

The World's Fair Quilt Reading Group Guide

A week before the launch of Elm Creek Orchards, a new venture Sylvia Bergstrom Compson hopes will earn much-needed revenue for her nineteenth-century rural Pennsylvania estate, her friend and colleague Summer Sullivan, curator of the Waterford Historical Society's quilt gallery, requests a special favor. When Sylvia and her elder sister were teenagers, they entered a quilt in the Sears National Quilt Contest for the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition. As part of Summer's exhibit, the Bergstrom sisters' World's Fair Quilt would illuminate an almost forgotten chapter of women's history during the difficult years of the Great Depression.

Sylvia grants Summer's request, though with misgivings. Neglected in the attic for decades, the fragile antique requires careful cleaning and repair—and not all of the memories it evokes are pleasant. Threads of fierce rivalry were woven into the fabric of the sisters' relationship, but their aunties insisted that they collaborate on a single entry. Yet as their masterpiece took shape, the reluctant partners were surprised to discover in each other an artistic kindred spirit, and perhaps even a friend—until a troubling secret kept with the best of intentions threatened to shatter their newfound sisterhood.



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 World's Fair Quilt*? Which characters were you most pleased to visit with again? If you're new to Elm Creek Quilts, which characters did you find most appealing or relatable, and why?
2. According to the official rules for the Sears National Quilt Contest, "Quilts must be of the contestant's own making" (p 61), clearly referring to a single quilter. Based upon what you learned in the novel, and perhaps upon your own experience as a quilter or crafter, do you think this rule is reasonable? Why or why not? Do you think Sylvia and Claudia should have followed the rule to the letter? What do you make of their rationale for why they should be allowed to work together?
3. "Most days I'm skeptical of the modern world's concept of 'progress.'" Sylvia's father reflects when she tells him how she plans to include the World's Fair theme, Century of Progress, in her original quilt design. "It emphasizes technological advances rather than moral development. Labor-saving devices and other modern marvels may do more harm than good if they aren't accompanied by progress in justice, equality, and ethics" (p 97). Do you agree or disagree with Mr. Bergstrom? Why or why not? How do you define progress? What does "progress" mean to you?
4. As Sylvia contemplates the unexpected challenges facing Elm Creek Manor, she reflects that "change, whether deliberate or unexpected, was inevitable in life. How one responded to change—with optimism or timidity, resilience or resistance—determined whether it would bring about opportunities for growth and progress, or for disappointment and bitterness" (p 148). Do you agree with Sylvia? How do you deal with unanticipated or disruptive change in your own life?
5. Claudia is unexpectedly kind and reassuring when Sylvia is struck by self-doubt after seeing that another quilt using a progress in transportation theme, the theme Sylvia had abandoned, had taken second

place at regionals (p 201-202). What does Claudia's refusal to allow Sylvia to blame herself for their failure to move on in the competition reveal to you about Claudia that you hadn't known before?

6. Why did Sylvia decide not to share the regional judges' comment sheet with Claudia (p 206-207)? Do you think she made the right decision? Why or why not? How do Sylvia's feelings about her decision change over time?

7. How did you feel when you learned that the woman who won the Sears National Quilt Contest didn't put a single stitch into the quilt that was awarded the grand prize?

8. How do Sylvia's current financial difficulties and her reminiscences about the Sears National Quilt Contest change her understanding of her Claudia's stewardship of Elm Creek Manor, and the estate's decline, during the sisters' fifty-year estrangement?

9. 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 of many quilts from the 1933 Sears National Quilt Contest online at Quilt Index: <https://tinyurl.com/1933WorldsFairQuilts>. Can you identify those that were portrayed in *The World's Fair Quilt*? Which quilts do you find most striking? Which would your book club award the Best of Show ribbon?

3. Visit a pick-your-own apple orchard. As you pick fruit and make your purchases, observe and imagine all the work that goes into making a business like Elm Creek Orchards thrive. Afterward, make favorite apple recipes to share at your next book club meeting.

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 World's Fair Quilt* is the twenty-third novel in the beloved Elm Creek Quilts series, and your thirty-fifth novel overall. What inspired you to write this particular story?**

In my previous novel, *The Museum of Lost Quilts*, the Elm Creek Quilters encounter unexpected financial difficulties that put the future of their beloved business in doubt. (Who could've foreseen that running the nation's most renowned quilters' retreat out of a nineteenth-century manor in rural central Pennsylvania would be so wildly expensive?) I knew my readers would worry about the fate of their beloved favorite characters if I didn't resolve those issues promptly, so I decided that my next book would feature Sylvia Bergstrom Compson, octogenarian quilter and cofounder of Elm Creek Quilts, as she enlists the help of her friends to confront the calamity.

Sylvia often finds courage in lessons from history, so I began by sifting through her past, hoping to rediscover something that might influence her newly uncertain present. That's when I remembered an incident I had included in the sixth Elm Creek Quilts novel, *The Master Quilter*. When Sylvia's friend and

colleague, Gwen, a professor of American Studies, struggled to find a new research topic that would unite her twin passions of women's history and quilting. Sylvia reminisced about a time decades before when she and her elder sister participated in the Sears National Quilt Contest for the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition. Intrigued, Gwen plunged into historical research, and what she discovered convinced her that the extraordinary quilt contest should be the subject of her next book.

Although I shared Gwen's fascination, the Sears National Quilt Contest appeared only briefly in *The Master Quilter*—but it definitely made an impression. Wherever I traveled on book tour, curious readers would ask me whether the 1933 Chicago World's Fair really had hosted such a magnificent quilt exhibit, or if I'd simply made it up. Their hopeful expressions made it very clear that they wanted it to be historical fact and not mere fiction.

