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In the fourth novel of the beloved Elm Creek Quilts series, Sylvia Compson searches for evidence of her ancestors' courageous involvement in the Underground Railroad.

The Runaway Quilt Details

Date : Published March 25th 2003 by Plume (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780452283985

Author : Jennifer Chiaverini

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Crafts, Quilting, Womens Fiction, Chick Lit

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From Reader Review The Runaway Quilt for online ebook

Virginia says

I have only just started this book, but it is grating on me already. The thought of using quilts as part of the trek to freedom for slaves in the 18th century is compelling, the backstory of the characters is interesting, but the present is dull. I am having trouble liking the main character, Silvia, who is self absorbed and prone to self pity. What has bugged me the most, however, is the fact that the attendees at her quilting camp must share of themselves as if this is group therapy rather than camp. Seriously?

Update: I have to say that while this book started slowly, it did improve as it went along. The historical aspect is much more interesting and compelling than the contemporary one. The idea that the Underground Railroad before and during the Civil War used quilts as signals to slaves who were seeking freedom has never been proven, but it makes for an excellent concept for a novel. Jennifer Chiaverini is hardly a great novelist, but the story was light and easy to read.

I might even check out some of the other novels in this series.

Rayni says

This is a book I could not get into. I returned it to the library & relegated it to my "May Never Read" shelf. But as with the first book of the series, The Quilter's Apprentice, I could not let it rest. I kept thinking about it & wanting to know more. Finally, I picked it up at the library. I kept it 3 weeks, again loath to pick it up & finish it.

I gave it 3 stars, because once I did get through it, I did like it. I can't say it was just "ok" because I kept thinking about it. I can't say I really liked it because I would not have returned it to the library unread.

MaryG2E says

4.5 ★s

The ageing Sylvia Bergstrom Compson is prompted by a stranger's request to look into items that have been stored in the attics at historic Elm Creek Manor for decades. She finds three very old quilts, stitched by unnamed ancestors, and a book of memoirs, written by her great grandfather's sister Gerda. It sets out the story of how the Bergstroms arrived at Elm Creek Farm and established themselves. It also reveals, gradually, their participation in the Underground Railway, i.e. an underground network that helped to smuggle runaway black slaves from Southern states through to freedom in Canada. Hans and Gerda were committed Abolitionists, but Hans's wife Anneke had less conviction. They harboured many fleeing blacks, including the brave but needy Joanna, escapee from a brutal Virginia plantation owner. In time their activities aroused the suspicions of local pro-Slavery advocates. It resulted in their arrests for breaking the laws relating to runaway slaves, and caused great disruption in the family's harmony.

The story shows various aspects of pioneering life in the backwoods of rural USA in the 1850s, in particular the social organisations that were set up to counter social isolation. Women's quilting circles were very

popular, including the one that Gerda and Anneke attended in the town of Creek's Crossing, later known as Waterford.

The mysteries which Sylvia and her colleagues attempt to solve are (a) whether the old quilts did indeed carry coded messages for the runaways to follow in their journeys to freedom, and (b) who made the fragile, old quilts found in the attic, as this discovery might lead Sylvia to a new understanding of the Bergstrom family tree.

There is an exquisite dilemma at the core of this book. How important is it to uphold a principle, however virtuous, if it endangers your family, including vulnerable babies? In the novel Gerda is portrayed as the highly principled, uncompromising member of the family, deeply committed to doing good, even at her own personal expense. Her sister-in-law, Anneke, is softer, more tractable, less judgemental. She has recently given birth, she's living in a fairly remote part of rural Pennsylvania during a period of social upheaval, with the burning issue of the abolition of slavery smouldering away and impacting on everyone's lives. As the narrator of the memoir, Gerda judges Anneke unkindly but I'm inclined to sympathise with the latter. I suspect the vast majority of mothers, both now and in the 1850s, might feel similarly, in their maternal need to protect their children.

The other interesting question that remains unanswered at the end of the book is whether every child has the right to know his/her own heritage. Certainly in today's society this issue is a given, but that may not have been the case in 1859. How the Bergstroms handle this delicate topic is interesting...

