

The Museum of Lost Quilts Reading Group Guide

Summer Sullivan, the youngest of the founding Elm Creek Quilters, unexpectedly returns to the celebrated quilters' retreat from the University of Chicago. After dedicating two years to earning a master's in history, she's struggling to complete her thesis, and she hopes Elm Creek Manor will offer the creative inspiration she needs to overcome her writer's block in time to graduate. She finds a welcome distraction in an ambitious project to raise funds to renovate Union Hall, the 1863 headquarters of the Waterford Historical Society. Her research skills and thorough understanding of the art and traditions of quilting make Summer the perfect candidate to take charge of the capital campaign's centerpiece: an exhibit of antique quilts with historical significance. Encouraged by the Elm Creek Quilters, Summer embarks on a quest to find intriguing heirloom quilts and uncover their back stories. Yet while local quilt lovers and history buffs praise the growing collection, affronted local leaders demand that Summer remove all references to Waterford's troubled past. As controversy threatens the exhibit's success, Summer fears that her pursuit of the truth may cost the Waterford Historical Society their last chance to save Union Hall. Her only hope is to rally the quilting community to her cause.



TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If you've read other books in the Elm Creek quilts series, how did you feel when you returned to Elm Creek Manor in *The Museum of Lost Quilts*? Which quilt camp traditions were you most pleased to experience again? If you're new to Elm Creek Quilts, which aspects of quilt camp did you find most appealing?
2. "So what's the problem?" Diane asks, bewildered, after Summer confesses that she is struggling to finish her master's thesis. "Just put your hair in a bun, pour yourself a cup of coffee, and pound out a few more pages. It doesn't have to be good. It just has to be finished" (p. 32). Do you agree with Diane? Why, from Summer's perspective, is finishing her thesis not such a simple matter?
3. Recall a time when, like Summer, you faced a challenging project in school, at work, or in the home. How did you motivate yourself to persevere when the task was especially daunting? What advice would you offer Summer?
4. Agnes, a longtime member of the Waterford Historical Society and a founding Elm Creek Quilter, proposes a special event to launch a capital campaign to raise funds to restore historic Union Hall: an exhibit of quilts that have significant ties to local history. "And you, Summer," Agnes declares, "as a longtime resident of Waterford, accomplished quilter, and trained historian, would be the ideal curator" (p. 53). What specific qualities does Summer possess that make her perfect for the job? Considering that Summer has a thesis to finish and a swiftly approaching deadline, why would Agnes encourage her to take on another project? In what ways might Agnes hope that the role of curator could benefit Summer?
5. Observing the quilt campers at their Candlelight ceremony, Summer reflects that Elm Creek Manor was, "for the brief time they resided within its gray stone walls, the world as it should be: women of all ages, from widely varied backgrounds, coming together in harmony to create objects of beauty and

comfort. Differences were not merely tolerated, but accepted and even admired...Patient mentors stood by willing to pass on their knowledge; friends offered companionship and encouragement. Confidences were shared at mealtimes and in late-night chats in cozy suites or on the moonlit verandah. Resolutions were made, promises kept. Quilters took artistic and emotional risks because they knew they were safe, unconditionally accepted” (p. 66). Do you have or have you ever had a community that offered you that sense of acceptance and inclusion? What made your community so special? What brought you together?

6. Sharing some of her own hard-won wisdom about dealing with creative blocks, Sylvia tells Summer that rather than thinking of her source of creative inspiration “as a well that has run dry,” she prefers to imagine it as “an underground spring” that simply needs replenishing (p.73). How does Sylvia distinguish between the two? How do you imagine your own source of creative inspiration?

7. For each quilt Summer adds to the exhibit in Union Hall, she writes an object label providing information about the quilt’s size, materials, date, and maker, as well as what she discovered about its provenance and significance to local history. Did reading the object labels change or enhance how you initially imagined the quilts? What do Summer’s descriptions reveal about how she values quilts as historical artifacts?

8. How would you describe the relationship between Summer and her mother, Gwen? In what ways has Gwen established expectations for her daughter’s success, intentionally or otherwise? In what ways does Summer impose those high expectations upon herself?

9. After researching local World War Two Victory Quilts, Summer learns that although guilds in the Elm Creek Valley are more diverse in the present day, back in the early twentieth century, quilters from the neighboring towns of Waterford and Grangerville chose which guild to join not based upon where they lived, but where they would be among women of their own race. Sylvia and Agnes, the two eldest Elm Creek Quilters, are “pained and mortified” to hear this. “It never occurred to me that the Waterford Quilting Guild might have been segregated, intentionally or otherwise,” Sylvia says (p. 144). Why do you suppose she never noticed? Do you think she should have known? Even though their guild never deliberately excluded Black women, why do Sylvia and Agnes find Summer’s revelations so troubling, so many decades later?

