

## Reading Group Guide

1. When Estella is sitting in a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean, she reflects that clothing has “power beyond the fabric and the thread and the pattern.” That clothing can give you courage, or comfort, or transform you into a different person. Do you have a piece of clothing that transforms you, or that makes you feel different, or that you choose to wear for certain occasions? Discuss the special meaning behind some of the clothes described in the book.
  
2. The idea of bravery, and of courage, is at the heart of the novel. At the Musée de l'Armée in Paris, Fabienne wonders if people are still capable of being as selfless now as they were during the war, of acting for a greater good rather than acting only for themselves. What do you think? Has contemporary life diminished the concept of bravery, and are heroes now defined in a different way?
  
3. Estella’s mother makes a very difficult decision when she decides to leave one of her babies behind with the Thaw family. What other choice could she have made? Was another choice even possible at that time in history? How did you judge her for the decision she ultimately made?
  
4. Estella works as a copyist in Paris, copying designs at fashion shows and selling the illustrations to American department store buyers. Were you surprised to learn that fashion’s long history of copying stretches back so far? Was there anything else that you learned about the fashion industry in the book that surprised you, or was there anything you hadn’t previously known about the industry and its history?
  
5. In the author’s note at the back of the book, the author says that she wanted to look at the long and difficult legacy left for women when men are allowed to do terrible things, over and over, and without punishment. Have things changed in contemporary life? What do you think of the idea that, while sometimes historical fiction shows us how far we’ve come, sometimes it also shows us how far we still have to go?
  
6. Fabienne argues with her boss at the Powerhouse Museum that fashion should be seen as art rather than fad. Is fashion art? Is haute couture just a senseless waste of money or can it be compared to purchasing a painting, or a sculpture? Do you “consume” fashion – buying seasonal pieces and then not wearing them again once the trend has passed? Discuss your own attitude to fashion, and the attitudes of some of the characters in the book.

## Creating *The Paris Seamstress*

I have quite a selection of books on fashion history in my office, as it's a particular interest of mine. Once I had the idea for *The Paris Seamstress*, that it would be a book about the birth of the ready to wear fashion industry in the 1940s, I began to look through some of these books. I also ordered some new ones – of course! One day, as I was flicking through a book on 1940s fashion, I came across an illustration of a gold silk dress.

Probably, to anyone else, this gold silk dress would simply be another dress. To me, it was a scene. I could immediately see my main character, Estella, making this dress and wearing it out to a jazz club in Paris. I could see her sitting in the atelier in Paris, sketching the dress, designing it, conjuring it up from the excitement she felt at first seeing the bolt of gold silk.

Immediately, I sat down to write this scene: Estella first sees the bolt of gold silk, she dances around the atelier draped in it, she imagines a dress, she draws the dress, and she goes home that night to make the dress. As I was writing the scene, I felt such genuine enthusiasm for the story.

In that one scene, I got such a sense of Estella's character; I knew her almost instantly. I knew this would be the first scene of the book, that it would open the story, and that it would lure people into Estella's world. It's one of the most exciting parts of writing when that happens, and now it's become a really important part of my writing process: to find the opening scene that encapsulates the character, that allows me to be in her mind, that makes me feel her as a person rather than words on a page.

Of course, it's all very well to have an opening scene, but you also need another 100,000 words or so! Everything was going along just fine until I reached about 80,000 words. I had written myself into such a tangle that I had no idea how to unravel the knots. I put the book away and went to Europe to research, thinking I'd come back and the thinking time would solve the problem.

It didn't. The plot was as tangled up as ever.

I had mysteries with no answers, or no possible way to get the answers into the story without a whole lot of explaining and info-dumping and taking the reader out of the world of the story. I also didn't quite know all the answers myself!

Nevertheless, I sat down to redraft, thinking that as I neared the place where I had become stuck, the solution would present itself. It didn't. I began to panic.

Then, in August 2016, I watched the documentary *Crazy About Tiffany's*, about the iconic Manhattan jewelry store. At the time, I thought it was just an amusing diversion and had no idea that it would spark an entirely new direction for *The Paris Seamstress*. Up to that point, *The Paris Seamstress* was purely a historical novel, with all the action taking place in the past.

That night I woke up with scenes practically writing themselves in my head, and those scenes were set in contemporary times – 2015 in fact. One of the characters was the granddaughter of Estella, the main character in *The Paris Seamstress*. (No, Estella had not had a granddaughter at all until that moment). The other character was a man and his job was the Head of Design at Tiffany & Co, a character clearly brought to life by the documentary I'd watched on the plane.

