

A Study Guide for

DARKEST BEFORE DAWN

by

Robert T. McMaster

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

SETTING: *Darkest Before Dawn* is an historical novel about life in an American industrial city in 1919. The setting is Holyoke, Massachusetts, but this is a story that could have occurred in any American city a century ago.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: The war in Europe that we know today as World War I began in 1914. For three years Americans were deeply divided over whether this country should enter the war, but a U-boat attack on the *S. S. Lusitania* and reports of atrocities by the German army turned public opinion around. In April, 1917, President Wilson asked Congress for a Declaration of War against Germany and Austria-Hungary. American soldiers, sailors, and marines fought bravely alongside allied troops until Germany announced its intentions to surrender and an Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918. Soon American troops began to return home on huge troop ships and were greeted by exuberant crowds in Boston, New York, and other ports up and down the East Coast.

MAIN CHARACTERS: The central character of *Darkest Before Dawn* is 20-year-old Jack Bernard who is just returning from France. In Boston he encounters Pauline Foley, an old high school classmate. Back home in Westfield, Jack is reunited with his father, Charles, and sisters Marie and Claire. Jack's sweetheart, Anne Wellington, and her brother Tom stopped writing him just a month after he shipped out. Jack is angry and hurt at being abandoned in his time of need and is not interested in trying to reconcile with Anne or Tom.

THEMES: The central theme of *Darkest Before Dawn* is coping with the loss of friends and loved ones and mending old wounds. The story also deals with sexual assault, coming-of-age, interfaith marriage, and homophobia.

ABOUT

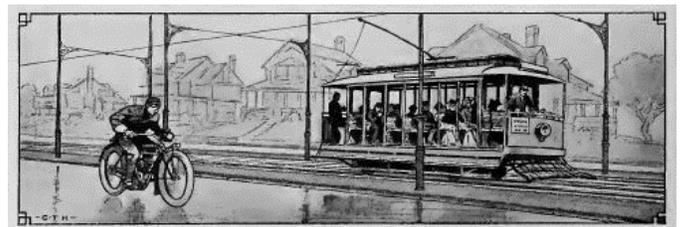
DARKEST BEFORE DAWN

Readers young and old will be easily engaged by *Darkest Before Dawn*. The story has something for every reader: mystery, drama, humor, romance. The book follows the lives of Jack Bernard, his family and friends in the months following the end of World War I. Naturally there was great relief with the end of hostilities, but the war had lasting effects both abroad and at home.

This guide is offered to aid teachers and students who read *Darkest Before Dawn* as part of a language arts, social studies, or other academic program.

Part I: Enrichment activities for individuals, small groups, and classes are provided. Activities may be used before, during, or after the reading of *Darkest Before Dawn*. Subject areas include language arts, social studies, science, math, and technology.

Part II: Additional resources, available either in print or on-line, are also included for use by teachers and students.



PART I: ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES**LANGUAGE ARTS****A. Characters**

1. Choose one of the characters from *Darkest Before Dawn* listed below. Describe the character in enough detail so that someone who has not read the book can understand the character. Include physical appearance, personality traits, strengths, and weaknesses.

Jack Bernard
 Charles Bernard
 Marie Bernard
 Claire Bernard
 Émile Bousquet
 Fergal Dooley
 Luke Cassidy
 Pauline Foley
 Patrick Foley
 Daniel Foley
 Gertrude Donovan (Gertie)
 Tom Wellington
 Anne Wellington

Helen Wellington
 Thomas Wellington (Sr.)
 Carolyn Ford
 Nina Calavetti (Carolyn's mother)
 Sarah Muller
 Albert Albrecht
 Father Bertin
 Erwin Richter
 Evelyne Bernard (Evie)
 Chester A. Digsworth (Digsy)
 Dr. Schofield

2. The “arc” of a character refers to changes in a character in response to events in a story. Some may be physical changes, others emotional or spiritual. Some changes are dramatic, some subtle, some for the better, some for the worse. Choose one of the central characters from *Darkest Before Dawn*. Describe the arc of that character over the course of the story. Cite events from the story that were important for the development of the character. You might include several direct quotes from the character that show evidence of the change. Discuss how your feelings about that character changed over the course of the book.

