

THE WEDDING
DRESS
SEWING CIRCLE



BOOK CLUB KIT

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Dear Friends,

It is truly wonderful to welcome you into the world of *The Wedding Dress Sewing Circle*. Thank you for choosing it for your book club; I hope you're enjoying it immensely.

While researching my last book, I came across a heartwarming story about a young vicar's wife who had the idea of lending her own wedding dress. Clothes ration rules meant that it was illegal to waste fabric on new wedding dresses; brides were supposed to wear their best dress of their uniform if they were in service. Soon, the vicar's wife became renowned, with brides-to-be coming from miles away to borrow the dress, while others were inspired to share their own wedding dresses—and gowns began coming out of attics and cellars, unpacked, mended, and refitted to make another woman's wedding a fairytale.

For me, it was a tale that depicted the very best of the wartime spirit. It was a way that women came together to provide something that meant not only romance and tradition but also demonstrated that Hitler was not stopping the civilized national customs that they held dear.

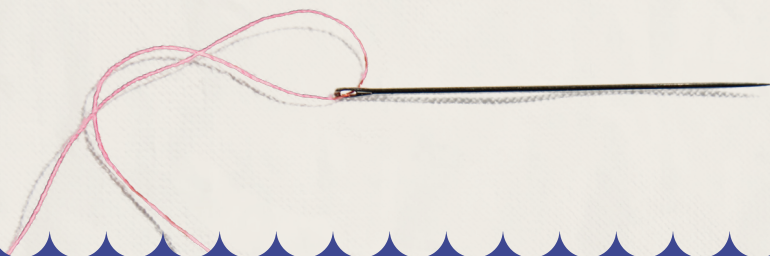
It was as I was researching my book about food rationing, *The Kitchen Front*, that I became aware of just how difficult it was to dress well in wartime Europe. British women were encouraged to keep looking good for the sake of their and other people's morale. "Beauty is duty" became a byline, and red lipstick became patriotic. Meanwhile in Germany, the emphasis was on practicality, which became a little dispiriting by the war's end. I became fascinated with the ways in which British women managed to dress well, remaking clothes out of old ones, finding new fabric from unlikely places—from funeral-parlor silk to flour bags. Lending clothes became commonplace and bridal gowns were top of every bride's hopes. After all, nothing marks the ritual, pageantry, and romance of a wedding like the traditional long white dress.

All of my works rely on the words of women who were living through this era, and I would like to say a very hearty thank you to every one of them. I for one would have found it frightening, hard work, and incredibly stressful to get through the war, and yet they were all so ready to step up. "This was our moment," one of them told me. "It was our time to show the world what we're made of, and we weren't holding back."

My own wonderful book club, along with my writing group, my choir, and my group of friends, are all incredibly dear to me, and it is this theme that I really wanted to bring to light in *The Wedding Dress Sewing Circle*. There's nothing quite like getting together with friends, sharing our problems, celebrating our joys, discovering more about ourselves and the world around us through talking, discussing, and laughing. I love the camaraderie, the companionship, the knowledge that when something bad strikes, there will be a special band of souls who will keep me afloat, as I will them. It is this that I wanted to give my characters: the power of friendship.

As you read and discuss *The Wedding Dress Sewing Circle*, I hope you take the time to enjoy your book club and that the fun and support of friendship rubs off on you all. Thank you again for choosing the novel—for becoming part of the group story—and take pleasure in your time together: our clubs, groups, and friends are what makes life inspiring, steady, and most of all, fun.