One evening, at a library event in Wisconsin, a reader in the signing line passed me her copy of *The Master Quilter* and regarded me speculatively. "Gwen believes that there's a whole book to be written about the Sears National Quilt Contest," she remarked. "I hope you agree."

I laughed and replied that I hoped it was true for Gwen's sake, or she'd have to find another research topic! That seemed to satisfy the reader, and she moved on—but her comment lingered in my imagination ever after. Perhaps, I thought, I really should write a novel focused on the 1933 Chicago World's Fair quilt contest. Its cultural significance definitely deserve a fuller account than the few pages I'd devoted to it in *The Master Quilter*. The Bergstrom sisters had perfected the art of sibling rivalry, so it would be fun to show them overcoming their differences, or persevering in spite of them, as they collaborated on a quilt. And since the contest had taken place during the Great Depression, an older, wiser Sylvia could draw courage and resilience from memories of that earlier time when the residents of Elm Creek Manor had come together to overcome uncertainty and financial hardship.

I'm happy that all these years later, I've been able to weave the loose threads from an earlier novel into the continuing story of the Elm Creek Quilters—thanks to a timely observation from a clever reader.

In your new novel, you portray Sylvia in alternating chapters as a young teen in 1933 and many decades later as an octogenarian master quilter in 2004. *The World's Fair Quilt* is one of several dual-timeline stories in a series that includes both contemporary and historical fiction. Alternating between past and present must offer unique creative opportunities. 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 restricted to 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.

How did you research *The World's Fair Quilt*? Is it more challenging to write a historical Elm Creek Quilts novel than one set in the present day?

Whenever I write historical fiction, I begin by doing extensive research into the era and the significant locations, peoples, and events that will likely figure in my story. I usually turn to primary sources such as memoirs, letters, newspapers, and government documents, as well as secondary sources such as biographies and historical accounts. For *The World's Fair Quilt*, newspaper articles about the Sears

National Quilt Contest and the Chicago World's fair were absolutely essential. As for secondary sources, the book *Patchwork Souvenirs of the 1933 World's Fair* by Merikay Waldvogel and Barbara Brackman was very helpful, and I highly recommend it for readers who want to learn more about the contest.

When I'm preparing to write an Elm Creek Quilts novel, I refer to my master timeline for the series to remind myself about important, fixed events in the lives of the established characters. Often I'll reread entire novels to make sure I haven't overlooked anything that didn't seem significant enough to add to my master timeline at the time, but might be important for the new story I want to tell.

For a historical Elm Creek Quilts novel like *The World's Fair Quilt*, I need to do all of the above!

Did you learn anything in your research that especially surprised you?

My historical research for *The World's Fair Quilt* unearthed many details that surprised and impressed me. The first was the astonishing size and breadth of the quilt contest itself. 25,000 quilters—roughly one of every two thousand American women given the population at the time—submitted their finest handiwork to their local Sears, Roebuck and Company stores, where the top finishers advanced to regional competitions and then onto the finals in Chicago. The tantalizing \$1,200 grand prize was an enormous sum in those days, more than the average per capita income. In honor of Chicago's centennial, the theme of the World's Fair was "A Century of Progress"; many savvy participants made sure to incorporate this theme into their designs, forever capturing their understanding of "progress" during the Great Depression and reflecting the nation's mood during an extremely challenging era.

I was also surprised to learn that the grand prize-winning quilt, later titled "Star of the Blue Grass," was presented to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt a few days before Christmas 1933. It was kept at the White House for a time, but at some point it was moved, lost, or stolen. Nothing in the historical record remains to explain what became of it. That's a mystery I'd love someone to solve.

The *Library Journal* review of the novel says, "It's been 25 years since Chiaverini introduced readers to the Elm Creek Quilts series, and she shows no signs of slowing down, deftly stitching two storylines together in this offering..." What do you think of that description?

That's very gratifying to hear. I must be doing something right if it all seems so swift and effortless! I still love writing as much as I did when my first novel, *The Quilter's Apprentice*, was published in 1999, and I hope to continue writing as long as readers still want to hear from me.

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, whom 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 stereotypes.

Yet 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 hoped they would discover how quilting can bring together

people from different generations, races, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds into a beautiful, enduring patchwork of friendship.

What do you hope readers take away from *The World's Fair Quilt*?

I hope that readers will be inspired to emulate Sylvia when they face difficult times, that they'll find strength in community and in remembering the many courageous people who overcame great challenges in the past. Find your community, take heart, and be undaunted.

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 2026, William Morrow will publish the twenty-fourth novel in the series, *The Patchwork Players*, which picks up a few weeks after *The World's Fair Quilt* ends. *The Patchwork Players* turns the spotlight on a favorite character first introduced in my third novel, *The Cross-Country Quilters*—Julia Merchaud, the acclaimed, award-winning actress and star of the enormously popular historical drama series *A Patchwork Life*. When several members of the cast decide not to return for a seventh season, Julia concocts a brilliant scheme to convince them to stay. Five years before, her visit to Elm Creek Quilt Camp had been a truly life-changing experience. Not only had she learned to quilt, but she'd also formed profound, lasting friendships with several of her fellow campers. She's absolutely certain that if her cast and crew can share a similar bonding experience, they'll happily abandon their other plans and remain with the series indefinitely. Unfortunately, Julia's scheme is not quite as brilliant as she thinks it is, and things go badly awry—or hilariously awry, depending on your point of view!