

TO BE FULLY HERSELF:

Autobiographies of Trauma, Flow, and Resilience in Knitting Literature (Knit Lit)

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not include any material previously published or written by another person except where reference is given in the text.

Sharyn Kaesehagen

Dec, 2017



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Abstract

Knit Lit Autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience are categorised as nonfiction knitting literature: a field dominated by US author/knitters. While knitting literature is a valuable resource for interdisciplinary knitting scholarship, it is often absent as an inquiry subject. This thesis seeks to address this gap.

In this creative doctoral thesis, as an original contribution to knowledge, the critical exegesis defines autobiographical Knit Lit situating it within the broader context of autobiography, and further asks the question: Do these Knit Lit autobiographies—from 1998 to 2017—position knitting as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events?

As a result of practice-led research the project includes ‘To be fully herself’, an original creative writing manuscript—a South Australian Knit Lit memoir of posttraumatic growth after multiple adverse experiences, including childhood trauma in the 1950s. The memoir gains texture from immersion research of knitting traditions. The choice of Norway as a site of inquiry was inspired by a Norwegian folk tale’s characters that were imaginary companions in childhood. Ethics-approved research trips and interviews to England, Scotland, including The Shetland Islands, and Ireland, especially The Aran Islands, inform the project.

Collectively, the study finds that the majority of these autobiographies do position knitting, in part, as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events. It offers literary evidence of therapeutic benefit from knitting to the field of interdisciplinary research, and presents models of the process.



TO BE FULLY HERSELF:

Autobiographies of Trauma, Flow, and Resilience in Knitting
Literature (Knit Lit)

To be free, to be fully herself, woman has to move from the deep inner places—from her emotional attitudes and beliefs outwards. She cannot transform herself, she cannot be truly free if she concentrates on the secondary outer problems—practical, economic, political problems. I feel that woman will only become truly liberated if each woman is brave enough and responsible enough to push deep into her own spirit—to grapple with her own inner being, to be proud enough, to feel herself meaningful enough to dare to be individual. Barbara Hanrahan.¹

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¹ P. Hanley and National Library of Australia, *Creative Lives: Personal Papers of Australian Writers and Artists* (National Library of Australia, 2009), 172.

Introduction: A Poetics of Words & Stitches

Introduction

In this creative writing doctoral thesis, as my original contribution to knowledge, I broadly define and contextualise knitting literature (Knit Lit)² and place it in an autobiographical context when discussing autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience in Knit Lit, between 1998 and 2017, thus filling a gap in the literature. My research contributes literary evidence to other interdisciplinary work, including clinical research, about knitting's therapeutic attributes and practical applications.

In particular, I argue that these autobiographical analogue texts in knitting literature position knitting as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events. Flow is understood as that still place where the outside world is totally excluded. Resilience can be seen as bouncing back to a previous state, or where one can grow beyond previous levels of ability to withstand life threatening or shocking traumas. My original creative manuscript contributes, as an exemplar, to this argument. It is a memoir in a regional voice—South Australian—in a subgenre dominated by the US.

You will find that there is no quarantine between the exegetical and the creative components of my work—they bleed, each into the other, like dye on silk. So, too, my main aims coalesce, filtered through medicalised constructions of trauma, flow, and resilience in acts of self-representation.

Firstly, through practice-led research and immersion memoir techniques, I process the writing of my own Knit Lit autobiographical³ narrative. Secondly, also through practice-led research in which

² I will define and explain Knit Lit as an interchangeable contraction of 'the literature of knitting' or 'knitting literature' in Chapter 1 below.

³ Within this thesis, for reasons of clarity and in agreement with Kate Douglas I use autobiography, memoir and self-life writing interchangeably. Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 2.

writing is critical thinking and orchestrates process, I read other Knit Lit autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience. And lastly, through stitching—both as methodological process and embodied product—I create knitted memory artefacts.⁴ Driven by research curiosity, and a personal need to reflect upon the *raison d'être* of my life, underlying concepts of trauma, flow, and resilience infiltrate both the creative and critical products.

The general focus of that curiosity is the interface between words, knitted stitches, and various traumas. I use them as building blocks; I harness my strengths—reading, writing, and stitching—to construct my thesis about Knit Lit autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience.

When I began this project, I questioned whether this act would allow me to conquer the weaknesses, the legacies of multiple traumas. I hoped I would learn the skills necessary for the creative writing of an engaging monograph, a memoir, when the longest piece of work I'd written at that time was an Honour's thesis of fifteen thousand words. I hoped I could master the interdisciplinary, theoretical dimensions that would result in a rigorous critical exegesis. And, I hoped I could promote reader engagement through describing knitted artisanal garments, and knitting traditions.



Knit Lit and the Autobiographical 'I'

Let me tell you more about the words and stitches one finds in knitting and the literature of knitting, and how that led me to this project.

