

***The Wedding Quilt* by Jennifer Chiaverini – Reading Group Guide**

Discussion Questions

1. Who is Sarah McClure? How would you describe her character at the start of the book? How does her daughter's wedding act as a catalyst for the memories and events that unfold throughout the novel?
2. After reading about the birth of Sarah and Matt's twins, what is your opinion of the conflict Matt experiences between his responsibilities as a father-to-be and his responsibilities to his father? How do his actions inform his relationship with Sarah? What do we learn about Matt and Sarah during that experience?
3. How would you describe Sarah's children, Caroline and James? How are they similar? How are they different? How do their relationships with Sarah differ and how do those relationships inform Sarah's character?
4. Who is Sylvia? How would you define her relationship with Sarah? What does Sylvia ultimately bequeath to Sarah and what does that say about their friendship?
5. What does Bonnie find for herself in Hawaii that she didn't have before? How does her decision regarding Elm Creek Quilt Camp affect Sarah? What does the friendship between Sarah and Bonnie say about them and the Elm Creek Quilts community?
6. Sarah points out that she is "not Elm Creek Quilts...It's so much more than one person." What does Sarah mean to the Elm Creek Quilts community? What is her role? Could you imagine any of the other members running Elm Creek Quilts? Why or why not?
7. What connection exists between the Elm Creek Quilters and Waterford's Union Hall? Why is this connection significant? What importance does quilting have in the history of the Waterford community? How would you describe quilting's significance in the nation as a whole?
8. What do the Winding Ways panels the quilters hang in the library mean to the core group of Elm Creek Quilters? What does it say about their relationships? Why do you think things like the Winding Ways quilt bring people together?
9. Just before the wedding, Sarah gives Caroline a piece of jewelry belonging to Sylvia. Why do you think Sarah does this? What does the jewelry mean? What does this gesture say about the role Sylvia had in both of their lives?
10. During the rehearsal dinner, Caroline says that she admires her mother and father's relationship. How would you describe Sarah's initial reaction to this admiration? Do you agree with her? What is your opinion of Caroline after their talk and what future do you see for her marriage to Leo?
11. Sarah gives James and Caroline gifts that Sylvia had made them before her death. What were these gifts? What is the significance of these gifts? What did Sylvia mean to the McClure family and to Elm Creek Quilts in general?

12. What future do you see for Sarah McClure and Elm Creek Quilts? What will happen to Caroline? What role will James play in the camp's future? What does Elm Creek Quilts mean to Sarah and what role does it play in her life?

A Discussion with Jennifer Chiaverini

1. When bride-to-be Caroline McClure returns to Elm Creek Manor a few days before her wedding, she confides to her mother, "I wish I had a wedding quilt, one I made myself." Did you make a wedding quilt of your own or receive one as a special gift? Did that cherished quilt inspire *The Wedding Quilt*?

I've been married more than eighteen years, but I acquired my wedding quilt only recently. When Marty and I were engaged, like Caroline I longed for a beautiful heirloom wedding quilt to commemorate the occasion. Unfortunately, none of my friends or relatives quilted, and we couldn't afford to buy a genuine, handmade quilt. Eventually I realized that if I wanted a beautiful heirloom wedding quilt, I'd have to make it myself.

Our town didn't have a quilt shop where I could take lessons, so I found an instruction book titled "Teach Yourself How to Quilt," bought some fabric from a discount store, and taught myself to piece and appliqué by following the step-by-step instructions. My first project was a simple nine-block sampler rather than the elaborate king-sized bed quilt I had envisioned, but I was pleased with it, and I was eager to try more challenging projects. I bought more pattern books, browsed through quilting magazines, sought advice from more experienced quilters on the Internet—and learned through trial and error and lots of picking out seams.

As for that beautiful heirloom wedding quilt I had wanted so badly as a bride... I'm a little embarrassed to admit that while I've made many quilts through the years, I never got around to that particular project. And then, not long after I wrote *The Wedding Quilt*, I decided to make a version of Caroline's Double Wedding Ring quilt for a new pattern book. My husband and I liked it so much that he suggested we choose it to be our wedding quilt. If I had waited two more years, I could have called it our twentieth anniversary quilt—but I suppose we'd already waited long enough!

2. The world of *The Wedding Quilt* spans the lives of many characters over many decades, just as the Elm Creek Quilts series moves effortlessly between the past and present from book to book. 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 could 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.

3. 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, their quarrels and their kindnesses—the lives of quilters became a natural subject for me. I also wanted to pay tribute to the quilters of ages past who preserved and handed down their 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 away 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 patchwork of friendship.

4. Do you think of the quilts you feature in each of your Elm Creek Quilts novels as characters, of a sort? How do you decide which quilts and patterns to include in which novels? 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. In my novels, 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.

5. What are you working on now? Will we hear more from the Elm Creek Quilters?

Within the next year, the nineteenth and twentieth Elm Creek Quilts novels, *Sonoma Rose* and *The Giving Quilt*, will be released in paperback. My next novel, *Mrs. Lincoln’s Dressmaker*, will be published in January 2013. I absolutely loved researching and writing this book, and I hope my readers will be as captivated as I was by the life of Elizabeth Keckley, the former slave who became the dressmaker and trusted confidante of Mary Todd Lincoln. In Fall 2013, Plume will publish a reader’s guide to the Elm Creek Quilts series, *An Elm Creek Quilts Companion*, which

will include character biographies, a Bergstrom family tree, descriptions of significant places and things, illustrations of quilt blocks, an interview with the Elm Creek Quilters, and a few other reference tools readers have told me they'd like to have at their fingertips. While writing the *Companion*, I've enjoyed reading through all twenty of the Elm Creek Quilts novels, revisiting favorite settings and tracing the winding paths my characters have followed through the years. It's been quite a journey for me as well.