3. Choose two characters from the list who were friends or partners (romantic or business partners). Discuss their relationship. What made them good friends or partners? What characteristics did they have in common? Were they different in other ways? Here are a few examples:

Jack Bernard and Pauline Foley
 Jack Bernard and Anne Wellington
 Anne Wellington and Claire Bernard

Tom Wellington and Luke Cassidy
 Claire Bernard and Albert Albrecht
 Claire Bernard and Fergal Dooley

4. Choose a character who faced an important decision in *Darkest Before Dawn*. Explain the situation and the character's decision. Imagine what might have happened if the character had decided differently. Here are a few examples:

- Jack's decision to accept Pauline's help in Boston (Ch. 2)
- Tom's decision to go into business with Luke (Chs. 5, 8, and following)
- Claire's decision to go to see Anne (Ch. 30)
- Anne's decision not to tell Jack about Evie (Ch. 31 and following)
- Jack's decision to forgive Anne (Ch. 38)
- Tom's decision to tell Ellie about his past (Ch. 49)

5. Anne's decision to stop writing to Jack in France without giving any explanation is central to the story of *Darkest Before Dawn*. Think about the reasons she gives Jack for that decision (beginning in Ch. 31). Do you feel her explanation is plausible? In other words, do you think a young woman might actually do as she did in that situation?? Or did you find it hard to believe that she would have done that? If you were in her situation, do you think you would have done the same?

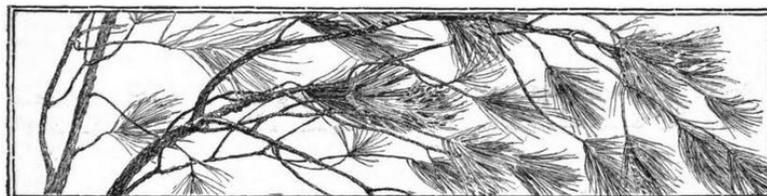
B. Plot

1. The story of *Darkest Before Dawn* has a number of subplots. Try to identify and briefly describe two or three of the most important subplots in the book. Early in the book these subplots seem unrelated. Explain how they are connected by the end of the book.
2. Conflict is an important part of many stories and occurs in different forms: physical fights, verbal disagreements, and misunderstandings between characters. Give several examples of conflict between characters in *Darkest Before Dawn* and explain the importance of each to the story.
3. Every good story has a surprise or two for a reader. What unexpected turns of events can you recall from *Darkest Before Dawn*?
4. Writers often give hints or clues about the conclusion of a book earlier in the book, a literary device known as foreshadowing. What examples of foreshadowing can you recall from *Darkest Before Dawn*? For example, do you recall any hints early in the book regarding Anne's disappearance?
5. Sometimes an author will intentionally include details in a story meant to trick or deceive the reader. Can you recall any such devices in *Darkest Before Dawn*?
6. Irony is a literary device in which a character (or the narrator) says one thing when he or she means something quite different. Give several examples of the use of irony in *Darkest Before Dawn*. Be sure to quote the character's exact words, then explain the irony in those words. One example is the phrase "Trust is a beautiful thing" which occurs five times in the book. Why is that phrase ironic as it is used by characters in the book?
7. Running gags are jokes or humorous or ironic phrases that come up again and again in a story. Two examples in *Darkest Before Dawn* are Pauline's "tricks" on Jack and Claire's misuse of words and mispronunciations. See how many similar words or phrases you can recall from the book and explain why each is funny or ironic.

C. Vocabulary

Below is a list of words and expressions from *Darkest Before Dawn* that were common a century ago but may be unfamiliar today. Pick a term from the list that is new to you, define it, then explain how it was used in the book. One page number is provided for each.

Companionway (2)	Hupmobile (54)	Kerosene (149)
Rum-running (3)	Prohibition (57)	Arpeggio (156)
Badinage (9)	Bottomland (70)	Glissando (156)
Doughboy (12)	Boche (80)	Audacious (158)
Chesterfield (17)	Mass. Agricultural College (102)	Philanderer (206)
Shirtwaist (31)	Excavator (105)	Anomaly (220)
Filigree (31)	Cattle corn (silage) (107)	Electrocardiogram (228)
Brooch (31)	Gestation (109)	Davenport (251)
Normal school (33)	Afterbirth (110)	The bee's knees (269)
Gas poisoning (44)	Spinster (111)	Speakeasy (287)
Mustard gas (45)	Crestfallen (113)	Epiphany (308)
Cottonwood (49)	Nightcrawlers (133)	Yeomanette (315)
Percheron (49)	Ice box (145)	



D. Quotations

1. In Chapter 20 Anne confesses to Jack that she felt very low after Evie was born. “I never felt so miserable in my life. I lay in bed all the time, barely looking at that beautiful baby. Except at feeding time, and I dreaded that and couldn’t get done with it fast enough.” Eventually all that changed. In modern terminology, what was Anne suffering from? See if you can find out a little bit about it.
2. In Chapter 27 Pauline tells Jack of something she read in the newspaper about French General Foch. General Foch really did predict in 1919 that there would be another war in Europe within 20 years. See if you can find Foch’s actual words from a newspaper of that time and the reasons he made that prediction. How accurate was his prediction?
3. In Chapter 29 Pauline says to Jack, “Did you know that Oscar Wilde was a homosexual?” What was Jack’s response and why did it upset Pauline?
4. In Chapter 50 Ellie tells Anne and Jack that she plans to move in with Tom. When Jack asks Tom if this is a long-term arrangement, Tom replies, “Let’s just say Ellie and I have a deal, Jack.” Describe the deal that Tom and Ellie have agreed to.