This book is a lively account of an interesting period of history, beautifully written in Jennifer Chiaverini's characteristic elegant prose. I greatly enjoyed the story, in particular the illumination of what might be called secret women's business in the coded messages issued to assist fugitive slaves. Of all the Elm Creek Quilt novels I've read so far, this one stands out for the moral questions it poses, which occupied my mind for many days after finishing the book. *The Runaway Quilt* would be a great Book Club title. The book is also very appealing to anyone with a genuine interest in patchwork quilting and similar handcrafts.

It is possible to read the Elm Creek Quilt novels as stand-alone books. However, it is definitely helpful to read them in order, at least the first two, *Round Robin* and *The Quilter's Apprentice*. Previously, I'd read the books at random, and am enjoying going back to the start and reading them in sequence. I love this series.

Mollie Matusick says

I particularly like historical fiction, and I really enjoyed this. It features very strong but still vulnerable enough to be relateable female characters, which is a major draw for me. The main character, Sylvia Bergstrom, finds the journal of one of her civil war ancestors, Gerda Bergstrom, and what she reads in it makes her question what she always believed about her family. A good portion of the book is set during the Civil War as if you're seeing the events Gerda wrote about in her journal through her eyes. The events Gerda describes are depicted in a later Elm Creek Quilts novel, *The Union Quilters*, which I read before this and which I absolutely loved. When I saw that this was based around Gerda's journals being found, I had really hoped a question I had from TUQ would be answered, and while I was disappointed it wasn't, I really enjoyed the book. I've only read the two from the Elm Creek Quilts, but I definitely want to read more. I read another series that I loved (The Williamsburg novels by Elswyth Thane) which was the continuing story of one family, generation to generation from just prior to the American Revolution to just prior to WWII. I loved being able to see the same characters at different points of their lives going from being the young

generation to the old generation, and the Elm Creek Quilts novels seem to be somewhat similar to that. Although, like I said, I've only read the two so far, so it may not be the same thing. While the books are linked through various characters, both TUQ and TRQ could definitely stand alone; you certainly don't *have* to read the whole series if the other books don't interest you.

Kim says

I truly enjoyed this book. I liked the way it intertwined both the present and the past, and as usual the quilts played an important part in the story and the mystery. The story gave the reader a more in depth understanding of the Bergstrom family, the founding of their thoroughbred business and the building of Elm Creek Manor. The genealogy of Sylvia's family has been an important part of this series of books, even more so in this book. The story also showed the role of quilts in the underground railroad, and how deeply people on both sides of the Abolitionist movement took their beliefs. Terrific book!

Kim says

I love the way Ms. Chiaverini blends the story-within-a-story. I'm a huge history buff, and the Civil War era is one that I don't often study. But I enjoyed this book. The characters are still richly drawn, and I like the way there's just enough material set in the present to continue that story as well. I know that Ms. Chiaverini has written several historical novels to date, and I'm sure I will enjoy reading them, interspersed with finishing the Elm Creek set.

Margaret Schwind says

Fourth in the series, this book delves more deeply into the backstory of the Bergstrom family and the establishment of Elm Creek Manor in the years before the Civil War. A key element in the story is the apocryphal belief that quilt patterns were used to guide runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad, and while that has never been conclusively proven, it does move the story along.

Ariana says

I love historical novels, and I really enjoyed this one. I am planning to read the other books in the series. Sylvia, the owner of a home that predates the Civil War, discovers an old family journal in her attic. As she reads her ancestor's account, she learns that her family history is not quite what she thought it was. The journal's author explains that she feels the need to record her family's history, despite the possibility of the truth hurting her family. The protagonist learns of her family's involvement in the underground railroad. I really enjoyed reading about Sylvia's ancestors and their struggle to help a runaway slave. This book has some great twists, and I loved learning more about this time in our country's history.

The love life of the protagonist is pretty uninteresting, and I kept wishing the author would stop telling me about that and spend more time on the story of the ancestors in the journal.

There is a scene that explains that a slave was raped by her "owner." It does not go into detail, but lets you know that it did happen, that the slave fought back, and it is very important to the story.

Ashley Lucas says

I'm embarrassed to say I've now read all of the Elm Creek Quilts novels--embarrassed because they're not great literature and because the darn things are so repetitive. The same stories get retold over and over again in a lot of the books, especially the holiday ones, but I keep reading them because I enjoy the aspects of the books that deal with quilting and because when the stories are new, they can be quite moving and at times comforting. I have to say that The Runaway Quilt was my favorite of the series because it feels like a whole novel, not something pieced together from the prior books. It deals with the life of a slave who uses a quilt to help find her way through the Underground Railroad. If you like quilting and want to try out this series of books, this one is a good place to start.