10. Do you think Summer and Pat made the right decision to keep the original object labels in the gallery rather than replacing them with Gregory Krolich’s revised versions? Why or why not?

11. “Oh, honey, there’s lost, and then there’s *lost*,” Linda McLoughlin says as Summer tries to puzzle out how Linda’s quilt can be lost when she says she knows exactly where it is. “Lost as in missing, whereabouts unknown, and lost as in *lost to you*, as in you know exactly where it is but you can’t have it” (p. 182). Discuss the various meanings of the word “lost” in the novel. Do you believe that by including artifacts related to a missing quilt in the Union Hall exhibit, Summer prevents that quilt from being entirely lost? Why or why not?

12. Discuss any other passages or themes in the novel that were of particular interest to you. What did you take away from the novel? Which parts resonated most strongly with you? Why?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. If this is your first time reading an Elm Creek Quilts novel, try one of the other numerous books in the series. Jennifer Chiaverini’s website, jenniferchiaverini.com, includes an FAQ page that lists the novels in order of publication and chronology. The beautifully designed site is also full of information on all of Chiaverini’s books, quilts, patterns, and upcoming events.

2. View photos and illustrations of the quilts from the Union Hall exhibit online at Jennifer's website: <https://tinyurl.com/TMOLQexhibit>. Which do you find most striking? Which quilt would your Book Club award the Best of Show ribbon?

3. On the first night of each week-long session of Elm Creek Quilt Camp, the campers and Elm Creek Quilters gather together for a special welcome ceremony. As a way of getting to know each other (if your group is new) or as a way to make sure the group is on track with everyone's goals and expectations, perform your own Candlelight Ceremony: arrange your chairs in a circle, dim the lights if desired, and give one member of your Book Club a lit candle or another symbolic object to hold. Pass the object around the circle, allowing each member sufficient time to introduce herself and to describe what brought her to your Book Club and what she hopes to get out of it.

4. American Patchwork & Quilting keeps a list of their readers' favorite quilt museums across the US at <https://www.allpeoplequilt.com/how-to-quilt/quilting-basics/quilt-museums-our-must-visit-list>. Quilt History offers a list of museums around the country that contain outstanding quilt exhibits at <https://quilthistory.com/quilt-museums/>. Plan a group trip to the one nearest you.

A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER CHIAVERINI

***The Museum of Lost Quilts* is the twenty-second novel in the beloved Elm Creek Quilts series, and your thirty-fourth novel overall. After diverting from the series to write numerous critically-acclaimed, bestselling historical novels, what brought you back to the Elm Creek Quilters?**

After I finished writing my previous novel, *Canary Girls*, and was contemplating what to write next, it occurred to me that April 2024 would mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Elm Creek Quilts series. I was struck by what an amazing milestone that was, considering that all of the books are still in print, remain popular, and continue to attract new readers. When I first began pursuing my childhood dream to be a novelist, I never imagined such good fortune awaited me—and I have a rather active imagination!

The most recent Elm Creek Quilts novel, *The Christmas Boutique*, came out in 2019, and since then, I've received countless requests for more. My loyal readers have made it abundantly clear how much they longed to return to Elm Creek Manor and reunite with the Elm Creek Quilters, characters they've come to think of as friends. If you've ever attended any of my author events, either in person or online, you know how grateful I am for my readers, whether they've been enjoying my novels since *The Quilter's Apprentice* came out in 1999 or if they discovered me last month when their book club read *Canary Girls*. It seemed to me that the twenty-fifth anniversary of the series' launch would be the perfect time to welcome readers back to Elm Creek Manor with a new story.

You made an interesting choice with *The Museum of Lost Quilts*, in that it seems to be set in the early 2000s rather than in the 2020s. Does that make this novel, too, historical fiction? Did you consider setting it in the present day?

I suppose in a sense *The Museum of Lost Quilts* is historical fiction, although I admit I didn't think of it that way when I was working on the manuscript. Still, it's true that I did have to confirm certain historical facts now and then. (Would Sarah have been able to Google this? Would Summer have been able to post about that on Facebook? The answer to both of those questions was no.)

The Museum of Lost Quilts begins in June 2004, about a year and a half after the previous Elm Creek Quilts novel, *The Christmas Boutique*, ends—so I really just picked up the series where I had left off. It wouldn't have been possible to set this novel in the present day, because twenty years would have passed and too much would have changed. Mostly importantly, Sylvia was born in 1920, so if I had set *The Museum of Lost Quilts* in 2024, she would have been 104! I need about two years to complete a novel, so my timeline—our timeline—proceeds at a much faster pace than the timeline for the world of Elm Creek Quilts.

