

Writers Writing About Knitting

knitting  
pearls

EDITED BY

Ann Hood



# knitting pearls

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• WRITERS WRITING ABOUT KNITTING •



*Edited by Ann Hood*



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*Jen,*

*Louise,*

*Stephanie,*

*Mary,*

*Laurie,*

*Nancy,*

*Pam,*

*Drake,*

*Karen,*

*and Helen*



## Introduction

*Ann Hood*



PATTERN: CLASSIC CUFFED HAT

PURL SOHO • New York, NY

## Clothes for the Living

*Steve Almond*

## Knitting Took Me Halfway Round the World

*Anne Bartlett*

## Unraveling

*Cynthia Chinelly*

## Casting Off a Spell

*Melissa Coleman*

## Big Maroon Sweater

*Michael Collier*



PATTERN: PAINTBRUSH LACE COWL

Hill Country Weavers • Austin, TX

## The Unravelers

*Stephanie Mannatt Danler*

## Handmade at Home

*Jared Flood*

## Wool

*Nick Flynn*

## Why, Yes—I Can Knit My Way Out of a Wet Paper Bag . . .

*Diana Gabaldon*

## The Red Vest

*Debra Gwartney*



PATTERN: CHEERY SEED STITCH TEA COZY

Churchmouse Yarns & Teas • Bainbridge Island, WA

## What Happened in Scotland

*Jane Hamilton*

# My Mother-in-Law, Her Knitting, and Me

*Cathi Hanauer*

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## The Italian Hat

*Lily King*

## The Museum of the Lady with Only One Neck

*Perri Klass*

## How We Spend Our Days

*Christina Baker Kline*



PATTERN: CHIMES COWL

Loop • Philadelphia, PA

## On Knitting

*Ann Leary*

## The Dinosaur Sweater

*Caroline Leavitt*

## The Thirty-First Stocking

*Laura Lippman*

## Positive Capability

*Maile Meloy*

## Knit Your Bit

*Stewart O’Nan*



PATTERN: STONEHAVEN STOLE AND SCARF

The Yarnery • Saint Paul, MN

## An Open Letter to All My Unfinished Projects

*Clara Parkes*

## Why I Don’t Knit

*Jodi Picoult*

## Creation Myth

*Robin Romm*

## Sarah with an H

*Bill Roorbach*



PATTERN: RIVULET COWL

Knit Purl • Portland, OR

## Just This

*Dani Shapiro*

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**Ema's Lessons**

*Samantha van Leer*

**The Santa Stocking**

*Lee Woodruff*

**Contributors' Notes**

**About Our Knitting Stores**

# introduction

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IN TRUTH, IF MY ALMA MATER WEST WARWICK HIGH School gave out a prize for Least Likely to Knit, surely I would have won it. A straight-A student, I met my nemesis in Home Economics in 1970, when all the ninth graders had to take Sewing. I'd successfully passed the Cooking section the fall before, which involved making no-bake cookies out of peanut butter, oats, and chocolate and serving them to the boys in the Woodshop room. Sewing proved more challenging. It involved cutting fabric, pinning patterns, taming a sewing machine, threading needles and bobbins. I sweated and cursed and prayed, but that wraparound skirt did not get made. Finally, I snuck it home to my cousin who'd received an A the year before. She made the thing in no time, and I tried unsuccessfully to pass it off as my own work. The teacher knew better. She tore out all the stitches, and gave me my first B. I vowed to never pick up anything remotely crafty again.

Many years later, after the death of my five-year-old daughter Grace in 2002, I found myself in a yarn store not far from the Sakonnet River in Tiverton, Rhode Island, doing what I never imagined I would do: knitting. From the time I picked up those number 9 needles and a skein of sky blue yarn, I was hooked. I often say I knit my way through grief, and I do believe that is the best way to describe how I returned to a place of hope and joy in my life.

If you are one of the many people who read *Knitting Yarns: Writers on Knitting*, then you know the pleasure you have in store for you here. That first anthology, published in 2013, included twenty-seven of your favorite, award-winning, bestselling writers writing on my favorite topic: knitting. The idea came to me as I watched writers like me sitting in the back rows of classrooms and lecture halls knitting. I knew why I first picked up needles and yarn back in 2002; but why had they? And why does the magic of knitting elude some people? What followed were essays (and one poem) about the transformative power of knitting; knitted gifts; knitting envy; onetime knitting; anti-knitting; the history of knitting; and knitting lessons.

Fans of that book might be surprised that twenty-seven more of your favorite, award-winning, bestselling writers have written essays just as delightful and heartbreaking, joyous and funny, wise and poignant. If you haven't read the first one, after reading *Knitting Pearls*, you surely will. *Knitting Yarns* gave us patterns by designer Helen Bingham, and one pattern by contributor Taylor Polites. This time, I'm pleased to offer you wonderful patterns by some of the best knitting stores across the country. Purl Soho in New York City, Loop in Philadelphia, Churchmouse Yarns & Teas on Bainbridge Island in Washington, Hill Country Weavers in Austin, Texas, The Yarnery in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Knit Purl in Portland, Oregon, have contributed patterns that will make you swoon.