Gina says

This is by far the best of the series! Each story in the Quilt series is better than the one before. This is a completely satisfying story: part mystery, part history lesson, and part genealogy study.

After a speaking engagement, Sylvia is approached by one of the attendees. Margaret Alden has an old family quilt that has always been called The Elm Creek quilt, and she wants to share her information with Sylvia. This sparks Sylvia's curiosity, and she sets out to find the old quilts her Aunt Lucinda used to tell her about, quilts that were used as signals on the Underground Railroad.

What Sylvia finds is so much more. She finds a journal written by Gerda, Hans' sister, the founders of the Bergstrom legacy. In the memoir, Sylvia finds more questions than answers. In the journal, Gerda reveals family secrets, and she introduces Sylvia to someone she never knew existed: a pregnant runaway named Joanna, who the Bergstroms hide from slave catchers and who is almost their undoing.

Sylvia is confronted with the uncertainty of her own family history, and is left with a question that is never answered by Gerda's journal. With the help of her fellow Elm Creek Quilters, as well as descendants of Gerda's closest friends, Sylvia is able to face these uncertainties and reaffirm her moral center.

Once again another story of slave history. My favorite time in history to read about.

Cat Tutt says

This book was a fabulous continuation of the Elm Creek Quilts series. The historical information was so interesting and well woven in that I was equally invested in both the current day story and the historical story being told through the memoir.

I can't recommend this series highly enough for anyone that has any love of quilting!

*5 Stars

Lori says

By FAR the best in the series so far. I became so engrossed in Gerda's story, I forgot I was reading a story within a story. I absolutely loved this book.

Derla says

Audio book -- CD

Looks like it is going to be an interesting book.

This was very interesting to listen to. And Christina Moore had just the right voice and accent to be the narrator. It had quite a surprise ending.

Maria says

I listened to this book on CD.

I've become hooked on the Elm Creek Quilts series (and apparently there are a LOT of them!), but I think they just keep getting better. There are the original "Elm Creek quilters" characters from the first book, in which Sarah meets Sylvia Compson and they end up starting a quilt camp business, where quilters from all walks of life come to Elm Creek and participate in classes and activities centered around quilting. In each book, the focus is on some of the "campers" and their lives and problems, while at the same time the original characters' lives are followed in a continuing story. For this reason, it's probably best to read them in order (#5 wasn't available at my library, so I took what they had, which is #15, and I'm wishing I hadn't because I'm lost)

Anyway, this volume focuses on the legend in Sylvia's family that there was a quilt that was used as a signal in the underground railroad, and the book centers around the lives of Sylvia's ancestors and what *really* happened. It fills in a few gaps and moves the characters forward in time as Sylvia comes to terms with her relationship with an old beau. And some new relationships are formed with one of the characters meeting a prospective love interest that will carry on to the next book.

It's kind of like a soap opera, except without all the bad stuff. I really like this series.

Betty Ast says

I loved this book!

Rebecca says

Sylvia Bergstrom is the last of her family. An avid quilter, she has set up her family home, Elm Creek Manor in Pennsylvania, as a mecca for quilters, with her staff hosting a series of summer quilting camps. Sylvia has always taken pride in the family stories of their farm being a station on the Underground Railroad, and after a quilt from the deep south turns up with the name "The Elm Creek Quilt," she is motivated to search through her overstuffed attic for the Civil War era quilts her aunt told her of. She finds not only the quilts, but a memoir written by her great-great aunt, Gerda Bergstrom, a German immigrant. Gerda tells the harrowing story of Elm Creek's role in the Abolitionist movement, and a family scandal so great the town changed its name to be rid of the stain.

I enjoyed this story, even though I have no interest in quilting. I liked the double-layered effect, with Gerda's and Sylvia's stories alternating; Sylvia's act as respite between the acts of Gerda's tale, which is full of disappointment, betrayal, fear, and more. Gerda writes very much in the style of the era, full of rhetorical had-I-but-known statements that amp up the suspense and apprehension. I'd recommend this to anyone interested in the Underground Railroad and stories of the time. The only caveat is that it does perpetuate the feeling that anyone who had slaveholders among their ancestors is necessarily tainted by association; visiting the sins of the fathers on the children. I don't believe in that.

