

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LIZ TRENOW



the
HIDDEN THREAD
a novel

Reading Group Guide

1. *The Hidden Thread's* heroine, Anna Butterfield, is based on a real life English designer who inspired the author's work. If you had to choose a person to write about, who would it be? What kind of story would you tell?
2. From the prologue to the first chapter, we can see that there is a stark contrast between where Anna grew up and her new life in London. How do these two settings influence Anna and her decisions throughout the novel? Do you think where you were raised ultimately affects the decisions you make?
3. Anna is soothed when she gets to draw the natural world and escape from her hectic London life. Do you have a hobby or artistic venture that lets you escape from the world? How is that experience similar to Anna's?
4. What do you make of Anna's relatives, the Sadlers? Why do you think they are set on Anna and the dashing Charles Hinchliffe becoming engaged? Are they good guardians for her?
5. Why do you think Anna is drawn to Henri, the French weaver? What do they have in common? What do you think are the biggest challenges their relationship face?

6. What do you think of Miss Charlotte helping Anna and Henri create his master piece design? If you were in her position, do you think you would do the same? What is she risking?
7. In this world of London propriety, Anna must adhere to strict social rules to secure a prosperous marriage and maintain her reputation. Imagine living in this world. What would be the advantages? What challenges would you face? Do you think you would risk it all like Anna and pursue a different life?
8. Describe the political temperament of London at this time. What challenges does Henri face as a Frenchman? How does prejudice, both racial and gender, affect both Henri's and Anna's lives throughout this novel? Do you think any of these issues are still present today?
9. Describe Henri and Anna's relationship. At what times did they fail each other? How did they prevail?
10. There is a lot of technical terminology about the art of silk weaving throughout *The Hidden Thread*. How did this affect your read? What was something you found interesting that you had not known before?

A Conversation with the Author

What was the inspiration behind *The Hidden Thread* and its heroine, Anna Butterfield?

When I was researching the history of my family's silk business, which started in Spitalfields, East London, in the early 1700s (and is still weaving today in Sudbury, Suffolk), the first recorded address that I could discover was in Wilkes Street, then called Wood Street.

Just a few yards away, on the corner of Wilkes Street and Princelet Street, is the house where the eminent silk designer Anna Maria Garthwaite lived from 1728 until her death in 1763. It was here, at the very heart of the silk industry, that she produced over a thousand patterns for damasks and brocades, many of which are today in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. I was intrigued to imagine that my ancestors would have known, and probably worked with, the most celebrated textile designer of the eighteenth century, whose silks were sought after by the nobility in Britain and America. Yet almost nothing is known about her personal life, and this is what intrigued me.

How did she learn the highly technical and complex skills of designing for silk? And how did an unmarried, middle-class woman by then in her middle years manage to develop and conduct such a successful business in what was a largely male-dominated industry? It was these mysteries that sparked the idea for the novel.

In the novel, Anna goes from searching for a prosperous marriage to becoming a prominent silk designer. How radical was it for Anna to choose a career over marriage at this time in history?

Most working-class women in that era had little choice but to work, usually in low skilled work, such as housekeeping or trades like the seamstress Miss Charlotte or as a silk throwster like Clothilde. But Anna is part of the “middle classes” for whom it was considered improper and unseemly for ladies to work. The only paid occupations open for an educated unmarried woman would have been as a governess or teacher, which is what Anna considers. Married middle-class women did not work at all except perhaps for charitable endeavors. This was not only a source of much frustration, but also left them dependent on making a good marriage to avoid penury. You only have to read the novels of Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters to see this reflected in the literature of the time. So it wasn’t exactly a “choice” that Anna made—she just got lucky and discovered almost by mistake what she had yearned for: both love and a creative career.

Tell us about your personal connection to the silk trade.

My family has been weaving silk for nearly three hundred years—it is the oldest silk company operating in the UK today. I was born and brought up next door to the silk mill in Sudbury, which is one of only three in the country, and supplies top-end fashion houses and interior designers all over the world. They wove the Queen’s coronation robe and a number of royal wedding dresses, including that for Princess Diana.

Although I spent most of my working life as a journalist for BBC radio and television, I have always had a fascination for silk and its remarkable journey from the caterpillar of the silk

moth weaving its cocoon to becoming the most beautiful and highly valued fabric in the world.

You paint a very vivid portrait of London in the 1800s. What does your research and writing process look like when crafting a historical novel?

I spent nearly a year researching the history behind *The Hidden Thread*, visiting museums, art galleries, libraries, and Georgian houses, as well as reading very widely. A royal palace was staging a Georgians season with actors playing the roles of the residents. One of them very kindly showed me how she got dressed each day, which was invaluable information! Another talked to me about the wigs he wore for different occasions.

Researching the history of the Huguenots was especially interesting and at times sad. To escape religious persecution, they made perilous journeys and terrifying sea crossings in much the same way as migrants fleeing war and persecution must do today.

Although most of the research is done before I start, it continues all the way through writing the novel. For eighteen months, I read nothing but factual books about the eighteenth century or novels written or set in the period to get myself into the vocabulary and rhythms of speech. By the end, I was so fully immersed in the era, I felt reluctant to let it go.

Was there anything about silk weaving you learned that you hadn't known before?

Yes! I had to learn how an eighteenth-century hand-operated draw loom worked. There are only one or two working examples left in the country, but luckily, a friend of the family is an expert and was able to help me understand how these looms were set up and operated (including the job of the draw boy) to create the fabulous damasks and brocades of the time.

Which character was your favorite to write?

Although I loved Anna and could really feel myself in her head, I particularly enjoyed writing the character of Henri, because it required getting into the mind-set of a twenty-year-old French boy in the eighteenth century. The language was challenging, but I was lucky enough to have a French friend who helped me make sure that it was authentic—especially the colorful curses!

I also have a soft spot for Miss Charlotte because she is an independent woman making her way in the world despite enduring difficult times.

We know that Anna is based on a real person, but is Henri? Where did you get the inspiration for their star-crossed romance?

From Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, surely one of the greatest love stories of all time! I particularly wanted to tell the tale of the Huguenots and how they had to flee religious persecution, because it seemed so relevant for today. Making Henri a Huguenot journeyman weaver meant that he was definitely from the wrong social class for Anna, as well as being an immigrant who spoke a different language.

Once I had decided that, Henri seemed to evolve quite naturally. His friend Guy appeared almost by magic in the first scene and evolved into the bold, rebellious character who drives so much of the plot. He becomes a great foil, helping to highlight Henri's flirtatious but relatively careful, dutiful nature, and also leading him into dangerous liaisons with the Cutters.