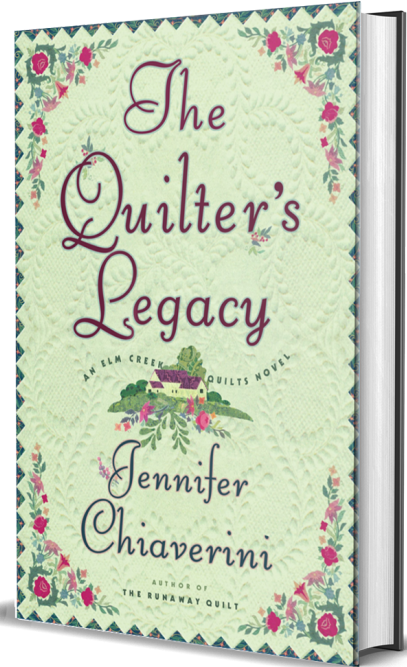


## *The Quilter's Legacy* Reading Group Guide

Newly engaged Sylvia Bergstrom Compson has her hands full running Elm Creek Manor and preparing for the holidays. But a more urgent matter trumps everything when she discovers that several of her late mother's beautiful handmade quilts have gone missing from the attic of Elm Creek Manor. Using journal entries, receipts, quilting websites, and other clues, Sylvia and her fiancé, Andrew, embark on a cross-country road trip to track down the precious heirlooms. During her journey Sylvia realizes how little she knows about her mother, who died when Sylvia was a young child. Through flashbacks and alternating narratives, readers learn more about Sylvia's mother, Eleanor, and her fascinating life—her wealthy childhood in New York, the tragedies that tore her family apart, and her greatest loves. As Sylvia tracks down the lost quilts and their stories, she begins to piece together her family history and the secrets of her past.



### TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Based on what you know of Sylvia, why might she have initially been so hesitant to marry Andrew? Why does she have reservations about permanently moving in with him?
2. Eleanor and Sylvia both encounter difficulties as they prepare to marry. Despite their vastly different circumstances, how do their struggles parallel each other?
3. How does Chiaverini build suspense by alternating between Sylvia's and Eleanor's points of view? Discuss some of the sections where she provides clues to the novel's final outcome.
4. Discuss Eleanor's relationship with Miss Langley. How is Miss Langley both a positive and a negative influence on Eleanor? How do both their actions dramatically affect the course of each other's lives?
5. What did you think about Andrew's children's reaction to the news of Sylvia and Andrew's engagement? Were they completely overreacting or could you understand their reservations based on their family's history?
6. Discuss the social and political events that Chiaverini weaves into the narrative of *The Quilter's Legacy*, from the voyage of the Titanic to the women's suffrage movement. How does Chiaverini integrate these historical elements into the framework of the story? How does the novel's inclusion of real events enhance your reading experience?
7. When Eleanor's parents attempt to force her to marry Edwin, Eleanor's mother tells her she should "never marry for love. Marry for position and security, as your father did. As I should have done. That is the only way you will not be disappointed. That is the only way you will receive exactly what you were promised." (p. 110–11) What do we learn about Eleanor's mother in this passage? What is ironic about this advice?

8. How might Eleanor have avoided developing influenza when everyone else around her had it?
9. Discuss the scene where Sylvia visits the Schaeffers and discovers their long-buried secret. In some ways her visit is both successful and unsuccessful. What does this section say about the turns life can take? Does it reinforce any other common themes in the novel?
10. Discuss the following passage: “Mother was wrong. Eleanor did not favor Claudia out of guilt for any long-buried resentment, but because she had almost lost her. . . . If there was a grain of truth in Mother’s accusation, it was that Claudia did remind Eleanor of Abigail, with the gifts their parents had not nurtured and the faults they had allowed to flourish.” (p. 283) Can you elaborate more on what both Eleanor and her mother mean? What other circumstances might lead parents to inadvertently favor one child over another
11. Do you think that Eleanor made the right decision in allowing her mother to live at Elm Creek Manor? Could you have forgiven her if you were Eleanor?
12. Why was Miss Langley never able to visit Eleanor? Do you believe she was truly too busy, or were there other reasons behind her decision? Based on what Sylvia and Andrew learn at the end of the novel, what else might have motivated Miss Langley’s actions aside from the reasons she gave Eleanor?
13. When Sylvia makes her final discovery at the Pioneer exhibit she is overcome with grief “for the stories lost, for those pieces of her mother’s life she would never know. Now only her quilts remained. . . . And yet one other part of her legacy remained: Sylvia herself, and all that she recalled, and all that she had yet to discover.” (p. 309) Discuss the various meanings of the word legacy in the novel. How does the title have a double meaning? Where else does this theme occur?
14. How did Chiaverini’s inclusion of the family tree from the Lockwood family Bible help you piece together parts of the family’s history on your own? Did seeing some of the dates before finishing the novel create an element of suspense? Were you surprised by the dates listed for Eleanor’s lifespan? 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](http://jenniferchiaverini.com), contains 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, galleries of fabrics, quilts and patterns, and upcoming events.
2. Gatherings of friends, food, and family are a huge part of life at Elm Creek Manor. Take a cue from Sylvia and Sarah and throw a holiday party. (If there’s no holiday coming up, throw a party just because, or make up your own holiday!) Ask each person to bring a favorite traditional family dish to add a bit of history to the table. Try adding an element of surprise, the way Sylvia does at her Christmas party.
3. Chiaverini writes, “That was one lesson [Sylvia’s] mother had taught her well: Persevere, hope, and do all things with love, for then the attempt would be successful even if it fell short of the goal.” Make a list of five things you would like to pursue purely out of love, regardless of how likely or unlikely it is that you’ll achieve them.
4. Visit [quilthistory.com/quilt-museums/](http://quilthistory.com/quilt-museums/) for an extensive list of museums around the country that contain outstanding quilt exhibits. Plan a group trip to the one nearest you.