And speaking of swooning, here's what you have to look forward to when you read *Knitting Pearls*. Like me, some of the contributors knit their way through adversity. Caroline Leavitt's first husband asked her to make him a sweater with brontosaurus on it, but as she knit the marriage began to crumble. Lily King's daughter knit a hat during their year living in Italy, which eased her homesickness. Cynthia Chinelly knits to help her escape the worry she has for her son. Melissa Coleman hoped that knitting a sweater for everyone in her family would remove the curse of divorce. An on-again, off-again knitter, Robin Romm returned to it when her mother was dying, and now knits as she waits for a baby. Back at Ithaca College in the 1970s, Bill Roorbach joined the knitting club to

get over his broken heart—and to meet girls.

Knitted gifts are important to us too. In fact, it sounds like the Christmas stockings Laura Lippman's mother knits are the same pattern as the ones from Lee Woodruff's childhood. Lippman writes about the thirty-first stocking her mother knit and why it will never be hung up. Woodruff examines the life of a marriage and adulthood. The surprise arrival of a cardigan helps Jared Flood understand the importance of homemade items, while the sweater Michael Collier's mother knit for him one Christmas helped him realize something about himself. And Nick Flynn, whose grandfather was a wool merchant, recalls the sweater his mother knit for him. Debra Gwartney's family believed you kept your troubles to yourself. But writing about the red vest her grandmother knit for her, Gwartney wonders about this advice. After her mother dies, Perri Klass poignantly reclaims all the items she'd knit for her over the years. And Stewart O'Nan reminds us how knitting for a serviceman overseas might be the greatest gift of all.

The people who knit for us are heralded here. Cathi Hanaeur's mother-in-law knit her a heather blue sweater and shared her life with Hanaeur. When Samantha van Leer knit a scarf for her mother, she discovered what her Ema got from knitting her so many sweaters. Steve Almond spent the summer he was six with his grandmother, who taught him to crochet.

Yarn whisperer Clara Parkes writes a letter to all of her unfinished knitting projects. Jane Hamilton tells us why after a summer living in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland she vowed never to knit again. Ann Leary confesses how one special knitter turned her against all knitters who followed. Stephanie Mannatt Danler calls herself an unraveler, and writes about how she let go of the idea of knitting for good. Knitting through her chemotherapy and radiation would have helped, Christina Baker Kline admits. In her essay she tells us why she didn't. After Dani Shapiro put down her yarn and needles for good, she understood a new lesson about life. And with a grandmother who was an expert knitter, Jodi Picoult writes about why she never learned herself.

I believe that knitting is not just knitting. And Anne Bartlett gives us twelve lessons proving that. Maile Meloy discusses knitting as negative and positive probability, and writes about how different knitting and writing are. Finally, Diana Gabaldon tells us how quitting the 4-H Club led to the knitting success that comes from the Starz television series of her *Outlander* novels.

What you have here, dear readers and knitters, is a stellar lineup of knitting stores and knitting essays. Kick off your shoes, curl up in your favorite chair, and dive into *Knitting Pearls*.



# knitting pearls

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PURL SOHO

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## CLASSIC CUFFED HAT

### MATERIALS

- **Hat with pom-pom:** 1 (2, 2) skeins of Purl Soho's Worsted Twist or Worsted Twist Heather, 100% merino. We used all of our new colors! Look below for a list of colors.
- **Hat without pom-pom:** 1 (1, 1) skeins of Purl Soho's Worsted Twist or Worsted Twist Heather, 100% merino.
- A US #5, 16-inch circular needle
- A US #7, 16-inch circular needle
- A set of US #7 double pointed needles
- 4 stitch markers (one a different color from the others)
- **Optional:** A US #6 or #7 straight needle for the Long Tail Tubular Cast On
- **Optional:** Clover Pom Pom Maker in Large

**Baby Size, left, from top to bottom:** Paprika Red, Pink Grapefruit, Ochre Yellow, and Yellow Zest

**Kid Size, center, from top to bottom:** Lichen Green, Green Turquoise, Pistachio Green, and Cardamom Green

**Adult Size, right, from top to bottom:** Gray Fig, Green Gray, Moody Green, and Black Green

### GAUGE

**Body:** 20 stitches × 28 rounds = 4 × 4 inches in stockinette stitch on larger needle

**Ribbing:** 24 stitches × 32 rounds = 4 × 4 inches in 1 × 1 rib (unstretched) on smaller needle

### SIZES

**Baby (Kid, Adult)**

- **Finished Body Circumference:** 15 (17, 18½) inches
- **Finished Ribbing Circumference (unstretched):** 12 (13, 14) inches
- **Finished Height (not including pom-pom):** 9½ (11, 12¼) inches

### NOTES

For this hat I used the nice and stretchy Long Tail Tubular Cast On. For our Long Tail Tubular Cast On Tutorial click [here](#).

