

WREN BOOKS

FROM DARKNESS TO DAWN

a novel by Johanna Joli and Juliette Mungo

Reading-group guide

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wrenbookspublishing.com/from-darkness-to-dawn/

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

From Darkness to Dawn is a novel in two strands. The longer one follows Julia, a London anthropologist in her sixties, from the day a charming American sits down beside her to the day she finds her accounts empty, and on through the courts, a friend's flat in Miami and a winter teaching in Udaipur. The shorter one belongs to Robert, and it opens and closes the book.

The questions below assume everyone has finished the novel, so they give away the ending. They are grouped loosely in the order of the story, but a group that wants one evening's conversation could do worse than questions 2, 6, 8, 12 and 14.

The book was written by a psychologist and a journalist, under pen names, and it closes with a resources section listing helplines and further reading. Several of the questions touch on coercive control and economic abuse; if your group would like plain-language background first, there is a short explainer at wrenbookspublishing.com/from-darkness-to-dawn/about-coercive-control/.

THE QUESTIONS

- 1 The novel opens with Robert on a yacht, running through a checklist and telling himself, "I don't make mistakes." Who did you assume the woman in the red swimsuit was, and how did that assumption colour the way you read Julia's story?
- 2 Robert's courtship is almost entirely words: daily emails, long calls, "the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen." Julia, the narrator tells us, "preferred to think of his control as taking initiative." Where in the early chapters did you first feel uneasy, and did Julia have enough information to feel it too?

- 3 Julia is an anthropologist, a professional observer of people, who likes to sit in the National Theatre foyer and watch. Why might a trained observer be no better protected than anyone else? What does the novel suggest about the gap between intelligence and self-knowledge?
- 4 The book pauses to explain the brain chemistry of new love, and later has Julia lecture Anna on *The Confidence Game* and *Wilful Blindness*. Did those passages change how you judged her? Is the novel kind to Julia, hard on her, or both?
- 5 Ben asks his mother to promise she will stay financially independent. Anna says, “Married? Why?” Edward is quietly frozen out. Why does Julia deflect each of them? What makes a warning from someone who loves us so difficult to hear?
- 6 List Robert’s tactics as the group remembers them: the joint account “for convenience”, the online access to everything, the broker he drives out, the private wedding with no witnesses, the tax return he takes over, the Jersey trust, the “post mortems” after parties, jealousy dressed up as devotion. Which of these would you have recognised as abuse at the time, and which only in hindsight?
- 7 Julia had nearly two million pounds and ends with her house. The novel is precise about how the money went: signatures freely given, access freely granted, letters later found to be forged. What does it suggest about the relationship between trust and consent, and about why economic abuse is so hard to prove?
- 8 The court chapters: a judge who admits he has not read the files, a barrister who does not challenge Robert’s claims, a fraud officer with no resources for overseas money, and an “amicable agreement” that leaves Julia with the bill. Is the novel fair to the justice system? Who, if anyone, fails her most?
- 9 “It is not a failure to trust, it’s a human quality. He is the one who is at fault.” Edward’s line sits alongside the honest stranger who returns Julia’s two hundred pounds at the cash machine. How does the book weigh the Roberts of the world against everyone else? Did it leave you more trusting or less?
- 10 Anna’s account of her own marriage to Alex mirrors Julia’s, down to the emptied accounts and the smear campaign among friends. What does the friendship between the two women give the novel that a single survivor’s story could not? Do you have an Anna?

- 11 Edward's help is practical: rating anxiety out of ten, challenging the three-in-the-morning thoughts, breathing exercises, less coffee and wine, the PERMA model, a reading list. Which of his suggestions rang true to you, and did any feel too tidy for the size of what Julia has lost?
- 12 India is colour after all that grey. The women's refuge puts Julia's trials "into perspective"; the guru tells her to go with the flow like a river; Lucinda passes on Boris's rule that what counts is how many people you make happy. Is the change of scene a cure, a distraction, or something else? Could Julia have recovered in Knightsbridge?
- 13 Red is Robert's colour: the swimsuit he posts to Julia, the one he buys in Harrods for Laura. In Udaipur, Julia chooses red sandals and a red necklace for herself. What do you make of the novel's use of red, and of its movement from darkness towards light?
- 14 The ending. James offers to come back and cannot promise to be faithful; Julia answers that she would rather be alone. Mark, Anders and the future are left open. Then Anna reads the headline. Did Robert's fate satisfy you? And what does it mean that Julia, on the phone, makes no reply?
- 15 Who would you give this book to, and what would you say when you handed it over?

A NOTE FOR THE GROUP

In most rooms of eight or ten people, someone has lived some version of this story, and may not have said so. It is worth agreeing at the start that nobody has to share anything personal, that the conversation is about the book, and that "why didn't she just leave" is the one question the novel has already answered.

The book contains coercive control and economic abuse, a drowning told from the killer's point of view, a killing in prison, and brief references to suicide. If anything in it has felt close to home, the organisations listed at the back of the book, and at wrenbookspublishing.com/from-darkness-to-dawn/about-coercive-control/, are free and confidential, and most are open around the clock.

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