We first met sixty odd years ago and have been friendly ever since. Sometimes, we might lose touch for a while, but we always manage to catch up. Please, indulge me while I talk of our most recent reunion.

⁴ Written permission was obtained from the designers.

The glossy cover of *Poetry in Stitches: Clothes You Can Knit* by Solveig Hisdal,⁵ one of Norway's foremost knitting designers, filled my gaze. I read it is a promise of beautiful treasures within. The cover design was a garment I yearned to knit.

If I close my eyes I recapture the image. A young woman reclines—is it forest undergrowth beneath her? I can see ovoid leaves, dark and light green, and what could be dry brown moss—not enough definition for pine needles but too organic for straw.

Her head is tilted sideways onto her right shoulder and supported by crooked arm against her fingers, face quarter-turned towards the camera, dark pink lips on the verge of smiling. Her eyes, colour indeterminate, look from the corners of her lids and engage with the viewer. Her hair is honey brown, drawn back beneath pale-blush roses so that three wisps graze the dark-grey pearl on her ear.

The rich ink-blue fabric of her full, soft-pleated, satin overskirt and deep red-purple underskirt sit beneath a hand knitted jacket that I have left—connoisseur-like—to savour until last. It is a high-hip, kimono shape with asymmetric front, crew but fluted neck, and three quarter sleeves. The only closure is a neck clasp formed by two gold leaves.

Stylised sprays of leaves, mid- on ink-blue, decorate the upper two thirds of the jacket's body. A broad horizontal band of white roses against graduated hues of pink through to mustard sits between two narrow bands of diagonal ink-blue and white stripes. The entire garment has been finished with a mid-blue border.

I hesitate before turning the pages, stretching out the moments before I can read the pattern for the jacket.

In *Poetry in Stitches*, Solveig Hisdal demonstrates through her exquisite photography and autobiographical writing how she draws

⁵Solveig Hisdal, *Poetry in Stitches: Clothes You Can Knit*, trans. Michelle Lock, Else E Myhr, and Maureen Engeseth, English ed. (Oslo, Norway. : N.W.Damm & Søn As. , 2004).

inspiration from museum holdings of traditional textiles and expresses them in her designs for the book.

I enjoyed the way she conflated art, craft, and self through life narrative, a healing⁶ of the historical barriers between creative and critical thinking and the art/craft divide.⁷

As if all this were not enough, the book delivered a bonus fillip. I had returned to knitting after a decade of focusing on other writing/art/craft and was well placed, because of that hiatus, to recognise what this book perhaps signified.

A shift seemed to have admitted the autobiographical into knitting literature. I questioned whether this was new and began cursory research to find any scholarly discourse on the topic. From that investigation, I narrowed my search to nonfiction literature of knitting. At the same time, I used trauma, flow, and resilience—preoccupations from my own creative work—as my focusing lens after I discovered that the use of the first person in Knit Lit spanned self-revelatory memoir as well as personal knitting anecdotes.

Trauma, flow, and resilience in both Knit Lit nonfiction, and specifically autobiography, appear to be without scholarly critique. For reasons pertaining to scope, it is the autobiographical mode that will be the subject of this exegesis.

As I investigated the autobiographical in the literature of knitting, my practice-led research project became clear: for my exegesis I would examine trauma, flow, and resilience in Knit Lit autobiographies; and for my creative work I would write my own autobiographical example. Building resilience by using flow from knitting and writing to combat the traumatic legacies of childhood sexual abuse, with an Australian protagonist, is new to Knit Lit nonfiction/autobiography. This is an original creative writing artefact, and my discussion of it in the exegesis forms a part of my claim of an

⁶ Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper, eds., *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penquin Books, 2009), 11.

original contribution to knowledge.



Storms and Shelter

Vivian Gornick writes, on the topic of personal narrative, that: ‘Every work of literature has both a situation and a story.’⁸ Whilst I am suspicious of universals, I can see her point when she distinguishes between the two aspects:

The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.⁹

As much as I needed a *situation* for my memoir, so too I needed a place of respite, a place which was redolent of safety, to shelter from life’s storms—from the personal *story* that preoccupied me and translated through sleep to nightmares. I needed all the help I could draw from knitting, and the literature of knitting, to keep working on a project that held both fear and joy. To this day, I find that not only knitting, as reputed, but all things associated with it have the capacity to enfold and sooth me.¹⁰

The storms that batter me are childhood sexual abuse, mental illness, physical impairment, and chronic pain. They are unwanted baggage. They weigh me down daily. Once they hounded me to the bottom of a dark pit, which took years to escape. And, still, episodically they sabotage my life, including my doctoral studies.