If you find yourself overwhelmed or intimidated by the Long Tail Tubular Cast On, just use a regular Long Tail Cast On (or whatever elastic cast-on method you feel comfortable with). Your hat will be just as classic and functional! If you do use a regular Long Tail Cast On, join to work in the round

and proceed directly from the Ribbing section of the pattern.

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## **PATTERN**

NOTE: This pattern is also available as a printer-friendly PDF. [Just click here.](#)

### ***Begin***

With the straight needle (or the larger circular needles, if you wish), use a Tubular Cast On to cast on 72 (80, 88) stitches. The first stitch you cast on, after the beginning slipknot, should be a purl stitch. Turn the work and do not join.

With the same needle, work two Foundation Rows, as explained in our Long Tail Tubular Cast On Tutorial:

**Row 1:** \*K1 through the back loop, slip 1 with yarn in front, repeat from \* to end of row. Turn.

**Row 2:** \*K1, slip 1 with yarn in front, repeat from \* to end of row. Do not turn.

### ***Rib the Cuff***

Using the smaller circular needles, place a marker and join to work in the round, being careful to not twist the stitches.

**Round 1:** \*K1, p1, repeat from \* to end of round.

Repeat Round 1 until piece measures 3 (3½, 4) inches from cast-on edge.

### ***Work the Body***

Continuing with larger circular needles, work in stockinette stitch (knit every stitch) until piece measures 8 (8¾, 9¾) from cast-on edge.

### ***Shape the Crown***

NOTE: Change to double-pointed needles when necessary.

**Round 1:** [k1, ssk, k13 (15, 17), k2tog, place a marker that is a different color than the end-of-round marker] three times, k1, ssk, k13 (15, 17), k2tog. [64 (72, 80) stitches]

**Round 2:** Knit.

**Round 3:** [K1, ssk, knit to 2 stitches before marker, k2tog, slip marker] four times. [8 stitches decreased]

Repeat Rounds 2 and 3 until 16 (16, 16) stitches remain.

**Final Round:** [K2tog] 8 times. [8 (8, 8) stitches]

### ***Finish***

Cut yarn, leaving an 8-inch tail. Thread the tail onto a tapestry needle, sew it through the remaining stitches, and pull tight. Bring the tail to the inside of the hat and weave it in. Weave in any remaining ends.

## ***Pom Pom***

Using the Medium (Large, Large) pompom maker, follow the manufacturer's instructions to make 1 pompom. Use sharp scissors to trim the pompom to 2 (2½, 3) inches diameter. Attach securely at crown. Here's how . . .

You should have 2 long tails coming from the pompom. Thread 1 tail through a tapestry needle. Insert the tapestry needle through the very top of the hat, directly to one side of the closure at the crown. Pull the tail through to the inside. Repeat with the other tail, this time inserting the needle on the opposite side of the closure at the crown. Turn the hat inside out. Firmly tie the two tails together in a tight double knot. Thread both tails onto the tapestry needle and bring the needle through the crown and up through the center of the pompom. Trim the tails to the same length as the rest of the pompom.

Now enjoy your Classic Cuffed Hat!

# clothes for the living

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STEVE ALMOND



*How a revelation of death when he was only six led the author into a brief obsessive love affair with crocheting.*

**W**HEN I WAS SIX YEARS OLD, I SUFFERED A REVELATION of death. I was wandering through a grove of pine trees near a lovely lake in the Adirondacks. I have no idea what I was doing in that grove. In my cloying reconstruction of the memory I'd been coaxed there by some exalted desire to divine the truth about life, which is almost certainly bullshit. The trees probably weren't even pines.

I do remember the moment itself. Sun lancing through the trees, the pungency of sap, then: a jabbing panic. My thinking went like so: *At some point my heart will stop beating. Everything will go black. I will no longer exist. That will be that.* I sobbed hysterically.

This episode marked the beginning of my brief obsessive love affair with crochet.

I WAS IN the Adirondacks at age six because my parents had sent me and my twin brother Mike across the country—unaccompanied, on an airplane—for a visit with our maternal grandparents.

Irving and Ann Rosenthal had grown up on the Lower East Side of New York City and come of age during the Great Depression. Because of what they saw, they came to believe that the bounty of the earth should be divided more or less equally among its inhabitants.

