
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading group guide

Silver Girl

A Novel

by

Elin Hilderbrand

A CONVERSATION WITH ELIN HILDERBRAND

Where did you get the inspiration for this book?

The initial inspiration came from an article I read in the *New York Times* Sunday Styles section about Ruth Madoff called “The Loneliest Woman in New York.” The article grabbed me—not because I was interested in Mrs. Madoff, but because I was interested in a woman in her situation. I decided I wanted to write a novel about a woman whose husband has committed massive financial fraud, a woman who has lost everything, including her good name, and has to fight her way back. The article mentioned that Mrs. Madoff still had one remaining longtime friend, a detail I found redeeming. So, because this is an Elin Hilderbrand novel, my character Meredith Delinn has one remaining longtime friend, Constance Flute, and it is Constance who agrees to “save” Meredith by whisking her away to Nantucket Island for the summer.

How difficult was it to write a novel based on something that came from the news? This is a departure for you.

I used the Madoff scandal as a seed for this book, and some of the details are in fact true to life, but my characters are completely creations of my imagination. Meredith was a Catholic schoolgirl who grew up on the Main Line in Philadelphia—not so far from

where I grew up—and she meets Freddy while at Princeton. I found that my fictional situation—I won't be giving anything away by saying that Meredith is innocent—was more fascinating to me than any real-life situation.

What are some underlying themes of the book?

The main theme of this book is forgiveness. I have explored this theme in my two previous novels, *The Castaways* and *The Island*, and it continues to intrigue me. In this novel, forgiveness is taken to a whole new level. Meredith has to attempt to forgive her husband for the unforgivable. Meredith and Connie have issues between them that need to be resolved. And Connie has a daughter who has stopped speaking to her, and Connie wants her forgiveness. There is forgiveness popping up all over this book! The other theme is resilience, or survival. Connie has lost her husband recently and is having a hard time dealing with it. And Meredith, well, Meredith needs to dig deep to figure out how to move forward.

Nantucket Island as a setting always plays a prominent role in your novels. Is that true here?

Absolutely. Connie has owned a home on Nantucket for fifteen years, and it is *that* special place for her. She brings Meredith to Nantucket, hoping she'll find it a refuge and a haven. Over the course of their summer together, they take boat rides and drives up the beach, they eat dinner on the back deck overlooking the ocean, they ride bicycles and walk the cobblestone streets of downtown, and Meredith becomes attached to the island. I happen to use Nantucket because that's where I live, but it represents any kind of special place where people go to find solace.

Your title, Silver Girl, comes from a Simon and Garfunkel song. What inspired you to use this title?

Thank you for asking that question! The title, which is drawn from the song “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” is very special to me. This is the song that Meredith’s father sings to her, and it is a song that my father sang to me when I was growing up. Meredith loses her father as a teenager, as did I, and the song is what’s left to sustain her and remind her of his love. At the time that I wrote the book, my father had been dead twenty-five years, but as not a day goes by that I don’t think of him, I thought that writing *Silver Girl* would be a fitting tribute.

Friendship between women is another theme of many of your books. What is it about this relationship that you find so interesting?

I think friendship between women is one of the most complicated relationships there is. Women are nuanced creatures with complex emotional lives—at least my characters are!—and I find their relationships with one another to be an endless source of material. The relationship between Meredith and Connie is particularly juicy. They have known each other “since before lasting thought or memory,” and hence every interaction contains decades of history. I have to say, of all of my characters in all of my books, the friendship between Meredith and Connie is perhaps my favorite. It’s real and it’s painful at times, but those two are bonded. Their love for and devotion to each other, considering the things they’ve survived, are awe-inspiring. I rarely find myself envious of my characters—but I am envious of Meredith and Connie’s friendship.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Connie agreed to bring Meredith to Nantucket for the summer? What are Connie's hesitations and fears? Do you agree with her decision, given their falling-out and the rift in their friendship?
2. Both Meredith and Connie arrive on Nantucket with a lot of emotional baggage. In what tangible ways do they both begin to face their problems, and how do they continue to hide from them? What kind of progress do they both make, and how do they help each other?
3. Throughout the novel, Meredith struggles with her conflicting emotions about Freddy and what he did. What do you think of Meredith's reactions and feelings toward Freddy and his mistakes? Do you agree with Connie that Meredith doesn't seem angry enough at him? Why does she struggle to let him go, despite the news about Samantha Deuce?
4. What role does Meredith's father, Chick Martin, play in the book? Discuss Meredith's relationship with him and its importance throughout the novel. How are her relationships with Toby and Freddy influenced by her relationship with her father?
5. Discuss the role of forgiveness in the book: Which characters are struggling to forgive others or be forgiven themselves?

Who do you think has the most to forgive, and for what? Was there a time in your own life when you had to ask for forgiveness or struggled to forgive someone else?

