noticed her growing affection for the paramour of her friend?

17. What makes Ange take the dangerous step of staying in England to get revenge on Alice and Richard? At what point did his business shift from the hired kills of politics to the personal? Why take the risk?

18. What do you think becomes of young Walter after the novel ends?