What was the best part about returning to the Elm Creek Quilts series? What was the most difficult part?

While writing *The Museum of Lost Quilts*, I absolutely delighted in revisiting Elm Creek Manor and the familiar characters I've come to love so much through the decades. The most difficult part about returning to the series was painstakingly searching through the earlier novels for specific, minute details I had forgotten in order to maintain continuity as best I could. But speaking of continuity, perceptive Elm Creek Quilts fans with excellent memories may notice a few chronological discrepancies between *The Museum of Lost Quilts* and *The Wedding Quilt*. In *The Wedding Quilt*, which I thought would be the last book in the series, I flashed forward to the “distant future” of the mid to late 2020s so that I could show Sarah's twins as adults. By the time I decided to continue the series, the “distant future” had become the present day, and—well, let's just say that things have not turned out as I had imagined. In order to continue writing the Elm Creek Quilts series, I had to tweak the timeline a bit, embrace the inevitable continuity errors, and carry on. I hope that my readers won't mind, since the result is more quilting adventures with Sylvia and friends!

As a lover of quilt history, I so enjoyed reading about Summer's investigations in library archives as well as her descriptions of the quilts that she acquires (or hopes to find) for the Union Hall exhibit. In bringing together her love of libraries, quilting, and history, is Summer living out a secret dream of your own?

Maybe so! I've loved libraries ever since I learned to read. When I was a young child, every Saturday my mom would take me to our local public library, where I would check out as many books as I could carry and devour them in a week. The wonderful children's librarians there introduced me to the books and authors who inspired me to become a writer.

Several years and a cross-country move later, as a sixteen-year-old in Southern California, I found a job as a page at the Thousand Oaks City Library. I worked part-time at the library all through high school and on summer breaks from college, and I loved it—not only because I was surrounded by books all day, but because of the intelligent, passionate readers I worked with. Our conversations about literature, music, the arts, politics, and social issues were, I believe, as important to my education as my time in the classroom.

I'm sure fans of the Elm Creek Quilts novels have noticed how my love of libraries infuses all twenty-two books in the series. The Thousand Oaks City Library itself appears in my fifth novel, *The Quilter's Legacy*, when Sylvia uses some of the same microfilm and microfiche I used to shelve to track down a long-lost heirloom quilt her mother had made. In my antebellum novel *The Sugar Camp Quilt*, my heroine organizes the making of an extraordinary raffle quilt including the autographs of 61 famous authors to raise funds to build a public library. In *The Giving Quilt*, a librarian fights to keep classic children's books on her public library's shelves after a talk-radio firebrand stirs up controversy over her Banned Books Week display. And in my most recent novel, *The Museum of Lost Quilts*, a library is just as important to the Elm Creek Quilters' adventures as the museum of the title!

Libraries are not only important settings in my novels; they're also absolutely essential to my creative process. Whenever I write historical fiction, I begin my research at another library I love, the Wisconsin Historical Society Library on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in Madison. It's a wonderful resource, an archive of marvelous depth and scope tended by knowledgeable, curious, enthusiastic historians and librarians. Summer and I definitely share a passion for delving into library archives to do historical detective work.

Quilting connects all of your characters in significant ways, and you are a quilter yourself. How have your own experiences as a quilter inspired your writing?

Beginning writers are often advised to “write what you know.” Since I knew about quilters—their quirks, their inside jokes, their disputes and their generosity—the world of quilting became a natural subject for me. I also wanted to pay tribute to the quilters of ages past who had preserved and handed down their knowledge and traditions through the generations.

When I first began writing about quilters, I had two audiences in mind. The first included my quilter friends, who I thought would enjoy reading about contemporary women like themselves with problems and dreams like their own, overcoming obstacles in their lives by taking strength from their own moral courage and from the support of faithful friends. I also believed quilters would appreciate a depiction of modern quilters and quilt-making free of the usual stereotypes.

But I also intended to write for non-quilters, to give them some insight into the quilting world, so that they might better understand how passionate we quilters are about our art and why we love it so. I wanted them to take from my books a greater understanding of how quilting is a wonderful creative outlet that can draw you into a wider community of talented, welcoming quilters who support and encourage one another. Perhaps more importantly, I wanted them to discover how quilting can bring together people from different generations, races, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds into a beautiful, enduring patchwork of friendship.