6. What role does the island of Nantucket play in the novel? How does it provide refuge for the characters, and why is that important to Meredith and Connie in particular? Discuss the ways in which that refuge is interrupted or violated throughout the book.
7. Throughout the novel there are many attempts to rekindle relationships, from the parental bond between Connie and daughter Ashlyn to the romantic history between Meredith and old flame Toby. Which relationships are healed and strengthened by the end of the novel, and in what ways? What new relationships are forged?
8. Why do you think Freddy changed his mind about talking to Meredith from prison? What was Meredith's reaction to this news? Would you have made the same decision she did about whether to communicate with him at that time?
9. For Meredith, losing almost everything helped give her a perspective on what she truly values and needs in her life. By the end of the novel, what do you think Meredith has discovered about what's important? Has she been able to regain what matters most to her?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELIN HILDERBRAND lives on Nantucket with her husband and their three children. She grew up in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, and is an enthusiastic Philadelphia Eagles fan. She has traveled extensively through six continents but loves no place better than Nantucket, where she enjoys jogging, cooking, and watching her sons play Little League Baseball. Hilderbrand is a graduate of Johns Hopkins University and the graduate fiction workshop at the University of Iowa.

...AND HER NEXT NOVEL

In June 2012, Reagan Arthur Books will release *Summerland*. The following is from the novel's opening pages.

NANTUCKET

Nantucket. The name of the island brought to mind many images: rolling surf, cobblestone streets, the brick mansions of whaling captains, a battered Jeep Wrangler, top down, with a golden retriever sitting shotgun and a surfboard strapped to the roll bars. It brought to mind cocktail parties on undulating green lawns, distinguished men wearing faded red slacks with needle-point belts and dock shoes without socks, sunburned children holding dripping Popsicles. It brought to mind wealth, sunshine, privilege, a playground for those with a certain prep-school, old-school, I-used-to-row-with-him-on-the-Charles-type pedigree.

So few outsiders (and by outsiders, we meant everyone from the casual daytripper from Wellesley to Monica “Muffy” Duncombe-Cabot, who had been summering on the island since she was in utero in 1948) understood that Nantucket was a real place, populated by real people. Like anywhere else, it was home to doctors and lawyers and insurance agents and small business owners and taxi drivers and a police chief and plumbers and dishwashers and carpenters and real estate agents and artists and salesmen. We had mechanics and therapists and schoolteachers and bartenders. That was the real Nantucket: the ministers and the garbage collectors and the housewives and the crew who filled in the potholes

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on Surfside Road, and the fishermen and the landscapers and the X-ray technicians.

Nantucket High School had a senior class of seventy-seven students graduating on June 15. This turned out to be one of the first balmy days of the year—warm enough to sit on the football field and wish that you, like Pumpkin Alexander’s nana, had worn a wide-brimmed straw hat.

Up on the podium stood Penelope Alistair. Although she was only a junior, Penny had been asked to sing the national anthem. Hers was the voice of Nantucket, her tones pure and ethereal, yet conveyed with such tensile strength that she didn’t need any accompaniment. We mouthed the words along with her, but no one dared sing out loud, because no one wanted to hear any voice but Penny’s voice. Her voice filled us up.

When Penny finished singing, there was a moment of thrumming silence, and then we all clapped and cheered. The seniors, sitting in neat rows on a makeshift stage behind the podium, whooped and fidgeted with their tasseled caps.

Penny sat down in the audience between her twin brother and her mother. Two chairs away sat Penny’s boyfriend, Jake Randolph, who was in attendance with his father, Jordan Randolph, publisher of the *Nantucket Standard*.

Patrick Loom, valedictorian of the senior class, took the podium, and some of us felt tears unexpectedly prick our eyes. Who among us didn’t remember Patrick Loom as a child, in his Boy Scout uniform, collecting money in a can for the victims of Hurricane Katrina outside the Stop & Shop? These were our kids, Nantucket’s kids. This graduation, like other graduations, was part of our collective experience, our collective success.

Twenty-three of the seventy-seven graduating seniors had written their college essays about What It’s Like Growing Up on an Island Thirty Miles Out to Sea. These were kids who had been born at the cottage hospital; they had sand running through their veins, they cried tears of sea water. They were on intimate terms

with nor'easters and fog. They knew that north was marked by the Congregationalists and south by the Unitarians. They lived in gray-shingled houses with white trim. They could distinguish bay scallops (small) from sea scallops (big). They had learned to drive on streets with no traffic lights, no off-ramps or on-ramps, no exits. They were safe from axe murderers and abductors and rapists and car thieves—as well as the more insidious evils of fast food and Walmart and adult bookstores and pawnshops and shooting ranges.

Some of us worried about sending these kids out into the wider world. Most of these seniors would go to college—Boston University or Holy Cross or, in Patrick Loom's case, Georgetown—but some would take a year off and ski in Breckenridge or Banff, and still others would remain on Nantucket and work, living lives not so different from their parents. We worried that the celebration surrounding the graduation weekend would lead our seniors to drink too much, have unprotected sex, experiment with drugs, or fight with their parents because they were eighteen, goddamn it, and they could do what they wanted. We worried they would wake up on Monday morning and believe that the best years of their lives were behind them. The electric buzz they felt on the first Friday night football game under the lights when they ran out onto the field or led the crowd in cheering—those moments were gone forever. Next September the Nantucket Whalers would play again, the weather would be crisp again, the air would smell like grilled hot dogs again, but there would be a new guard, and the seniors who were, as we watched now, walking across the stage for their diplomas would be old news.