With warmest wishes,
Jennifer

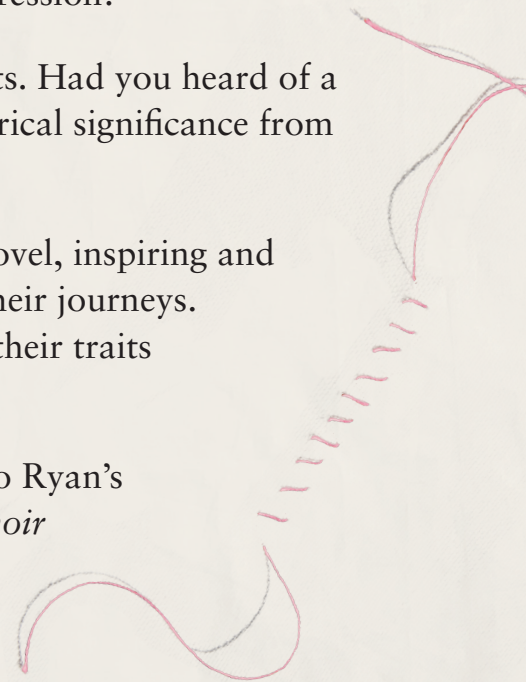




DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



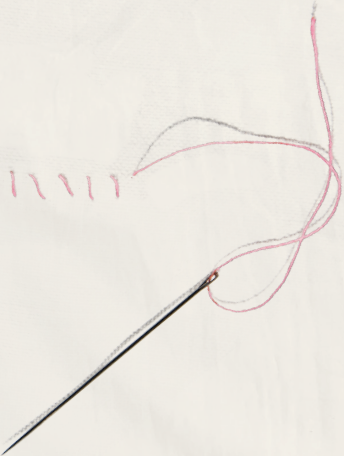
1. What role does the setting of wartime Britain play in the novel?
2. What is your opinion of Cressida Westcott? Do you think she was like other women of her time? How did her background influence her choices, including her work? How did her career shape her outlook on the events that were happening around her?
3. Cressida, Violet, and Grace are an unlikely trio when they start on their quest. How does their journey shape them as they come of age? How does each of them grow during their quest? What does each learn from the other?
4. What does each of our three main characters—Cressida, Grace, and Violet—truly want?
5. How do class and gender impact the way the characters interact with their surroundings and are perceived by others? What does the novel say about the ways in which our identities shape our experiences?
6. Love, family, and feminism are all major themes. What other overarching ideas did you notice? What did you take away from the book overall?
7. Evaluate the treatment and role of women in the novel. Discuss the various types of power (or lack of) that Cressida, Violet, and Grace experience. What provides, or denies, each of them access to forms of expression?
8. *The Wedding Dress Sewing Circle* is based on true events. Had you heard of a sewing circle before? What did you learn about its historical significance from the book?
9. The bonds of friendship play an important role in the novel, inspiring and stymying the three characters at different points along their journeys. How does each character view friendship? What about their traits and histories make them feel that way?
10. How does *The Wedding Dress Sewing Circle* compare to Ryan's other historical fiction, such as *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir* or *The Kitchen Front*?



HOW TO SURVIVE CLOTHES RATIONING IN WORLD WAR II BRITAIN

KNOW WHAT RATIONS YOU ARE ALLOWED

CLOTHES RATIONS, BRITAIN, 1942 • 40 COUPONS PER PERSON PER YEAR



- Women's skirt suit or long coat – 18 points
- Dress – 11 points for wool, 7 if not wool
 - Skirt – 7 points
 - Blouse or sweater – 5 points
- Women's underwear or apron – 3 points each
- Stockings, if available – 2 points per pair
- Shoes – 7 points
- Men's suit or coat – 20 points
 - Trousers – 8 points
 - Shirt – 5 points
- Men's underwear – 4 points each
- Men's socks – 2 points
- A yard of fabric – 2–3 points

New wedding dresses are not allowed. Brides are expected to wear their best dress or skirt suit for the occasion, unless they are in the military, in which case they are to wear their uniform as they receive only 18 coupons.

JOIN A SEWING GROUP

Sewing groups sprung forth in every town in the country, encouraged by the government who saw women's skills as key to getting through the war looking good. Commonly set up by the Women's Voluntary Service, they specialized in teaching Make Do and Mend, making clothes last longer or reconfiguring them into new garments, for example a man's jacket into a skirt.

MAKE FRIENDS WITH ANYONE GOOD WITH A NEEDLE

Cressida wasn't joking when she worried that Violet only liked her because of her design skills. With the onset of clothes rationing, women who wanted to dress well gravitated toward those who could provide them with the means, either by producing new dresses or remodeling old dresses to make them new.

GO TO SECOND-HAND CLOTHES SALES AND CLOTHING EXCHANGES

Women's groups organized plenty of jumble sales and clothes swaps, which became paramount for keeping children dressed in their right sizes. With the Make Do and Mend classes, women were able to pick up old clothes with the view to remodeling them after purchase.



BORROW CLOTHES FROM FRIENDS

Groups of young women often pooled their party dresses to give them a variety of clothes to wear on dates. These were commonly given nicknames, like the Yellow Devil or the Red Vixen.



TRY UTILITY CLOTHES

When a group of top couturiers stepped in to design the Utility range, they became all the rage. From their two-tone colors to their classical lines, they enabled everyone to wear high-end fashion design.



BORROW, BEG, OR STEAL CLOTHING COUPONS FROM YOUR RELATIVES

When a woman got married, her family would collectively save coupons for her trousseau, with siblings and grandparents contributing, and sometimes aunts and uncles too. Other tales tell of young women coercing younger siblings and grandparents to part with their coupons, while some clothing coupons simply went missing.



FIND FORGED CLOTHING COUPONS ON OXFORD STREET

Hawkers on big shopping streets sold forged clothing coupons of varying quality, but beware: department store staff are on the lookout, so be ready to slip them an extra shilling or make a run for it!



FIND NEW MATERIAL FROM PLACES YOU DON'T EXPECT

Fabric used for industry was not rationed in the same way as clothes, and people became inventive, dying funeral parlor silk, old flour bags, even using the cloth that architects use for their blueprints. The black fabric used for blackout blinds became popular for dresses and blouses, and black became, well, the new black.



WEAR PATRIOTIC RED LIPSTICK

“Beauty is duty” was a catchphrase of the war, encouraging women to keep looking good regardless of the clothes rations and shortages. This was epitomized by red lipstick, which previously would have been viewed as gauche or even tarty. Even when makeup became hard to get, improvisations were published in magazines: coal or boot polish for mascara and beetroot juice for lipstick.