This was a dangerous view to hold during the 1950s and Annie, who was the assistant principal of P.S. 113 in Harlem, was eventually asked to testify before the New York City Board of Education. This was all part of the work done by the House Committee on Un-American Affairs. Annie didn't testify. She took an early retirement instead. She was lucky, compared to a lot of other folks.

I knew none of this at age six. My grandparents were simply grandparents: loving, indulgent beings. They set up a little room for us in the cottage they rented on the banks of Lake Lucerne, where they came each summer to escape the sweltering Bronx. They took us swimming every day. Irving bought us fishing poles and we pulled sunfish from the brown water. They glittered like giant dimes.

It was in some ways an idyll. At least until I suffered this anxiety attack, which was no doubt triggered by the separation from our parents but was also (as I see it now) a reasonable, if precocious reaction to the horrifying nullity of death.

MY GRANDPARENTS DID everything they could to comfort me. Nothing stuck until my grandmother presented me with a crochet needle. It was brushed aluminum, a light green model that gleamed. I fell in love with it instantly.

I'm not sure why Annie settled on a crochet needle. Perhaps I'd shown an interest in her knitting. Perhaps she'd realized, based on my thumb sucking and fingernail gnawing, that I needed something to engage my hands and thereby tame my nerves.

Whatever it was, I took to crochet with a fanatic devotion. I loved the feel of the needle in my

hand, the slack sliding over my index finger, the tiny digital ballet by which the yarn slipped under the hook and the stitch was pulled snug. I loved the terminology: slipknot, magic ring, chain stitch. I loved the numbing repetition of the ritual, the idea that you could create something without thinking about it at all.

SOMETIMES, I WOULD gaze down at the yarn looping around the end of the needle and the knot slipping free and I would see the hook as a tiny little head that was being hanged and rescued over and over.

THIS WAS ALSO the summer my grandmother's brother Sam died, her favorite. She told us nothing about this, though one night Mike snuck into the kitchen after hours and caught her weeping in front of the kitchen sink. He returned to our room shaken. I was shaken, too.

We tell ourselves children don't understand death. I happen to believe just the opposite. Children see every loss as a kind of death. They experience fear and sadness as pure sensation. They are at play amid the vast graveyard of human feeling.

ANNIE SPENT A LOT of time roasting chickens and baking cookies and ironing on a battered card table. She also knit with me every day. She showed me a few of the more sophisticated stitches—it took me days to master the half-double—while my brother and grandfather played a single endless game of checkers. I worked that green needle in a silent fury, crafting nothing of consequence. I certainly don't remember finishing any particular project. I simply sat for hours with my grandmother as dusk fell around us.

She finished things: blankets and mittens and hats and ponchos and sweaters, a significant portion of the clothing I wore as a kid. As late as college I donned her cardigan sweaters. They were coveted garments among my slovenly cohort, lent out to friends and inevitably misshapen by use, the knots loosened by the idiot capering of youth until the sleeves hung down over our hands.

I REMEMBER A summer storm rolling in and releasing spindles of lightning onto the lake as I sat on a stone wall crocheting. "Put that thing away," my grandfather hollered down from the door of the cabin. "You'll wind up electrified."

I pretended to put it away but kept right on with my work after he'd gone back inside. Years later I'd remember this exact moment, reading *The Bell Jar*:

*It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York . . . It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.*

BY THEN, I KNEW something about the secret life my grandparents had led, how haunted they'd been by the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. As members of the Communist Party, they'd known Ethel a little bit, through friends of friends. That nice woman. That poor woman.

It was one thing to write articles under a nom de plume, or to be called before a committee. But to be executed—that was something else. It cast a pall.

Maybe I picked up on some of this anguish, too, as kids often do. In any case, I came to see knitting as some curious admixture: a therapeutic ritual that was bound up in death.

THE LITERATURE WILL back me on this. Penelope, who weaves a great shroud at her loom day after day

only to unravel her work each evening. She is trying to keep her husband Odysseus alive. Or Madame Defarge, that creature of vengeance, who knits her own sort of shroud: a record of all those the revolution will murder. Even Charlotte—wise, true friend, noble spider—spins her webs to spare Wilbur the ax. And she does save him, too. But she also dies in the end.

I'M STILL TERRIFIED of death. Some nights, when all the little people in my house have been taken under by sleep, I lie awake and face the cold truth of it. We are here like comets, flesh and chaotic feeling. Then we are gone. Boil off all the romance and myth and what's left? Exile. Disappearance. Loss.

I HAVE COME to understand this fear as arising from a failure to love.

I STILL CANNOT see a needle crochet without feeling the stab of that summer, which was its own variety of exile I guess.

It's an odd sensation: a lump of sorrow that is somehow also nostalgic. I feel an intense desire to be back there again, in the Adirondacks, in that musty cabin near Lake Lucerne, with my grandmother and her raspy laugh, with her needles knit together under the yellow lamp like tiny axes whet and whet. She didn't make shrouds. She made clothes for the living while my grandpa leaned over the checkerboard with his beautiful crooked teeth.