E. Reader’s theatre

Working with 2 or 3 classmates, choose a scene from *Darkest Before Dawn* that you and your classmates enjoyed or found especially memorable. Assigns roles, write out dialogue, then rehearse and perform the scene in front of the rest of the class. Scenes that might work well include

1. Chapter 1, pages 2 – 4, Jack and Luke talking on the deck of the *S.S. Mongolia*.
2. Chapter 2, pages 17 – 19, Pauline asks Jack what happened between him and Anne.
3. Chapter 8, pages 54 – 56, Carolyn Ford asks Tom Wellington about Anne.
4. Chapter 17, pages 110 – 111, Claire and Sarah have a conversation about Claire’s matchmaking.
5. Chapter 17, pages 111 – 113, Albert asks Claire to the Formal.
6. Chapter 32, pages 201 – 202, Pauline tells Jack about her plans to study in Paris for a year
7. Chapter 33, pages 205 – 206, Tom has a confrontation with Patrick at O’Shaughnessy’s

F. Writing fiction

If you enjoy reading historical novels such as *Darkest Before Dawn*, maybe you’d like to try writing historical fiction. Choose a time period in the past that interests you and that you know something about. Create two characters living in that time. Then imagine the characters discussing something about their lives or their community. Write just enough dialogue so that a reader will be interested in your characters. Then share your scene with a classmate and see how he or she reacts. Here are a few ideas:

1. Imagine you are a twenty-year-old soldier returning from France. One of your best friends never wrote to you while you were away. One day you meet that friend on the street. Try to imagine what you might say to that friend and how that friend might respond.
2. Imagine you are Ellie Russell, Tom Wellington’s girlfriend. He tells you about his past, his misdeeds and mistakes. How do you react? Write out that scene including Tom’s words and Ellie’s reaction.

SOCIAL STUDIES

A. History

1. WORLD WAR I: *Darkest Before Dawn* takes place in 1919, shortly after the end of World War I. That war began in 1914. Why did America finally enter the war in Europe in 1917? Make a list of some of the factors that influenced that decision. Here are a few clues: the *Lusitania*, U-boat attacks, Teddy Roosevelt, and the Zimmermann telegram.

2. WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: At the time of *Darkest Before Dawn* women could not vote in national elections. Research the history of women's suffrage in the United States. Name some of the leaders of the women's suffrage movement and describe their roles in the movement. Create a timeline showing the major events in the history of women's suffrage in the U.S.

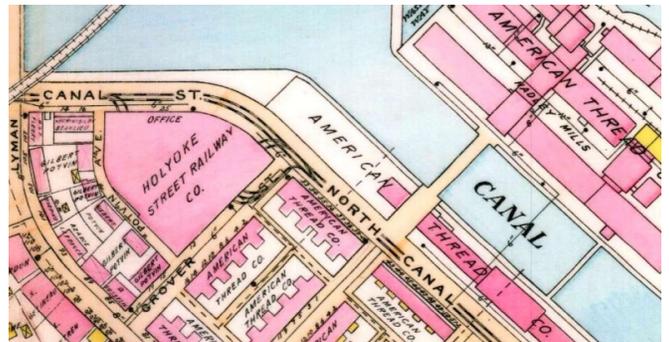
3. PROHIBITION: Read about the 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution and explain prohibition, what it was and why the amendment was passed in 1919. Then investigate the results of prohibition in America. When was the amendment repealed and why?

4. IMMIGRATION THEN AND NOW: Immigration was a contentious issue in the United States a century ago and it remains so today. Compare immigration in 1919 to today in the United States. Consider questions such as the source and number of immigrants, the attractions for immigrants to America, and the attitudes of Americans to immigration then and now.

B. Geography

1. The streets of downtown Holyoke have changed very little in a century. Find a current street map of Holyoke and print it out, then mark each of the following locations:

- The Wellingtons' house (corner of Cabot and Beech Streets)
- The Women's Home (Maple Street near Suffolk Street)
- Wellington Textile mill (Race Street on the Second Level Canal)
- Germania Mills and the surrounding German neighborhood of Holyoke (corner of Water Street and Main Street)
- The streetcar line from Holyoke to Westfield (from High Street to Sargeant Street to Northampton Street to Cherry Street)



2. On a larger map of modern day western Massachusetts try to locate the following:

- Holyoke
- Westfield
- Hampton Ponds State Park on the Holyoke/Westfield border (known then as Pequot Park)
- The route of the Holyoke-Westfield trolley line (High St. to Sargeant St. to Northampton St. to Cherry St., then southwest to Westfield)
- The route of the Holyoke-South Hadley-Amherst trolley line
- Forest Lake in Palmer showing the possible route of Jack and Pauline from Holyoke

3. Locate a map of your hometown a century ago. If there were streetcars in your town, try to find out where the lines ran. How has your city or town changed in the last 100 years?

MATH, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY

1. Three automobile models are prominent in *Darkest Before Dawn*. Find advertisements from that era for the Model-T Ford, Hupmobile, and Pierce-Arrow. Describe each vehicle and the features that made it popular.

2. In Chapter 7 we learn how the Bousquets and Bernards used a greenhouse in their vegetable gardening business. Research the uses of a greenhouse in starting vegetables in late winter and early spring.

3. In Chapter 11 we learn that Jack's job at Germania Mills paid \$1 per hour. He probably worked about 40 hours per week so his weekly pay was about \$40. Find out what rate of pay was typical for workers in different kinds of jobs in the nineteen-teens.

4. In Chapter 17 Felix and Madeleine Bousquet must assist one of their sheep in giving birth and they call upon Elaine Bousquet and Claire Bernard to help. Find out more about lambing and why it is sometimes necessary to assist a ewe.

5. In Chapter 33 we learn that Anne requested a paternity test to help prove that Jack was the father of her baby. The kind of test that was done involves comparing the blood types (A-B-O) of a baby and its parents. Research the subject of paternity testing and explain how it works. Why is A-B-O testing often inconclusive? What type of paternity testing is done today and how is it an improvement over the type described in *Darkest Before Dawn*?



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Standard Motor, 1918-1919

PART II: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Non-fiction: Some references for teachers or students wishing to learn more about early 20th century America.

Brault, Gerard J. 1986. *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*. University Press of New England, Hanover, NH USA.

Child, Julia and Alex Prud'homme. 2006. *My Life in France*. Knopf Doubleday, New York, NY USA.

“Great Crowd Welcomes New England Batteries,” *Boston Globe*, April 11, 1919.

Griffith, John P. C. 1919. *Diseases of Infants and Children* 2 vols. Saunders and Co., Philadelphia, PA USA.

Hendricks, Charles. 1993. *Combat and Construction: US Army Engineers in World War I*. Office of History, US Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Belvoir, VA USA.

Hoffa, William W. 2007. *A History of US Study Abroad: Beginnings to 1965*. Forum on Education Abroad, Carlisle, PA USA.

McCaw, John. 1914. *Diseases of Children*. William Wood and Co., New York, NY USA.

Richards Standard Atlas of the City of Holyoke, Massachusetts. 1911. Richards Map Company, Springfield, MA USA.

Zack, C. S. 1919. *Holyoke in the Great War*. Transcript Publishing Company, Holyoke, MA USA.

Historical Fiction: Novels depicting life in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly (Graphia Books, 2004). A teenage girl solves a mystery and learns about life and love during a summer working at a resort in the Adirondacks in the 1900s.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith, Harper Brothers, New York, NY, 1943. Touching and inspirational story of an Irish-American family in New York City in the early 20th century.

Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain (1876). Humor, satire, and drama in the life of a 12-year-old growing up along the Mississippi River in the 19th century.

All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1928. A novel about the war experiences of a German soldier in World War I.

Anne of Green Gables by Lucy Maud Montgomery (1908). The hilarious and touching adventures of a young girl adopted by an elderly couple on a farm on Prince Edward Island, Canada, in the early 20th century.

Call the Darkness Light by Nancy Zaroulis (Doubleday and Company, 1979). A frank, sometimes dark view of a young woman's life in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1840s and 1850s. An engrossing story for high school students and adults.

Lyddie by Katherine Paterson (Lodestar Books, 1991). An endearing, uplifting story of a young Vermont farm girl who travels to Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1840s to find work in a cotton mill. Well suited to middle school readers.

One of Ours by Willa Cather, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1923. Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a young American man who finds meaning in life as a soldier in World War I.

Visit www.TrolleyDays.net: You will find some valuable learning tools for students at www.TrolleyDays.net.

Take a Tour includes a map of Holyoke of that period with old photos and drawings of important localities from the stories.

Meet the Characters includes descriptions, quotes, and images of the major characters.

Meet the Author includes the words of Robert T. McMaster about his books and the influence of his parents, Holyoke history, and French-Canadian immigrants.

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