Alumnae.

High school was over.

There was a bittersweet element to June fifteenth, graduation day, and as we walked off the field at the end of the ceremony, some of

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us said we would never forget this one in particular because the weather had been the most beautiful, or because Patrick Loom's speech had been so pithy, mature beyond his years.

It was true that we would always remember graduation that year, but not for these reasons. We would remember graduation that year because it was that night, the night of June fifteenth, that Penelope Alistair was killed.

What? the world cries out in disbelief. The world wanted the Nantucket that resided in the imagination: the icy gin and tonic on the porch railing, the sails billowing with wind, ripe tomatoes nestled in the back of the farm truck. The world did not want a seventeen-year-old girl dead, but the world needed to know what we knew: Nantucket was a real place.

Where bad things, sometimes, happened.

JAKE RANDOLPH

Everything looked different from the air. There, below him, was Nantucket Island, the only home he'd known for seventeen years. There was Long Pond and the Miacomet Golf Course and the patchwork acres of Bartlett Farm. There was the bowed white stretch of the south shore. Already cars were lined up on the beach. Jake couldn't help remembering the Sundays, every summer Sunday of his entire life at Nobadeer Beach with his parents, and the Alistairs, and the Castles. They had body-surfed and played touch football, they had hidden in the dunes and made forts with boogie boards and beach towels in the back of Mr. Castle's pickup. Jake recalled the smell of the grill, the marinated steak, the ears of corn with kernels blackened and dripping with herbed butter. Zoe Alistair was a gourmet cook. There was always a bonfire and marshmallows and a glow-in-the-dark

Frisbee and fireworks that Mr. Castle bought when he was away on business.

Jake felt his father's hand on his shoulder, a cupping, a squeeze. This happened four or five times an hour, his father touching him for no reason other than to reassure himself that Jake was still there.

Jake picked out Hummock Pond Road, like a fortune-teller reading a palm. It was the life line (without life), the love line (without love). The road ran due south from town. From the air, it was just a path cut through the pine forest. The cars traveling it looked like toy cars.

Jake pressed his forehead against the vibrating window. The plane floated over Madaket and Eel Point. Nantucket was receding. *No!* Jake thought. He felt tears buzz in his eyes. He was losing Nantucket. Tuckernuck was below them now, then Muskegut, its shores crowded with seals. Then, open ocean. If only there was a way he could jump out, land safely, swim back. So many terrible, tragic things had happened in the past four weeks, and one of those things was that which his parents—by which he meant his father—deemed to be the solution. They were running away from home.

JORDAN

The phone had rung in the middle of the night. Nobody, and especially not a parent of a teenager with his own car, wanted to hear the phone ringing in the middle of the night. But Jordan was the publisher of the island's newspaper, *The Nantucket Standard*, and so the phone rang in the middle of the night at the Randolph household more than it did at other households. People called with news, or what they thought was news. Ava never answered

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the phone anymore, even when it was her mother calling from Perth. That, like so much else, was beyond her.

Zoe had been known to call in the middle of the night, but that was always Jordan's cell phone, and he'd taken to shutting it off when he went to bed to avoid unnecessary drama. Anything Zoe wanted to say to him at two in the morning would sound better at eight o'clock, once he was safely in the car and driving to the paper.

It was a Saturday night, technically Sunday morning. It was eighteen minutes past one. Jordan had a pretty good handle on what was happening around the island at any hour of any day of any month. One o'clock in the morning on a Sunday in mid-June the crowd would be spilling from the Chicken Box onto Dave Street. There would be a string of taxi cabs, there would be a police cruiser. Downtown, there would be clumps of people standing on the sidewalk outside the Boarding House and the Pearl; there would be the inevitable woman attempting to cross the cobblestone street in four-inch stilettos. An older, more sedate clientele would stroll out of the Club Car once the piano player finished his last song. (Always "Sweet Caroline"—Jordan had gone to the Club Car with Zoe a couple of times. Cavalier, yes, but they had pretended like they'd bumped into one another, which was largely unnecessary, as it was all tourists and renters.)

The phone, the phone. Jordan was awake. His mind was instantly alert but it took a few seconds to get his body to move.

He swung his legs to the floor. Ava was sleeping in the guest room with her earplugs in and the white-noise machine going, and the door locked and the shades pulled. She was completely dependent on him in the event of a fire.

Fire? he thought.

And then he remembered: graduation.

He raced to the phone. The caller ID said *Town of Nantucket*. Which meant the police, or the hospital, or the school.

"Hello?" Jordan said. He tried to sound alive, awake, in control.

Elin Hilderbrand

“Dad?”

That was the only word Jake had gotten out. What followed was snuffling and sobbing, but whatever had happened Jordan was buffered by the knowledge that Jake was alive, he could talk, he remembered the number of the house.

The police came on the line. Jordan knew many of the officers, but not all of them, and especially not in the summer.

“Mr. Randolph?” the officer, his voice unfamiliar, said. “Sir?”