They were burdened people contented by simple pleasures. I should have kissed each of them more than I did. We waste so much of our hearts. Only the dying keep a full account. In their moment of passing the exact amount is revealed on our tongues, which turn black with regret.

# knitting took me halfway round the world

ANNE BARTLETT



*The author gives us twelve lessons on knitting,  
writing, and life.*

**K**NITTING TOOK ME HALFWAY ROUND THE WORLD.

Knitting and writing have much in common. Knitting taught me a great deal about writing, and writing taught me about knitting.

But let's begin at the beginning . . .

WHEN I WAS five my mother taught me to knit garter stitch with nice thick orange wool, and when I was six I graduated to stocking stitch with some pillar-box red. There was only a brief lesson in stocking stitch before she left me for the weekend with an elderly friend. The friend had been a nurse in the First World War and she knew everything.

I took out my knitting, but I couldn't remember how to do purl. I knew what stocking stitch should look like and that it was a step up from garter stitch. I wanted the kudos. I knew that for stocking stitch you had to do alternate purl and plain, but I didn't know the word *row*. I went to my mother's friend.

*I want to do one purl one plain, I said.*

*Like this, she said, showing me rib stitch. One purl one plain.*

*That's not right, I said. It's not like that. It's one purl one plain.*

*It IS right, she said. THIS is IT. It's the ONLY way to do it. One purl one plain. RIB stitch.*

Language. Words. Frustration. I didn't know the words for *row* or *stocking stitch*. I knew what I wanted, but not how to get it.

LESSON 1. *You need the right words to communicate about anything.*

When I was ten my mother decided my method needed adjusting. I'd held my hand above the right hand needle, taking it off for every stitch, but now she deemed me ready to knit with the hand under the needle and minimal movement of my pointer to wrap the yarn. We were doing the good old English method, which is slower than the European, but who dares interfere with generations of mother to daughter instruction?

I tried. I protested. Awkward. My hands hurt. Too slow. My knit stitches were suddenly too tight, increased in number and the fabric developed holes. Furthermore, now I was knitting cotton. No



stretch, not kind to a child's hands.

I took it to school. My friends asked what it was. *A dishcloth*, I said proudly. But a dishcloth had no traction in that circle. Dishcloths were gray and smelly, and lived in the sink, and this one, still on the needles, was gray and smelly already. Maybe it had something to do with knitting in 100°F heat.

I learned to cast off with a sense of relief. Now I could start something new.

LESSON 2. *Don't knit with yarn or patterns you don't like. Don't write things you don't like either.*

Next came the *scarf*. Baby wool on medium-sized needles, not ideal. Maybe that was all Mum had in her stash, and she was a thrifty woman. Stocking stitch alternating with slabs of a simple holey lace stitch. *Scarf* beat the hell out of *dishcloth* for status. And even my ten-year-old eyes could see that the new method had greatly improved my tension. The scarf grew.

That same year I did a massive school project, with my excited mother leaning over my shoulder. It was on her birth country, South Africa, and she had a lot of fun. It was larger and longer than any other project in the class and I felt completely overwhelmed by the great piles of resources. I hated doing it, but it won first prize.

Another writing experience from that era. My father offered me five pounds to keep a daily diary for a whole year. I only managed it for eight months, so didn't qualify for the five quid, but to my surprise I had written a book.

LESSON 3. *Stick at it. Small amounts are cumulative.*

At fifteen there was the lemon mohair jumper. That's *sweater* for you North Americans, a word I've never understood. Do Americans like to sweat? Yes, Australians like to jump! ;-) At fifteen I was an ungainly shape, and so was the jumper, but body and jumper didn't match. Sigh. I gave up knitting until my first pregnancy.

LESSON 4. *You can't undo mohair. Some things are just duds. Recycle. There are always worms as a last resort, and they love munching on stories.*

Baby clothes! My first proper knitting pattern, bought with due ceremony. I made one item and it took the whole pregnancy, a tiny blue jumper in the hope of a boy, with a cable down the middle front, flanked by two blocks of garter stitch. I reknitted that baby blue nylon many times, and finished it just in time. But the boy came out bigger than the jumper. I squeezed it over his head just once and that was it. By the end of his first week he had grown out of it. Forty years later I've still got it. I should stuff it and put it in a glass case.

LESSON 5. *Make it big. The child will grow. The same with writing; put it all down. You can edit later when you know what it's about.*

I loved having three boys, but during the fourth pregnancy, for the first time, I knitted girl clothes—

one pair of white bootees, complete with embroidered pink rosebuds, and one little pink jacket. (We didn't have detailed scans back then.) When she was born I went overboard. That poor child wore nothing but pink until she was about seven. In her teens she had a love affair with brown and khaki green. Served me right.

During those years I was also part of an Australia-wide team of editorial associates working on a magazine. We met face to face every second year, but in between we had telephone hookups. So much rich discussion! My writing was enhanced as we read, discussed and planned together.

LESSON 6. *It's easy to get into a rut. Community input enhances creativity.*

More jumpers, more confidence, more experimenting. Four children under eight, a student husband, and the need to earn some cash. I searched the jobs columns, looking for the impossible job, the one I could do at home when the children were asleep. An offer of freelance editing. And joy! I found an ad for knitters. The application was a knitted swatch. I posted it with trepidation, but I passed, and along came a designer with bags of beautiful wool. Long winter evenings, with sleeping children, industriously knitting complicated intarsia patterns that sold in major designer outlets for more money than we were getting for two weeks' pay. One memorable design included a pair of legs in fishnet stockings and red high heels. I earned seventy cents an hour.

LESSON 7. *Completing big challenges gives a sense of accomplishment, but word for stitch, writing pays better.*

Number two son and I knitted squares. We sewed them all together into a jumper and added a few beads, bells and whistles. It suited his spiky hair and his sense of fun. When that boy grew up he made a pair of football bootees for his friend's first child, and taught his wife how to crochet.

When number three son was ten, he wanted a "piano jumper." I'd never designed anything. In consultation with him I knitted a vertical off-centre piano keyboard down the front, and on the back I graphed up an intarsia pattern of the first few bars of Scott Joplin's 1902 ragtime *The Entertainer*, his favorite music, made famous in 1973 by the Oscar-winning movie *The Sting*. It was a grand success and he wore it until it was too short every which way.

I edited a book about former cannibals.

LESSON 8. *Try anything. Some of the tries will work. And use good-quality materials for epic jobs—the black dye leaked into the white. If you're writing, give yourself the benefit of a quality environment. (Libraries and coffee shops!)*

One day my father, aged seventy-two, came with my mother to the city to see the cardiologist. As we lived close by I picked them up after the appointment and brought them home to our place for lunch. Dad would have surgery in a week or two. During lunch my sister-in-law rang to get the news, but while my father was speaking to her he collapsed. Our son, aged fifteen and trained by St. John, began CPR with a doctor friend who "just happened" to be in the house, but to no avail. Afterwards the doctor commended our son for his cool head and good CPR technique. Some months later my mother

gave our son a jumper she had hand-spun and knitted for my father. Our son wore it for a very long time.

---

LESSON 9. *Knitting is an expression of love, as is the wearing of it. Let our words, written or spoken, be life-affirming.*

After my father died life became difficult. For almost a decade we seemed to be in a long dark tunnel of many kinds of grief. In the wider family there were breakups and sad children. Number one son was seriously ill and we thought he might die. Several people we loved did die, including babies and young women. Two more friends took their own lives. Later I found myself advocating for two disturbed young men through a distressingly long, sad court case. Meanwhile our family was going through rapid transition; our own children were leaving home, leaving the country, getting married, having babies.

Some aspects of life were wonderful and others painful and wrenching. No time to knit! One day collapsed and ended up in an ambulance.

LESSON 10. *Sometimes words are inadequate; sometimes you can't do anything except survive. Even then, if you really want, you can probably still knit—at the wake, at the wedding, in court—or at least if not at them, on the way home. It might just be the relaxation you need.*

Suddenly the dark tunnel ended. We moved house, my husband started a new job, our family was peaceful and settled, and we had good holidays. Over time, slowly, I left the burnout behind and re-engaged with normal life. After twenty-three years I returned to university to study creative writing, and in that protected and peaceful environment had the best fun of my life. I even did some knitting.

During a workshop our professor introduced us to the opening passage of Gertrude Stein's *Paris, France*, which begins like this:

*I was only four years old when I was first in Paris and talked french there and was photographed there and went to school there, and ate soup for early breakfast and had leg of mutton and spinach for lunch, I always liked spinach, and a black cat jumped on my mother's back . . .*

What fun! I thought. *I'd like to have a go at that—fluid word association, loose punctuation, racy rhythms.* I had been brewing a piece about a woman throwing rose petals over a church congregation, and I made a note in my journal.

*If you read too much of this [Stein] it would certainly become tedious, but as a first experience I felt bowled along like a ball in a river . . . I could try this kind of voice for the roses piece—it would suit the mad woman rather well. As my friend Ray said, Stein loops around like a clover leaf, in and out, in to the centre again. It might not work at all...But it will be fun to try, looping in and out in a large knitting pattern.*

There's the word in the last sentence, *knitting*, knitting as metaphor, to describe a writing style. At the

time I barely noticed it, and it was only in rereading the journal years later that I discovered that this was the very point at which I transferred from knitting as metaphor to knitting as subject matter.

LESSON 11. *The best work is preceded by play.*

As the journal clearly demonstrates, I set out to write about roses, but what came out was knitting. All my dammed-up experience of knitting erupted in a gush of writing. I wrote it fast, in a kind of a flush and with great pleasure.

*My name is Martha. I like knitting. I like the order it makes. If you go \*(P1 K1) rpt all along the row, and then back again the same, it makes rib. If you have odd stitches. If you have even stitches it makes moss stitch. Rib is for ribbing, for cuffs and collars and bands on the bottom, for necklines, and maybe to make a pucker in the pattern. Puckers, evenly spaced, drawn in and stretching out, make for interest. I'm interested in knitting. I'm very interested in knitting. It interests me . . .*

And so it continued, a smooth uninterrupted flow, a total surprise, for a couple of pages. And then it stopped.

I made another note in the journal.

*Where did that come from? There are no roses at all. I thought I'd find out a bit about Martha, and there she is, all finished up with knitting. But that was lots of fun!!*

What to do with it? Such an odd little piece, not much use for anything. I filed it away. I didn't forget it, because the writing experience had been exhilarating, but it didn't seem to fit anywhere.

Time passed. I finished the course. I had time to knit again and during the next two years wrote commissioned nonfiction. When I was nearing the end, a friend, one of my former tutors, persuaded me to apply for a creative writing PhD at the University of Adelaide. I was even offered a scholarship. Paid writing time in a supportive environment? Impossible to resist.

Early in the first year I was required to read from the work in progress, but the work was not progressing very well, so I read the knitting piece instead. I thought it had too many technical terms to appeal to an academic and potentially non-knitting audience, but it was warmly received. There was lavish encouragement to explore this character further.

And so the novel *Knitting* began, though of course I didn't know it then—it was simply an extended experiment that just might become something larger. Along the way I researched knitting in many forms—actual knitting like the blue silk vest Charles I wore when he was beheaded; knitting as a plot device as per Marelle Day's *Lambs of God* or Elizabeth Stead's *Knitting Emily Bridget*; knitting as history as in Bishop Richard Rutt's superb work, *The History of Knitting*; knitting as art form in various exhibitions; and finally, knitting as metaphor for unity and healing, as it became in my own work. I knitted as I wrote, to keep the writing grounded: concurrently with the novel I produced two jumpers, two pairs of socks and half a scarf.

After the decade of grief, knitting was healing, and so was writing about it. It's hardly surprising that the two main characters, one a bossy academic consumed with grief, the other an unboundaried fragile artist, began to represent opposite extremes of my personality. In the novel these two very

different women, one a wordsmith and one a knitter, work painfully towards a retrospective exhibition of knitted garments. In the process they both offer and receive healing—albeit with the help of a third party.

As for the rest, it's a long story with a touch of the miraculous, but eventually the novel was published in America, Australia and the United Kingdom. And that's how knitting took me halfway round the world.

LESSON 12: *Don't give up. Somebody out there is on your side.*

# unraveling

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CYNTHIA CHINELLY



*Knitting keeps the author from thinking of her troubled son and opens up a path to memories.*

**Y**OU SIT IN THE KITCHEN, WINDOWS OPEN, THE FAMILIAR blue half-light of dawn slipping in. You try hard to think of anything but him. There is the harsh squawk of the yellow-crowned night heron, returning after a night of foraging. There is the rustle of an ovenbird in the leafy understory of a palm. You imagine her nest, an adobe cup, perfect and safe. And there, at the edge of the white mangroves, a green heron hunches on slender legs, waiting.

The clock in your heart thrums and you do not think of him, the boy who dreamed all dreams, the son whose sadness now is large and deep.

So you sit and open what seems like a present, a gift as light as a breath, the turns of tissue paper revealing a luster of silk yarn, the color of a dove or a star or a prayer candle. You drape the loop of yarn around the edge of the table and start by forming a butterfly, a figure-8 pattern around your thumb and index finger, winding until the wraps have reached some bulk. Then bringing up the wings of silk, as you have been taught, you try to blink away the shadowbox hung in his childhood room: monarch, giant swallowtail, painted lady, Florida leafwing. The wisp of his net high in the hot sky of a summer afternoon, his face soft to every possible hope.

You begin to wind.

You are careful to keep the tension of the yarn loose. Neatness isn't important when rolling a ball of yarn. Looseness is. It's okay, even helpful, to let the yarn overlap your fingers slightly. You wrap, slowly rotating the ball counterclockwise. Counterclockwise. Leftward. Backward. Away. In reverse. Earthward. Homeward. To the place before his addiction. To the place before the blackouts, before the thin glaze of white powder on fingers and lips, before the daily litany of small deaths in the bedroom in the yard, in parking lots, behind storefronts. To the place where this radiant boy sat in the backseat of the car caught up in the sweet rhythm of a cross-country trip, planning stops around roadside attractions: Gatorama, the Corn Palace, Wigwam Village, the Pez Museum. You still remember whole years of infinite possibilities, of a boy's voice so ripe with light that your heart was swept clean.

The ball of yarn is getting bigger, more spherical, and it is still surprising to you that this will ever be anything else. A pristine wedding shawl for after the ceremony, after the drinking, the dancing, as late May night cools down and morning breaks into a happy weariness. An ethereal scarf, cotton and silk, beside a bed in a rented duplex in a small college town. Summer socks—small wisps alight on a rocker. But today you decide on a cowl, unnecessary, really, in this place where you live, where the swish of ocean breezes, no matter how manic, are still warm. But you are convinced the cloud-like scarf will dull the tick tick tick of the pulse in the hollow of your throat, a too-visible history under the weight of memory.

When you were fourteen and living in upstate New York, so far away from Florida and sorrow, your mom gave you two shiny pink knitting needles and a few dollars to buy yarn at Woolworth's.

You took a boy, a couple of years older, on the walk. The yarn then, no more than an excuse to stop behind the shopping plaza and feel the restless heat of hands and lips. And breath. And you didn't mind the love bites he left on your neck, constant reminders that turned over in your heart those simple afternoons. And he followed you into Woolworth's and helped you pick out the soft green yarn because, yes, he would love a scarf and he would wear it all winter, tied closely around his neck against the icy winds of Lake Ontario. So you learned to knit because of love or something close to it. Green stitches gathering one by one until you saw before you what you had imagined.

The sun is up now, but it is still early and you know you have some time before the chores and the traffic and the job. With the silk rolled, you pull out two cones of slub cotton, undyed, the main yarn for the cowl. You begin to cast on. A slipknot. A foundation. A beginning. You once read, "Knowing how to tie a slipknot could save your life." Could it save his life? This running knot? This knot you used to tame your tents against the cozy rains of cross-country trips? There was St. Mary's, Georgia, and the campsite near the tidal river. His small hands were a bit wobbly as he tied the fishing line—the twist, the loop, and then the slip. A neat, strong, durable knot. A knot to cast his hopes on. And yours. There was the Rio Grande River, the knotted rope securing mom and dad and son against rapids that broke in every direction. How terrified you were that you would all be swept away, disappearing over the falls, and how you had made such a bad decision, until you saw his face and a smile so large it drank up all that fear.

A slipknot, so easily undone. Just pull one of the ends. Watch as it unravels. Watch as your son stands full-grown before you. Thin, restless, the weight of grief unhinging him until he's barely recognizable. The Camels and pills and pot. What is at his back that is too great to be forgiven? How many pasts has he lost? How terrified you are that you all will be swept away, disappearing over the falls, and how you have made so many bad decisions, to bring him to this.

A slipknot. A simple noose.

You still yourself. You learned to knit because of love or something close to it. The pattern asks for 184 stitches. So many to lose track of. You use a row counter. A click for each stitch. You need to concentrate. The yarn is called Silken Straw and is so delicate that if you cast on too tightly the silk will shred, unravel to where it will be impossible to tell where one stitch ends and another begins. Where one love ends and another begins. The boy with the green scarf ending. The boy with the blue scarf beginning. A lanky boy on the sleeping porch of his parents' home. A blistering night, a late August thunderstorm offering little relief. There was close, quiet talk of how the both of you would spend the last couple of weeks before heading off to separate schools. You sat in a rocker believing it was the heaviness of the air that made it hard to breathe.

And then the real boy, or man really, that helped you make this son. The man you set up house with, and married. This beautiful man who made this beautiful boy, out of love. The man who resurrects worlds from ink, who tries to give this son a happy ending: a ribbon of silk, unfailing.

A click for each stitch on this circular needle, a number 4, and your fingers are clumsy, never having done such fine work. You tilt the right needle to the right and insert the left needle into the loop you've pulled up. You move slowly, too slowly perhaps, unlike the thousand starlings flying through the morning light above this house. But even so, you drop the loop. You lose it. How will you get through this thing that started from love? You begin again. Insert the needle into the stitch. Pull the silk through. How careful you need to be. But being careful isn't enough. You have learned this. Mistakes are made. Some can be forgiven, overlooked. Others take root and will not let go.

You came back to knitting because of your son. You thought it would give you back that easeful life, bright from its loom. And sometimes it does. But most times the rhythm of needles is not enough and before long the mind and the heart collide, and you cannot forget the way he held your arm, white knuckled in that white water of the Rio Grande, as if you were enough so he could open himself to the

grand rush of beauty. How will you get through this?

~~The kitchen windows are open and the South Florida winter sun bleeds in. You try hard to think of anything but him.~~



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