The Elm Creek Quilts series moves effortlessly between the past and present from one book to the next. Tell us how that feels creatively. How do you come up with so many different story lines spanning different generations? Did you plan to take this approach from the beginning of the series?

I enjoy writing both contemporary and historical stories, and I'm pleased that my readers have embraced my more flexible definition of a series so that I can continue to write in both genres. When I wrote my first novel, *The Quilter's Apprentice*, I had no idea it would be the first of many intertwined books, so I didn't map out an extended storyline that would be spread out over a certain number of volumes. In hindsight, I think it's fortunate that I launched the Elm Creek Quilts series this way. Instead of proceeding in a strict linear fashion, following the same thread of the same character's life in perfect chronological order, I've been able to take secondary characters from earlier stories and make them the protagonists of new books. In other novels, I've delved into a familiar character's past, exploring entirely new settings and characters that are still tied in some way to the Elm Creek Valley. Because I'm not stuck in the traditional series format, I've enjoyed the creative freedom to write novels that explore new characters and settings while still satisfying readers who want to see the people and places they have already come to know and love.

What do you say to people who assume your books are only about quilts?

People who assume my books are only about quilts obviously haven't read them! I've always known that my books are about quilters—in other words, people—rather than quilts or quilting. That said, the quilts my characters make are never arbitrary. They aren't included as an afterthought or as set decoration, but are as important to my characters as real quilts are to the quilters who make them. Often I'll use a quilt to provide insight into a particular character's personality or past. You can learn a great deal about quilters from the style of quilts they make, the techniques they use, their color and fabric palettes, and whether they finish quilts or have a closet full of abandoned projects. Sometimes a quilt will play an important role as a narrative device. In *The Quilter's Apprentice*, a sampler quilt serves as a useful instructional project as a master quilter teaches her young friend how to quilt, but the patterns also evoke stories from the older woman's childhood and life as a young bride on the World War II home front. In *Round Robin*, a collaborative project allowed me to tell the story from different characters' perspectives as the central block was passed around the circle of friends and each contributed her border.

Ultimately, my novels are character-driven stories of friendship, history, moral courage, and ordinary people's struggle to overcome adversity—and you don't need to know anything about quilts or quilting to enjoy them.

As you and readers around the world celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the launch of the Elm Creek Quilts series, what do you feel is the most meaningful aspect of your work?

I marvel at the stories my readers have shared with me through the years about how my books have inspired them to make positive changes in their own lives. In *The Quilter's Apprentice*, after moving to a new town, a lonely young woman discovers a welcoming circle of friends at a quilt shop; many readers have told me that she inspired them join their local guilds to build new friendships while learning to quilt. Other readers, moved by another character's wistful reflections upon missed opportunities to reconcile with her estranged sister, have summoned up the courage and humility necessary to mend broken relationships within their own families. One woman from my home state of Wisconsin found inspiration in the story of my character Grace Daniels, an artist who struggled emotionally and physically after receiving a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Contending with the same illness, my reader decided that, like Grace, she would find a way to continue to pursue the work she loved, in her case, teaching elementary school. When I write alone at my computer, telling stories of characters and places close to my heart, I often forget that my words might have a positive impact beyond my quiet room. It's gratifying and humbling when readers let me know that they have.

Can you give us a hint about what you're working on now? Will we hear more from the Elm Creek Quilters?

Yes and yes! I hope readers will be pleased to hear that another Elm Creek Quilts novel is in the works. In April 2025, William Morrow will publish the twenty-third novel in the series, a dual-timeline story titled *The World's Fair Quilt*. In *The Museum of Lost Quilts*, Summer hears worrisome rumors that Elm Creek Quilt Camp is facing unexpected financial difficulties. In this new novel, octogenarian master quilter Sylvia Bergstrom Compson must confront these problems head-on in order to save her ancestral estate and the beloved business the Elm Creek Quilters founded there. As she and her friends collaborate to solve problems and plan for the future, Sylvia finds inspiration and courage in memories of an extraordinary national quilt competition she and her elder sister participated in during the Great Depression—the Sears National Quilt Contest at the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair. This was the largest quilt competition ever held, and it hasn't been equaled since. Twenty-five thousand quilts were submitted, which, given the population at the time, meant that roughly one of every two thousand American women participated. The twelve-hundred-dollar grand prize was an enormous sum back then, more than the average per capita income. What I found even more compelling than the size and scope of the competition, though, was its theme. The quilters' artistic interpretations of a "Century of Progress" revealed how the concept of progress was imagined and defined by a people still recovering from World War I and struggling through the Great Depression, capturing the mood and the values of a nation during one of the most difficult periods of its history.