

a French emigre and Holocaust survivor who becomes Ann's co-worker and friend; and Ann's Canadian granddaughter, Heather, who receives -- after her grandmother's death in 2016 -- a box of exquisite, embroidered flowers, and sets out to discover their significance and her grandmother's secret past. # The story spans 70 years, as the embroiderers' fates diverge: Ann is courted by an aristocrat; Miriam befriends a charmingly frumpy magazine editor and begins to design tapestries that open a window on her past. Part of the pleasure of the novel is to see how lives unfurl over nearly a century -- and to learn the secrets that the characters never will. # An Oxford-trained historian, Robson has a fine eye for detail: We learn that in postwar London, " early trains cost sixpence less "; that soap (like food and clothes) was rationed; that fennel and oranges were rare; that olive oil was sold primarily by pharmacists to treat earache. When Ann seeks work at age 14, the jobs listed at " the labor exchange " include " trainee shirt machinist, assistant nursemaid, restaurant cashier " and, of course, apprentice embroiderer. # At its best, the novel is a gripping portrait of the aftermath of a war too often romanticized in American fiction and film; the privations of global conflict and its lingering weight -- in bombed-out streets, in coupons for necessities -- make vivid both the hardship and the unequal distribution of suffering. The comfortable remain comfortable even in uncomfortable times.