



Book Club Set

# The Forgotten Seamstress

By Liz Trenow

## About the Author

I'm living proof that it is never too late to follow your dreams! I started writing fiction after a long career in newspaper and broadcast journalism, and am now astonished to find myself with a second career as the author of best-selling historical fiction which is published all over the world. I combine writing with spending time with my family, my artist husband and two beautiful grown-up daughters, three grandchildren, some wonderful friends, singing in two chamber choirs (Baroque music, especially) and, of course, reading widely. This is where I write.

One strand running through some of my novels stems back to my family background: I was born and brought up in a house next to the family silk mill, a company which was founded nearly 300 years ago and is still going strong today. There is more about the silk company at [www.stephenwalters.co.uk](http://www.stephenwalters.co.uk).

Retrieved from: <https://www.liztrenow.com/about-me>

## About the Book

London, 1910: Maria, a remarkable young seamstress, is noticed by Queen Mary, patron of the London Needlework Guild, who gives her a job in the royal household.

A century later, when turning out her mother's loft, Caroline discovers an old patchwork quilt left to her by her grandmother, and becomes intrigued by the curious verse embroidered into its lining. When her best friend, a fabric conservator, notices that some of the fabrics are almost certainly unique and rare royal wedding silks, Caroline becomes determined to discover more about the quilt and its mysterious origins.

Through the fading memories of her mother, some family letters and photographs, some old cassette tapes and the help of a local journalist, she uncovers an extraordinary story involving a royal affair, a life of incarceration, an illegal adoption and two women whose lives collided with devastating consequences.

Finally, Caroline comes to understand what her grandmother wanted her to know – the truth about herself and how she wants to live her own life.

## Discussion Questions

1. The Forgotten Seamstress was inspired by a single piece of beautiful historic fabric. Is there anything in your life which could inspire you to write a story or poem, or paint a picture?
2. The two main characters in The Forgotten Seamstress were born more than a century apart. What does the novel tell you about how the class system in Britain changed in that time? Can you identify any parallels in the social history of the U.S.?
3. Maria was locked away because she threatened the rules of a rigid society. Have we become more tolerant and humane today, or are there still certain social improprieties that attract similar punishment? How do you think our views will have changed a hundred years from now?
4. What does Maria's story tell us about progress in the treatment of mental illness over the past century? Is the present-day use of "care in the community" really best for some patients?
5. Maria is a very "unreliable narrator." To what extent did you believe her story, or were you, like Caroline and Professor Morton, doubtful of her fantastical claims?
6. At the start of the novel, Caroline has been laid off and is newly single and desperate for a new direction. How does the quilt help her find a new path in life?
7. How does the novel hint at the contrasts between urban and suburban/rural life in present-day Britain? How do these differ between the UK and the U.S.?
8. Caroline feels agonizingly guilty about putting her mother into a residential home and compares her actions with how the Kowalski family cares for "old Sam" at home. If you found yourself in Caroline's circumstances, what would you do?
9. Should Caroline have told her ex-boyfriend about her pregnancy and her decision to have an abortion? What were his rights in this issue versus her rights? By not telling him, was she just being selfish or was she guilty of a more serious moral deception?
10. Caroline's grandmother is so desperate for motherhood that she accepts a baby even though she knows that there may be something untoward about the baby's arrival. What does the novel tell us about the psychological corrosiveness of guilt?
11. Caroline loved her Granny Jean and feels a very special bond with her. What are the differences between a mother-daughter relationship and a grandmother-granddaughter relationship?

12. Adopted children meeting blood relatives for the first time often report that they immediately recognize them as “family.” What does the novel tell us about blood-bond affinities?
13. Had Caroline, as an adult, been able to meet Maria, what do you think she might have said to her?
14. The novel touches on the issue of homelessness. Apart from providing single-night hostels (called “shelters” in the UK), what else needs to be done to reduce the problem of homelessness? Should society intervene? Or should homeless people be responsible for sorting out their own problems?
15. Two forms of first-person narrative are used in the novel. Discuss the differences and what effect they have on the reader.
16. Why do think the author decided to use the device of telling Maria’s story through recorded cassette tapes?
17. If you met Maria as a young woman, what would you tell her about what life would eventually teach her?
18. What would your reaction be if you discovered that you had “royal blood”? Who would you tell? What do you think would happen if the news reached the royal family?
19. Will Caroline and Ben eventually get together?

