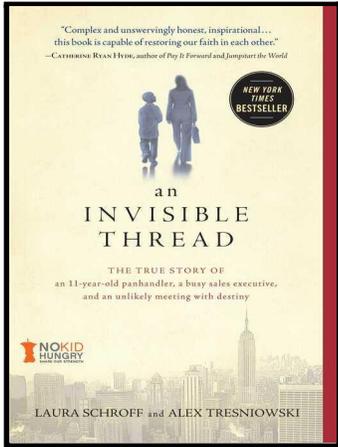




BOOK BUZZ

An Invisible Thread Reader's Guide



An Invisible Thread: The True Story of an 11-Year-Old Panhandler, a Busy Sales Executive, and an Unlikely Meeting with Destiny

By Laura Schroff and Alex Tresniowski

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[A Simon & Schuster Reading Group Guide](#)

*This reading group guide for **An Invisible Thread** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Laura Schroff**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

It could have ended with a passing glance. He could have been just another panhandler, and she could have been one of many New Yorkers who simply walks on by. Instead, Laura Schroff stopped and bought lunch for eleven-year-old Maurice. From that day, their unique bond evolved into a profound friendship that changed the course of their lives in ways neither could have imagined.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. *An Invisible Thread* introduces readers to some of the realities of poor families living in large metropolitan cities. How would you characterize Maurice's family life? What kind of differences do you think exist between urban and rural poverty?



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2. Why do you think Maurice throws Laura's business card away? How does trust influence the early stages of their friendship? What about later in their relationship?
3. Laura's grandfather would say "Il solo tempo lei dovrebbe baciare i sue bambini in quango dormono," or "The only time you should kiss your children is when they are asleep." What kind of role does love and affection play in Maurice's life? What about Laura's?
4. Why is Laura so adamant about obtaining permission from Maurice's mother so he can attend the Mets game?
5. In what ways is privilege evident in *An Invisible Thread*? What types of privilege can you identify? How would you compare and contrast this privilege in the 1980s with today?
6. Why do you think Laura stayed with Michael, even though he denied her what she wanted more than anything?
7. Laura's family life growing up had a significant impact on her and her siblings, especially in terms of what they wanted for their own families. Based on Laura's descriptions, how would you characterize the lives of the siblings' individual families?
8. Laura writes that, "Sometimes we are drawn to that which is exactly the same" alluding to the impact that familiarity can have on one's comfort, regardless of how bad the conditions may be. How does Laura's life stray from this idea? How does she embrace what is different?
9. How did you interpret Michael's initial rejection of Maurice? What role did this rejection play in Laura's decision to divorce him?
10. The title, *An Invisible Thread* suggests several meanings about the bonds that connect us with others. Describe how these themes are reflected in Maurice's and Laura's lives, as well as in their relationships with other people.
11. Laura later discovers that Maurice was actually twelve when they first met, not eleven, because he wasn't even sure himself how old he was. How does this detail signify the importance of identity in *An Invisible Thread*?
12. Laura was initially careful to maintain boundaries between her and Maurice, ensuring that she was a friend to him and nothing more. At what point do you think their relationship changed from a friendship to something more akin to a mother and a son?



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Enhance Your Book Club

1. Rituals are an important element of *An Invisible Thread*. Take a moment to discuss your favorite ritual with your book club as a child and explain why it was so important to you, even to this day.
2. Pack up your book club for a day and see a baseball game. Reflect on Maurice's feelings of wonderment at his first baseball game. What is your favorite part of a baseball game or of attending a sporting event?
3. Using a smartphone, scan the Microsoft Tag in the back of *An Invisible Thread*, and watch Maurice's toast at Laura's fiftieth birthday dinner. Discuss the highlights and your reaction among your book club.

A CONVERSATION WITH LAURA L. SCHROFF

What made you want to write down your experience with Maurice and share it with others?

In 1997, *Good Housekeeping* wrote a short article about my relationship with Maurice, and I received an overwhelming response from friends and colleagues in the ad community. I was continually told I should write a book and document our story. People loved the story and wanted to know more. But it was not until 2007, after I took an early retirement package from Time Inc. and moved to Florida, that I had enough time to begin contemplating the book. In the first few years that I was friends with Maurice it never dawned on me that our story would be of any interest to other people, but as I started working on the book with my co-author Alex Tresniowski I began to realize there was a powerful message in the experiences Maurice and I shared. And so I became determined to share our story with the world.

What were some of the challenges of writing *An Invisible Thread*? What did you enjoy most about this experience?