Mary Lou says

Ah, the oft- and poorly-told story of the fleeing slaves, guided on their path by the coded messages in the quilts hanging on a line outside a station on the Underground Railroad. This is not an urban legend (it would have to be a rural legend, wouldn't it?) but we so want it to be true. It has a ring of truth to it, yes?

Chiaverini does a better than average job with this concept, although the amount of time Sylvia took to read her great-aunt's antebellum journals boggled the mind. JUST SIT DOWN AND READ IT!!! Dragged that out way too long. Good exploration of the way that we learn more about our ancestors and they become more real people when we see them from multiple perspectives. This book is one of the more ambitious in this series and I enjoyed it. It was less trite than I expected, given the topic.

Lorrie says

I loved this book! Sylvia found her great aunt Gerda's private memoir in an old trunk in the attic. There were also a couple of quilts in the trunk. The memoir divulged so many details about the Underground Railroad. It also became apparent that Sylvia's grandfather, David, was either Anneke and Han's blood son, or he was the adopted son of Joanna and her master, Josiah Chester. The severe right wing faction found Joanna in hiding at Anneke and Hans' Bergstrom's house and tied her to a horse and pulled her away, to return her to her former owner or sell her to another man. Joanna's baby, was left at the Bergstrom farm, and they raised the baby as their own, never telling which was their baby and which was the adopted baby. They, instead, told people that the children were twins. Sylvia was given the Runaway Quilt that Joanna had stitched herself and had taken with as she was tied to the horse. Gerda, who had always been in love with and was also loved by Jonathan, the doctor, had resolved to find Joanna but never could. Many letters went unanswered. It is

assumed that Joanna was probably dead, otherwise she would have come back for her son. To think that the slaves were hidden in a 2'x5' space in the wall! The name of the town was changed from Creek's Crossing to Waterford because of the raiding of the houses in search of the runaway slaves. There were 8 people imprisoned after this raid, Gerda and Hans among them. The town received so much publicity after the event, trains refused to even stop there. The North did not take kindly to such slave hatred.

Melissa says

The 4th book in this wonderful series, the Runaway Quilt could be read as a stand-alone or as part of the series. Due to this fact, I am not going to summarize the first three books as I don't think it would help any.

Sylvia is the owner of Elm Creek Manor, a large place with grounds that plays host to a Quilter's retreat during the summer. Running the business are her good friends from the Elm Creek Quilter's circle. Since they run the business, she often spends her retirement traveling with her sweetheart Andrew around the country. It is on one of these travels that she is introduced to a quilt that connects to Elm Creek Manor. The only troubling part about this, is the fact that it came from a family who had former slave owners in their past.

From her family's stories Sylvia knows that Elm Creek once served as a station on the underground railroad. Because of this, she is alarmed to think that maybe one of her family had branched off and owned slaves of their own, hence the quilt being made. She goes through the attic and finds three antique quilts and a memoir from a sister-in-law of Anneke, the original mistress of Elm Creek Manor.

The memoir is told by Gerda and explains the travails and past of Elm Creek Manor. Most specifically it revolves around one escaped slave and the details of her flight. It also shows Anneke's and Gerda's relationship and some of the history of the family. The book takes us part in the memoir and part Sylvia's reaction to it. The more she reads the more she is disappointed in her family and she questions the people she once thought they were.

Chiaverini has made this novel very engaging. While its not documented history it does offer an explanation on how signals for the underground railroad were used. Like some of her other quilt books, there are no instructions in this one, but if one cared to look they could probably find the patterns mentioned in this book. Instead it tells the stories of a few specific quilts.

The language in this particular book can get rough. While the cusswords are not spelled out, it is still easy to infer which word is probably meant. Aside from that, the language in the book is descriptive and as easy to read as ever. Chiaverini has a wonderful way of describing quilts so that you can see them in your mind.

A lovely novel. I can't wait to continue on with the series.

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329 pages

Kellie says

fourth in a series – intertwined with historical fiction regarding slavery and the possible use of quilts as signs/guides for the underground railroad – more of Sylvia's family history and their abolitionist activities which Sylvia learns about from a memoir – also, tales of love gained and lost, of love that should have been and may still be – intriguing and suspenseful – quick read – at least half a dozen more in the series