Retrieved from:

<https://cdn.sourcebooks.com/assets/downloads/readinggroups/ForgottenSeamstress-RGG.pdf>

## Author Interview

**Q. Welcome to Flashlight Commentary Liz. To start things off, please tell us a bit about *The Forgotten Seamstress*.**

A. Two stories are told in parallel: In 1910 a young seamstress, Maria, is noticed by Queen Mary, patron of the London Needlework Guild, and employed in the royal household. In 2010 Caroline discovers that a patchwork quilt inherited from her grandmother contains unique royal silks. Through the fading memories of her mother, some family letters and photographs, some old cassette tapes and the help of a local journalist Caroline uncovers an extraordinary story involving a royal affair, a life of incarceration and two women whose lives collided with devastating consequences. Finally, she comes to understand what her Granny wanted her to know – the truth about herself and how she wants to live her own life.

**Q. What inspired you to write this story?**

A. When I went to the Warner Textile Archive in Braintree, Essex, doing research into my own family history, I chanced upon a case of the ‘May Silks’: beautiful damasks and brocades, some with interwoven gold and silver threads, hand woven by Warner and Sons for the trousseau of Princess May for her wedding to the heir to the British throne in 1893. The silks themselves were entrancing but it was the story behind them which most intrigued me.

**Q. What research went into *The Forgotten Seamstress* and did your research yield any surprises in terms of historical events or illuminate a character in any particular way?**

A. The character of Maria, told in first person, seemed to arrive almost fully-formed. I had a clear visual picture of her and could actually hear the sound of her voice in my head. But finding out about what her life as a servant in Buckingham Palace was more difficult. I visited the building of course, but you are only allowed into the royal reception rooms and are never shown ‘downstairs’. *Downton Abbey* was quite helpful! I read a number of accounts and histories of the Palace and of the royal family at that time, but couldn’t discover whether they had ever employed a seamstress.

The setting of the asylum was straightforward. As a teenager, I was an inpatient in a ward set aside for minor clinical operations at an enormous Victorian mental hospital close to my home town. The sights and sounds of the place left a deep impression on me. It was like a country mansion set in its own grounds but surrounded by high fences – outwardly grand and yet with such an oppressive and ominous atmosphere.

I owe a great debt to the sociologist and author Diana Gittins for her book, *Madness in its Place* (Routledge 1998). She includes first-hand accounts of staff and patients, which really brought the place and people to life and led me to one of those light-bulb moments: solving the problem of how to tell Maria’s story. I created a character –

Professor Patsy Morton – who had undertaken a research project not unlike that of Diana Gittins’, although a couple of decades earlier. This was the perfect way of allowing Caroline – and the reader – to hear Maria’s story first hand. Although we never actually meet her in the book, the tapes help us to feel that we know her.

**Q. The Forgotten Seamstress is a multigenerational story. Did you find it difficult working with characters from such different background, decades and social circumstances?**

A. That’s an interesting question because, as I said, Maria came to life almost instantly. On the other hand Caroline, a thirty-something contemporary metropolitan girl, was much harder to conjure. Fortunately I have two daughters who live in London (aged 27 and 33) who became my regular advisers and helped me see into Caroline’s mind. It can be a tough time, your late twenties and thirties, trying to make sense of what you want for your future and, at the same time, worrying about your parents getting older, and I wanted to reflect some of that. I really enjoy writing multi-generational stories because our own histories resonate so powerfully through our lives, even though we sometimes don’t appreciate it until we are a little older!

I would like to have spent more time with Caroline’s grandmother, Jean. But I already had two strong characters and storylines (Maria and Caroline) and to have expanded on Jean’s would have made the story confusing. Also, because Jean’s life story reveals the secret at the heart of the novel, this could only be told ‘posthumously’ at the end of the novel.

**Q. You probably have many, but is there are scene you particularly enjoyed writing?**

A. Definitely the scenes in which Maria is seduced by the Prince of Wales. I read several biographies of the prince and, by all accounts, women were mesmerised by his charm and his astonishingly blue eyes. We may not approve of what he did in later life (sympathizing with the Nazis, for example) but at the age I was writing about him, he was young and innocent, hating being a royal, and he had not yet gained his later reputation as a serial womaniser.