I knew from the very beginning I needed someone like Alex to help me write my book. I mean, I knew what I wanted to say, and I knew what message I wanted the book to have, but I needed someone to help me shape and structure the story. It's kind of amazing to me how much effort and research goes into creating a book. The challenge for me was remaining faithful to the experiences Maurice and I shared while also making the story as dramatic and



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compelling for readers as possible. I wanted the book to convey how amazing and emotional and miraculous it was that Maurice and I found each other. It was also a challenge to relive all of the difficult moments of my childhood. That was harder and sadder than I thought it would be. But it was also kind of a blessing to be able to revisit my childhood and put it in some kind of context.

What I enjoyed most about the process of writing *An Invisible Thread* was just that—the process. Sometimes I still find it hard to believe our story will be read by so many people and hopefully have an impact on people’s lives. Reliving my incredible friendship with Maurice, his wife, Michelle, and their children, and working with Alex, has been nothing less than remarkable. There are no words to describe the support I received from my family and friends and how truly fortunate I am. It has been the most astonishing experience of my life and it confirms to me, and I hope to all of you too, how important it is to dream big dreams, as dreams really do come true. You must know that I was really the least likely person to ever publish a book, and yet here I am.

Did you ever second-guess the friendship you had with Maurice? Did comments and concerns from friends ever make you reevaluate your instincts?

You know, maybe I should have, but the truth is I never did. I knew the very first time I met Maurice that he was a very special child; he had the most trusting face and eyes. In the early stages of our friendship, my friends and family urged me to be careful and told me all the reasons why I shouldn’t be doing what I was doing. But I just always believed Maurice was a really good kid in a truly horrific situation, and that he came into my life for a special reason. And Maurice never gave me a single reason to doubt or mistrust him, so I never really questioned what I was doing.

Going into your marriage with Michael, why didn’t you make it clear to him that you wanted to have children? And did having Maurice in your life make it easier to deal with the disappointment of not having a child?

Michael and I were just so compatible, and we were having so much fun getting to know each other, that I guess I just didn’t want to complicate things by bringing up the matter of children. Obviously, in retrospect, this was a big mistake, and I would urge every couple to have these serious conversations prior to getting married. But I was so deliriously happy to have met Michael, and to have this second chance at happiness, that it never dawned on me that we would not have a family of our own. Ultimately, when I turned forty-four, I realized having a child at my age could be a selfish act on my part. By then, Michael and I would both be older



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parents and I believed it would be unfair to the child. After all, I lost my mother when I was only twenty-five, and I knew firsthand how difficult it was not to have a mother in those later years. And so, finally, I gave up the dream of having a child. Was it painful? Very much so. If I think about it for too long it still makes me sad. And, no, having Maurice in my life did not immediately help me deal with the grief I felt about not having a child. You see, I was feeling a lot of guilt about marrying Michael and moving up to Westchester, which fundamentally changed the nature of my relationship with Maurice. And so, in a way, I had to deal with the pain of losing Maurice and not having a child all at the same time. But prior to my meeting Michael, and now, at this point in my life, Maurice was and is the child I always wanted and dreamed of having.

How do you think your life would be different if you had never turned around that day you met Maurice?

Quite simply, my life would be a lot emptier had I not turned around that day. I mean, there's just so much pleasure and happiness that Maurice has brought into my life, and just so many ways he changed how I thought about my life and particularly my childhood. The times we spent together just talking, baking cookies and doing our Monday night rituals was incredibly rewarding. He didn't realize it then, and neither did I, but he was a child teaching an adult the true meaning of love and trust and friendship. I used to say to my family and friends all the time, we all need to meet a child like Maurice to help open up our eyes and to see how truly fortunate we are and how the other side lives. It sounds kind of selfish, but Maurice helped me deal with a lot of difficult issues in my life, a lot of difficult memories. And of all my achievements in life, there is nothing that makes me feel more proud than to call Maurice my friend and the son I never had. I can only hope he has gotten as much out of our relationship as I have.

Why was it so important for you to maintain a certain distance between you and Maurice, such that you only wanted to remain his friend and not create a mother-son dynamic? How did this ultimately shape your relationship?

Early on I believed it was very important for me not to try to replace Maurice's mother. The truth is, he had a mother, and he loved her very much, and I am sure she loved him very much. And I did not want to change that, or get in the way of Maurice's relationship with his mother. I mean, she wasn't always there for him, and she made bad choices, but I wasn't living in her shoes and I didn't understand the challenges she was facing, and so I never wanted to make life any harder for her. All I wanted was to help Maurice any way I could, as a



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friend. And I know to this day Maurice loves his mother and is proud of her for doing what she could to raise her children. And I am so glad that he is.

But as our relationship developed, I can't deny that we developed a mother-son bond. I mean, just the way I am around him, even today, telling him to do this or that, reminding him to be on time—I'm very mothering with him, and he's thirty-six now! Even back then, there were times I thought about what it would be like to adopt Maurice, and have him come live with me, and of course I dreamed that Michael and I would take him into our home. But I think our relationship played out exactly as it was supposed to play out. I think because I didn't try to replace his mother, we were able to become great friends as well as a kind of mother and son.

You often remark on how wonderful it was to witness Maurice experience the simple pleasure of childhood experiences. Were you afforded these same joys as a child? Were there any experiences you wanted to give to Maurice that you yourself never had?

Our experiences growing up were very different. As a child in a middle-class family I never worried about having a toothbrush, or where my next meal would come from, or having a winter coat or a bed to sleep in. For Maurice, the joys I gave him were the ones I took for granted. I was blessed with a very strong and loving mother and a hard working father who kept a roof over our heads. I mean, I know now and I knew back then that my childhood was very different from my friends' childhoods. But in our own dysfunctional way my family was a loving family, with an enormous amount of support. But there was one thing neither Maurice nor I had as young children, and that was a sense of security, a place to escape the chaos. And that's what I wanted to give Maurice when I met him—a feeling that he had someplace to go where he was safe and protected and loved and cared for.

How do you think your family upbringing impacted the way you interacted with Maurice?

I believed it was essential to give Maurice as much structure as possible through our weekly rituals, as this was something I yearned for as a child. I wanted things to be the same, to not change, to not have to move all the time and see our lives turned upside down. That's probably one of the most important messages of the book—the value of simple little rituals in a child's life. Consistency was something I thought about often and tried to provide Maurice. My father was a great father some of the time, and a bad father some of the time. And I wanted to consistently be there for Maurice, to be dependable.



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However, the most important thing I wanted to give Maurice was confidence. I truly believe it is one of the most important gifts parents or a caregiver can give a child. As hard as my upbringing was, and even though I was a terrible student, somewhere along the way I became an extremely confident person. I'm not sure how, but I did. And my poor brother Frank, he never developed that confidence because of the relationship he had with our father. And in many ways that lack of confidence doomed him. I believe confidence is what helps you dream and achieve those dreams, so I wanted Maurice to know how extraordinary he was, and for him to want something different for himself and ultimately for his family some day. Maurice was such an insightful child, such a smart boy, and one of the biggest obstacles in his life was that no one had ever told him that. You have to tell your child over and over how special they are, and no one did that for Maurice. I really believe if a child has one person they can truly count on and who they know truly loves them, it makes all the difference in their life. I hoped I could be that one person for Maurice.

You write that your mother was the guiding light that directed you toward Maurice. How would she have felt about Maurice?

My mother would have absolutely loved Maurice. She would have been so proud of his character, his strength, and his ability to understand at a very young age the power of right and wrong. She would have admired how he had the innate awareness to want to take his life down a different path, and how he had the perseverance to overcome the difficult challenges he faced. I also think how my mother would have respected Maurice for never trying to sabotage a good thing because he felt he was not deserving of our friendship. I mean, he could have easily done something to mess up our friendship because he just didn't believe it was real or that it could last. I always marveled at how Maurice knew at such a young age that our meeting each other was such an incredible gift for the both of us. And of course I believe it was my mother who brought us together, so I'm sure she would love him and embrace him and appreciate him just like I do.

In the beginning of your story, you described the “invisible thread” that bound you and Maurice together. Would you consider that fate? Do you believe in things like providence, fate, and destiny?

I consider myself an extremely spiritual person, and I have no doubt fate and destiny played a role in our lives. A few years ago, a very wise and dear friend told me, “It's not your lot in life to have your own children, but in fact to touch many.” I hope I have done that in very simple loving ways with Maurice, his children, my nieces, nephews and hopefully with my great little



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niece and nephew too. If our story can make a difference for some children and adults, it will confirm that our special bond was meant to happen for a reason. Maurice and I hope our story can change how society thinks about people who are less fortunate and can help them to understand why it's sometimes nearly impossible to change a devastating cycle. If *An Invisible Thread* achieves this goal in some small way, then our friendship will have had more of a purpose than just what it gave to the two of us. So, yes, I believe in destiny, and I believe that's why Maurice and I found each other—to not only help each other, but hopefully to touch other people as well.

Do you have plans to write another book?

Working on *An Invisible Thread* has been more than I could have ever dreamed of. I am enjoying every moment of the experience, while continually counting my blessings. So I feel wonderfully happy to have this moment and to have had this journey. But I have been thinking about how great it would be to give other people a chance to share their “Invisible Thread” stories, and I think that would make a wonderful book—all of these stories of people who were destined to meet, and the amazing confluence of events that had to happen for them to meet, and how meeting each other changed their lives in profound ways. I think a lot of people out there have just such a person in their lives, and maybe they haven't really thought about their relationship as *An Invisible Thread* relationship, but maybe that's just what it is—this bond that bends but never breaks, connecting them for a reason. So I would love to be able to work on a book about other people's Invisible Thread stories.



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