It ended up being the most productive sleepless night that I've ever had. I got up and wrote everything down, thinking that I would look at it in the morning and either laugh aloud or still be excited by it. Fortunately, it was the latter.

Most importantly, I realized I now had a way to solve my plot tangle – by making *The Paris Seamstress* into a dual narrative, I could use the contemporary narrative to unravel some of the answers to the mysteries without it becoming an info dump for the reader, which is the way it had been heading.

One of my favorite parts of writing this book was travelling overseas for research. Who wouldn't want to go to Paris and New York and places in between all in the name of work?! Here are some of the most vital places I visited during my trip:

### **The Théâtre du Palais Royal**

I organized a private tour guide to take me through the Sentier, Paris's historic fashion district. I met my guide at the Palais Royal, which backs onto the Sentier. There, I made the most wonderful discovery before the tour had even officially started, and which inspired one of the opening scenes in the book.

As we walked through the Palais Royal, a man sweeping the pavement outside his cafe beckoned my guide over and began to chat with her. I understood they knew one another. He passed my guide a key.

“Would you like to see the Theatre du Palais Royal?” she asked me. The man had given her his key to the theater upstairs.

“Sure,” I said. If I'd known how spectacular the theatre was, I would have reacted with a little more excitement!

We went in the back entry and it wasn't until later that I saw the entirely unprepossessing main entrance. You would never know what lay inside. It's an intimate, bijoux space, with amazing flocked velvet wallpaper, lots of gilt, a stupendous chandelier. As we walked in, I knew straight away that it would have to appear in my book. In fact, an entire scene came to me as I stood there, staring.

It was one of the most marvelous moments of serendipity and it absolutely cemented my belief that you must go visit the cities you are writing about because these discoveries can't help but make a book more authentic, and more real. I also recommend that if you ever go to Paris, you go to the theatre; it's absolutely one of the city's hidden treasures.

### **Atelier Legeron**

Before my research trip, I had imagined that the titular seamstress in my book would be a traditional seamstress, sewing clothes by hand or machine. Atelier Legeron, however, is the only independent artificial flower maker left in France and as soon as I saw what artificial flower making was all about, I knew that was what Estella must do.

There are seven traditional métiers in haute-couture, including flower-making, featherwork, lace, embroidery etc. If you look at a Chanel or a Christian Dior dress you'll see that the dresses are often adorned with flowers (and Atelier Legeron flowers, at that!). I had never once thought about where or how those flowers were made but I was lucky enough to sit for a whole morning and watch the process in detail.

Atelier Legeron has been in Paris for centuries. It occupies a set of maze-like rooms, all of which serve a different purpose – dying the petals, stiffening the fabric, storing the flowers, making the flowers etc. It is an incredibly labor-intensive process, and many of the women have been working at the atelier for decades.

Sadly, it's becoming a lost art. For instance, the man who makes the heavy iron cutters that the seamstresses use to cut out the petal shapes is very old, and, once he dies, there is no one left who knows how to make the tools. I know haute-couture is worn by very few people, but watching the way the flowers were made and the traditions that are preserved in the atelier made me appreciate these clothes as artworks. It was an incredible experience.

### **The Marais**

The Marais area of Paris is wonderful. I went there especially because one of the settings in my book is a hotel-particulier, and there are many of these still surviving in the Marais. These are former nobles' homes, which present a set of wooden doors to the street. The doors – which in and of themselves enliven a novelist's imagination – open onto a courtyard, and then the townhouse is set behind the courtyard. They are magnificent and look as if they hold secrets worth excavating.

I visited several of these, but I also just walked the streets of the area, as it was the area where I intended for Estella to live. And it's in walking the streets that you make fabulous discoveries.

One of those discoveries was the Passage Saint Paul, a tiny street near the Places des Vosges, with an apartment vaulting over the passage. The street looks as though it's a dead end. But if you venture right to the end of the passage, you come upon a back entrance into the Église Saint Paul Saint Louis, which is a typically magnificent Parisian church.

As soon as I walked down the street and discovered the hidden gem of a church at the end, I knew it would have to be the street upon which Estella lived. The shadowy nature of the street, and the secret entrance to the church, also inspired a scene in the book, which is what the research is all about!

### **New York's Garment District**

I went to New York prepared to find a slightly less romantic version of the fashion industry than what I had found in Paris. But did this turn out to be true?

I once again organized a private tour guide, this time to take me through New York's historic garment district. Incongruously, the garment district is located right next to Times Square, which you might think is the last place to find the remnants of an historic fashion district. But on the streets leading away from the Square, there are massive skyscrapers that used to house clothing factories.

Most of those skyscrapers are now occupied by businesses with more contemporary concerns, usually to do with money. My tour guide pointed out the high windows of many of the skyscrapers and showed me photographs in which you could see steam rising out of those windows, right up high off the streets, steam from the irons that once pressed the clothes. This alone was a beautiful and romantic notion, that above the busyness of the streets, little clouds leftover from making clothes floated out of windows.

My guide also took me to the infamous 550 Seventh Avenue, which is where some of the action in *The Paris Seamstress* takes place, and which used to house many iconic New York fashion brands.

So yes, it was very different to threading my way through the maze-like rooms of the Parisian atelier, but there was still that same sense of history and that same sense of loss, especially as much of what is left of New York's fashion district are just monuments, plaques and stories.

### **The Met Museum**

Anyone who's been to the Met Museum knows what a fabulous collection of historical fashion they hold. I went along knowing that the exhibition then showing was called *Manus et Machina*, Latin for "From Hand to Machine." What I didn't know was that I was about to experience another wonderful moment of research serendipity.

The exhibition was all about honoring the traditional haute couture métiers. As I walked into the Met, I was once again presented with beautiful dresses adorned with stunning, handmade flowers. If I hadn't already convinced myself after visiting Atelier Legeron in Paris that Estella should practice flower-making, then wandering through an exhibition devoted to that craft, amongst others, surely convinced me.

The exhibition was wonderful for filling in some of the detail of the métiers, how long they have been practiced for and what some of the key traditions are. And, as an extra bonus, there were lots of beautiful clothes to look at!

### **Parsons School of Art and Design**

One thing that is very important to me when researching is to spend time in archives, looking at primary source material. I knew that the Fashion Institute of Technology had a collection of illustrations by Claire McCardell, one of the first ready-to-wear designers based in New York in the 1940s. I thought these would be an excellent research source for my book.

But when I got in contact with FIT, whilst they tried their absolute best to help me, unfortunately my visit coincided with their students' final exam preparations. Thus, the students had booked out all of the available places in the archive on the days I was to be in New York! But, archivists are always the most helpful people, and the archivist told me that Parsons School of Art and Design, which I'd never even heard of, had a better collection of Claire McCardell fashion illustrations than they did and that I should get in contact with them.

Immediately I contacted the Parsons's archivist. She was only too happy to accommodate me.

So, I spent one glorious day sitting in the archives, poring over Claire McCardell's fashion illustrations. What amazed me the most about her illustrations was that she was able to show an incredible amount of detail with only a pencil. Because she was designing ready-to-wear, she needed to draw and produce garments quickly. So her sketches show only what is absolutely necessary. But she annotated each sketch as well and I was able to see how important it was to her to identify precisely what fabric she wanted, what type of buttons she needed or the belt buckles she wanted to use. All of those details were marked up on each sketch.

### **Gramercy Park**

I'd always known that Gramercy Park was to be one of the key settings for the novel.

My tour guide gave me an amazing rundown of the history of the area. Gramercy Park is both a neighborhood within Manhattan and the name of a park in the midst of this neighborhood. It's one of Manhattan's few private parks, meaning that if you don't have a key, you can't get in. Luckily, I was able to get into the park and have a look around. It's beautiful, as are the townhouses surrounding the park.

We spent a lot of time walking the perimeter of the park, examining each of the townhouses, discussing the architectural details and the history of many of the buildings that surround the park. Without that tour, I don't believe I would have been able to bring Gramercy Park to life in an authentic way.

There were many, many other things that I researched in New York. Estella lives with her friend Janie in Manhattan's infamous Barbizon Hotel for Women, a building with more history than any library! Estella's friend Sam lives in London Terraces, an, at the time, relatively new set of apartments in Manhattan's Chelsea district. Of course, I visited the apartments and the Barbizon and took lots of photographs. Alex has a home out in the Hudson Valley, so I spent the day looking at many of the historic and beautiful mansions there, especially those near Sleepy Hollow.

It's always a pleasure and a privilege to be able to access archives and histories and photographs and other materials that other people might not have the time or the inclination to look at. Without fellow history lovers, people who collect the photographs and the sketches and the stories, my book would be much the poorer. It was a truly wonderful experience to visit both Paris and New York in order to research *The Paris Seamstress* and was a trip I will never forget.

For photos and more, please visit my website at [natashalester.com.au](http://natashalester.com.au) or follow me on Instagram @NatashaLesterAuthor.