I also loved writing all the sections about the quilt. I needed an expert to help me and was fortunate to be introduced to the internationally-acknowledged patchwork quilter, teacher and author: Lynne Edwards, who in 2008 was awarded an MBE for her services to arts and crafts. With typical enthusiasm, Lynne completely embraced the project. We met several times and, over bottles of wine and lots of laughter, ‘devised’ the quilt that Maria made, taking into account the influences and sources of inspiration that she would have had at different times of her life, and the sort of fabrics she might have had at her disposal.

By the time we had finished I had, in my mind’s eye, a very clear view of what the quilt would look like. We very much hope that someone, someday, will be inspired by the

pattern Lynne has very generously devised (available for free at [www.liztrenow.org](http://www.liztrenow.org)) and create 'Maria's quilt'. If you do, please let us know!

**Q. What scene posed the greatest challenge for you as an author?**

A. The relationship between Caroline and Ben was problematic at first – I didn't want it to have a straightforward trajectory, but at the same time there had to be a spark of something from the start. Perhaps the most difficult scene to write was their first meeting in a café, and then later when they went for a meal in a pub. I used the dismal pub and its terrible food as a metaphor for Caroline's discomfort.

**Q. If you could sit down and talk with one of your characters, maybe meet and discuss things over drinks, who would you choose and why?**

A. Definitely Maria. There are so many more questions I want to ask her!

**Q. Do you see yourself in any of your characters and is there one of them you wish you were more like?**

A. Ooh that's really difficult. I don't think I really see myself in any of the characters, although of course there must be aspects of me in all of them. I sympathise with them and feel an affection for them, but would not want to be more like any of them!

**Q. The Forgotten Seamstress is your second novel. How did your experience writing it differ from that of The Last Telegram?**

A. It was a completely different experience, from start to finish. My first novel, The Last Telegram, was based on real-life characters, events and places from my family history and childhood, and by the time I'd finished writing it I felt that all that a lifetime of memories and experience had been 'used up'. My husband wisely counseled me to write 'something completely different' and not to try to recreate the atmosphere of the first one, which is what I set out to do. As I wrote, The Last Telegram was published and received almost unqualified five star reviews. Each time someone told me how much they loved it I would start to panic again, wondering whether The Forgotten Seamstress would ever match up.

As I struggled, I happened to watch a television documentary in which the crime writer Ian Rankin talked about the process of writing Standing in Another Man's Grave (now out in paperback). He talked about how, with each novel, he experiences what he describes as 'the fear', a point at which he thinks he's writing complete rubbish that will never get published, and even if it did, that reviewers would slate and readers hate. He talked about having to work your way through it and hold faith that it will come right in time. It was so reassuring to hear that even Britain's number one bestselling crime novelist should suffer such crises of confidence that I came back my manuscript with renewed determination. After a major restructuring and quite a lot of rewriting I found my



rhythm again, and now believe it is just as good as the first (although very different). I hope readers think so too.

**Q. What do you hope readers come away with after reading your work?**

A. A greater curiosity about human nature, and how our own family histories make us what we are today. I would also urge all readers, if possible, to talk to their parents, grandparents and other older relatives about their own lives and record what you hear, before it is too late. There is so much to learn from them.

**Q. Finally, what is next for you? Any new projects waiting in the wings?**

A. I have already written the first draft of my next book, *The Poppy Factory*. It will be published in August 2014, marking the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War. As the title suggests, the story revolves around the work of the real-life Poppy Factory which still employs disabled veterans making Remembrance Day poppies in Richmond, Surrey. Besides a poignant First World War strand it also has a powerful contemporary storyline based on interviews with two extraordinary young women who served as army medics on the front line in Afghanistan.

Retrieved from: <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot.com/2013/12/interview-with-liz-trenow-author-of.html>

## Other Links and Resources

THE FORGOTTEN SEAMSTRESS – Maria’s Quilt, Royal Silks and a Mental Hospital:  
<https://www.liztrenow.com/the-forgotten-seamstress-my-real-life-inspiration>

Maria’s Quilt Pattern:  
<https://www.liztrenow.com/marias-quilt-pattern>

## Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: