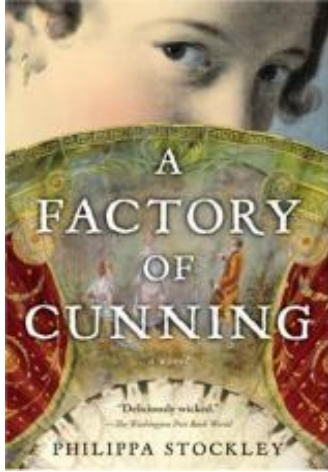


# A Factory of Cunning

by Philippa Stockley

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## About the Book

Set in late eighteenth-century England, Philippa Stockley's American debut gives us a wickedly delightful but deadly serious battle of the wills and the sexes. It begins with the arrival in London of the mysterious Mrs. Fox. On the run from a scandalous French past, she takes on a new identity, determined to rehabilitate herself. To do so she must pit her formidable skills for revenge against Earl Much, a British aristocrat with no less notorious a past and easily her match in sinfulness and intrigue. Between these two swirls a story featuring venal lords, wronged maidens, and reprobate clergymen, transporting readers from bawdy houses to country estates—places where the pleasures of the flesh are both high comedy and serious business.

**A Factory of Cunning** takes readers to the world immortalized in *Dangerous Liaisons*. And, like Michel Faber's **The Crimson Petal and the White**, the vividly rendered setting and characters give the thrill of a fresh discovery.

## Discussion Guide

1. Upon arrival in England, Mrs. Fox reflects on her past with the lament, "How far fallen!" In her new role as prostitute and procurer, does she find different levels of respectability based on social standing and wealth? Would she in present times? Consider Heidi Fleiss and Sydney Biddle Barrows (*The Mayflower Madam*) in your discussions.
2. The male characters of *A Factory of Cunning* can be compartmentalized into stereotypical clusters—fool, cuckold, devil. Assign a main category to the following characters and discuss how each both represents and breaks out of the stereotype: Earl Much, Lord Frederick Danceacre, Reverend Robert Denyss, Joshua Coats.

3. Based on Mrs. Fox's behavior in England, what is your assessment of her involvement in the debacle (depicted in the book **Dangerous Liaisons**) that caused her to flee her home in France? Was she culpable, either directly or indirectly, for the deaths of three innocent people?
4. Contrast and compare the characters of Earl Much and Doctor Hubert van Essel. Were you surprised by any of van Essel's actions? Which, if any, changed your initial opinion of him?
5. A reviewer in *The Washington Post* commented that Mrs. Fox is "a fantastically slippery character . . . who plays on the most unexpected juxtapositions to glide just beyond the reach of the law." Discuss your own feelings about Mrs. Fox.
6. Hubert van Essel states: "It is an undoubted truth that more knowledge can be gained from examining the motives and actions that belong to real lives, than from shutting oneself up in perpetual study." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Cite examples from your own life that support your position.
7. Secondary to Mrs. Fox, who is the most important female character in the novel? Why?
8. Who was responsible for Violet Denyss's downfall?
9. Discuss Nathan Black's character traits and how they relate to the Byronic style (based on the romantic, defiant, melancholy, and artistic characteristics of poet Lord Byron). What do you think will happen to Nathan Black in the future?
10. How did the author's clever use of description influence your interest in the novel? Provide an example and discuss its relevance.
11. Remove the storyline from Georgian England and instead place it in modern-day America. Would the female characters behave any differently? How and why?
12. Mrs. Fox tends to view her actions as minor influences on tragic events. Is she rationalizing her behavior or is it true that she bears no responsibility for cause and effect?
13. Philippa Stockley is an expert in eighteenth-century clothing design and manufacture, and her novel is sprinkled with references to materials, styles, and sewing techniques—a dressmaker's dream. Does the author use clothing to reveal a character's inner traits or to disguise them? Can fashion do both? Explain.
14. Is Poppy Salmon a product of her heritage or social circumstance? Do you think she views her final stage of transformation as redemption or just another opportunity?

## **Author Bio**

Philippa Stockley is a deputy editor at the *Evening Standard* newspaper and also works as an artist and illustrator. She lives in London.

## Critical Praise

"There is much to enjoy in Stockley's sly, tart mix of sex, painting and mischance, confectioned with a naughty, sophisticated glitter."

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### **A Factory of Cunning**

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