

Reading Guide

Reading Group Guide

An Assembly Such As This

By Pamela Aidan

Summary

In this, the first book of her "Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman" trilogy, Pamela Aidan reintroduces us to Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy -- through his own eyes. We meet Darcy during his visit to Hertfordshire to see his friend Charles Bingley at his estate, Netherfield Park. There he struggles to maintain "proper reserve" in the face of crude country manners, surprising country misses and Caroline Bingley's country plots! Revealing to us Darcy's growing fascination with Elizabeth Bennet, the book culminates with the disastrous ball at Netherfield -- where he and Elizabeth quarrel -- and his subsequent return to London with the express intention of forgetting Elizabeth and keeping Charles from ever returning to Hertfordshire.

Discussion Points

1. Darcy notes with pleasure that he's assuming the same role of educator to Charles Bingley as his father once assumed for him. What does this insight tell you about Darcy and his relationship with the Bingleys?
2. Charles Bingley is often found expressing his gratitude to Darcy for his assistance, advice, and various acts of goodwill. But Darcy cuts him off every time. Why do you think he does this?
3. At the Assembly that opens the novel, Darcy claims that only the Bingley/Hurst sisters are worth dancing with or talking to. Why, then, does he take such joy in rebuffing Caroline's advances?
4. Darcy often notes with disdain the "ambitions" of the various women he encounters at functions, both in Hertfordshire and London. Compare his two worst nightmares -- Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Bennet, or "the tabby" as Darcy calls her.
5. At Squire Justin's, Darcy first begins to wax poetic to himself about Elizabeth. He compares her eyes to fine French brandy, notes her fingers as "delicately formed," her brow as "lovely," and is otherwise enchanted by her. What is at war within Darcy? Why is he so resistant where Charles leaps forward with abandon?
6. When Darcy finally confesses to himself his feelings for Elizabeth, he checks himself by remembering "he had been well prepared from birth for his station in life and what was due his family." What do you think he means by this?
7. After Darcy and Caroline compile an outrageous list of accomplishments that the perfect woman must possess, he muses, "Would the embodiment of that list offer a better surety of his future happiness than a woman who was true, pure, and lovely?" What do you think?
8. Fletcher and Darcy butt heads several times over the course of the novel. Do you sympathize with Fletcher, given his attempts to surreptitiously help his master find happiness? Or is he overstepping his bounds as a valet, selfishly attempting to reach "the pinnacle of his profession" through Darcy?
9. How do you feel about the ending of this first part of the trilogy? Darcy is introspective and aware of his dubious motives in keeping Bingley away from Hertfordshire, yet at novel's end he is still continuing with them. Why?
10. What other Jane Austen novels would you like to see Aidan's take on? If you were to write a spin-off, which novel or series would you choose and why?
11. In the original *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy's standoffishness is often attributed to his high social standing, as if snobbery were a part of being a gentleman. Now that you've been given a glimpse into what might have been going through Darcy's head, what do you think of this opinion of him?
12. Do Austen's characters, as portrayed by Aidan, live up to your expectations? How are they similar to their counterparts in *Pride and Prejudice*? How are they different?

Enhance Your Book Club Experience

1. Don your Regency best (the nicest gown in your closet will do -- and don't forget a bonnet!), whip out your finest china, and host your next Book Club meeting over tea and sweets that even Darcy wouldn't pass up.
2. Call your local Chamber of Commerce, Tourism Board, or check out the Historical Museums' Guide for Historical Museums in the United States and the National Register of Historic Places to find a grand estate open to the public in your region. Have the members of your Club meet there for a tour through the high life. Can't you just imagine the ladies strolling down that carpeted marble staircase?