## A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER CHIAVERINI

**As does *The Runaway Quilt*, the previous installment in your popular Elm Creek Quilts series, *The Quilter's Legacy* offers fascinating lessons in American history. What inspired you to continue exploring our nation's past through the lens of fiction?**

I'm fascinated by history, especially women's roles in American history, and writing the Elm Creek Quilts series has given me the opportunity to study and write about a variety of historic periods and places. As I was writing *The Runaway Quilt*, it occurred to me that I had explored Sylvia Compson's paternal heritage thoroughly in the course of four books, but I had offered relatively little information about Sylvia's maternal ancestors. I decided to devote *The Quilter's Legacy* to Sylvia's mother and her history, a story Sylvia herself did not know well. In the course of my research, I realized that Sylvia's mother would have lived through a very turbulent period in our nation's history. Although she died young, she witnessed the women's suffrage movement, the struggle for labor rights, World War I, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and other pivotal events. Since Eleanor was a quilter, I also wove in quilting lore from her day. The quilts Eleanor creates and the fabrics and tools she works with were typical of the times. Quilting lore was an especially useful creative device for understanding Eleanor, since trends in quilting have reflected trends in American life. Social and political events of each period influenced everything from the materials quilters used to the subjects they depicted. I have found that quilts and other examples of the "domestic arts" can teach us a great deal about everyday life in these bygone eras.

**In *The Quilter's Legacy*, Sylvia Bergstrom Compson embarks on a nationwide search for five quilts her mother made, with hopes of learning more about the woman who made them. Why did you decide to keep so much about the life and character of Eleanor Lockwood Bergstrom a mystery to her daughter?**

In the first Elm Creek Quilts novel I established that Eleanor died when Sylvia was only ten years old, so I had to reflect carefully on what Sylvia would have known about her mother. Although the book would have been easier to write had Sylvia known her mother well, Eleanor would not have told a young child about certain memories she probably would have shared readily with a grown daughter. Ultimately the reader comes to know Eleanor far better than Sylvia does, which I hope will make readers reflect upon how much is lost when stories aren't shared among generations.

**What makes Eleanor a remarkable woman for her time and circumstances?**

Strong, independent women have existed in every generation, but perhaps what sets Eleanor apart is that she was courageous enough to risk everything for the chance of a more fulfilling life. At the time she decided to marry Sylvia's father, Eleanor knew her family would disown her, and she also believed she was risking her very life by giving up her inheritance. A childhood bout of rheumatic fever had left her with a weakened heart, and Eleanor believed that Sylvia's father would be unable to afford the medical care she needed. She decided that a few years with the man she loved would be far better than decades without him.

**Who was your inspiration for the extraordinary Amelia Langley? How does she stand as a role model for women in the twenty-first century?**

I drew upon many historical figures in creating Amelia Langley, each of them a pioneering woman involved in the causes of equal rights and social justice, including Susan B. Anthony and Dorothy Day. Amelia Langley is a strong role model for contemporary women regardless of their political beliefs because she stands up for what she believes in and accepts the consequences of her actions.

**Do you think women today understand the importance of the suffragist movement—or the price paid by pioneering feminists?**

It depends upon the generation; women who lived through the women's rights movement of the sixties and seventies seem far more aware than younger women are of the sacrifices past generations made in order to achieve the rights we enjoy today. This is another reason why it is so important for older generations to tell their stories, so that their struggles and sacrifices are neither taken for granted nor forgotten.

**What took Sylvia so long to agree to marry Andrew Cooper, a man she deeply loves? Why did Andrew's grown children object to their match? Is there a message in this fictional love story for real-life widows and widowers of a certain age?**

Sylvia put off Andrew's proposals because still grieved for her first husband, her first love, even though he had passed away many years before. Also, after many lonely and unhappy years she had finally made peace with her past and found some contentment for herself, and she was reluctant to jeopardize that. Andrew's grown children never expected their father to marry again, and so the announcement of his engagement catches them completely off guard. They like Sylvia, but she's several years older than their father and has had some health problems, including a stroke. They're afraid that before long, their father will again have to suffer the grief of losing a beloved wife, and they want to spare him that.

**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—and my publishers—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, however, 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.