Each new adverse event tips the balance and can lead to flashbacks or deep depressive episodes. Combating them, learning to live with scars, drove me to study. A willow tree beside water bends so that it doesn’t break. As a PhD student, my study journey

⁸ Vivienne Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), Literary Criticism, 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 38-48.

has had to bend like that willow, or accommodate the ebb and flow as the tidal river does around the tree's roots.

But I'm sure I already wrote about that in my memoir. No matter how hard I try, the layers of my work refuse to remain neatly distinct. Given the invasive nature of trauma and traumatic memory, I negotiate the *critical*, this exegesis, through a kaleidoscopic lens of neurodiversity.



Creative Writing in Academia

Jeri Kroll told us—her RHD study group—right at the beginning, and reinforced it regularly, that we could learn to write in any number of environments.¹¹

This meant that, if we chose to study creative writing as practice-led research in an academic context, then, we had to accept that the creative and critical—the artefactual work and the articulation of theoretical and critical practices and influences—had to travel together.

For me, it conjured an image of streams and tributaries being pulled over rocks by a flowing current into a river and out to sea. The streams and tributaries were inputs from internal and external influences. The rocks were obstacles. The current was my curiosity and motivations to learn the skills necessary to reach my aims. The river was my own outpouring of creative and critical work. The sea was my first readers, the examiners, and, hopefully, later, an extended audience.

Kim Lasky expresses it in a different, but complementary way. She talks of a poetics as drawing reflexively on—and spanning false

¹¹ Various public conversations during 2007-8

divides between—diverse inputs: public/personal, emotional /intellectual, and creative/critical.¹²

In my mind, there is a seemingly infinite library of memories, like Umberto Eco's labyrinthine library in *The Name of the Rose*, memories that are responsive to sights, sounds, tastes, aromas, and textures. I can't quite grasp that all these memories, a lifetime of experience, are stored as a web of interconnected neurons waiting for an executive command to excite them. They gossip, and send a whisper of the past my way, so that I can write a piece of creative nonfiction in which literary language/technique is conflated with the distilled essence of fact.



Truth and Imagination

The doctorate which takes the autobiographical as method, process, and product is asking the academy and reader to accept autobiographical authority, to privilege personal experience. This transforms my memories from Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's 'mythmaker'¹³ and storyteller into a repository of primary source material for both the creative and critical components of my thesis.

The audience trusts an author of self-life writing to tell, not *the* truth, but *her* truth, the facts as she knows them. This is Philipp Lejeune's autobiographical pact. The author has a contract with the reader to fulfil the expectations of the genre within which she writes. Of course, an assumed contract may be and is, sometimes, broken, but then there needs to be a will to embrace the consequences.

If creative nonfiction—in this case the immersion memoir, described as 'the writer writes about the world in order to examine

¹² Kim Lasky, "Poetics and Creative Writing Research," in *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, ed. Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper (London: Palgrave macmillan, 2013), 20.

¹³ Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction* 2ed. (New York etc: McGraw Hill, 2012), 4.

the self'¹⁴—is the form chosen, it does not automatically outlaw imagination as false.

Memory, in a sense, *is* imagination: an “imagining” of the past, recreating the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches...We invent because our lives and the world contain more than simple facts; imagination and the way we imagine are as much a part of ourselves as any factual resumé. In creative nonfiction, the creative aspect involves not only writing techniques, but also a creative interpretation of the facts of our lives, plumping the skeletal facts with the flesh of imagination.¹⁵

In my work there is creative interpretation of the facts. But imagination, that of the child within, draws imagination as a fact early in my story.

This is where a Norwegian fairy tale as access point to knitting styles, histories, and traditions makes its entrance. I will say little more about this now, as I would have to give a spoiler alert. It is enough that you know imagination was the link between childhood trauma and an ethic's approved research trip as a PhD candidate to Norway and a thirst for Norwegian knitting traditions.

When unforeseen circumstances negated my first ethics approval, I reimagined an alternative immersion research trip and travelled to England, Scotland, The Shetland Isles, Ireland and The Aran Islands.

I chose to express the immersion memoir using a lyric form that hybridises prose and poetical devices and that is less interested in a linear narrative: ‘By infusing prose with tools normally relegated to poetic forms, the lyric essayist creates anew, each time, a work that is interactive, alive, and full of new spaces in which meaning can germinate.’¹⁶ A sub-type of the lyric form is the braided essay. My memoir braids together autobiographical journeys (metaphorical and

¹⁴ Robin Hemley, *A Field Guide to Immersion Writing: Memoir, Journalism, and Travel* (Athens London: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 9.

¹⁵ Miller and Paola, 154.

¹⁶ *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 146-47.

physical), immersion research, knitting history and agency in building resilience after multiple traumas.



A Meditation on Methodology

I think of my practice-led research method for this thesis as a fusion of techniques from related fields: creative writing, auto/biography, and creative nonfiction.

I am completely involved with the processes and outputs of the narrative I am writing; they invoke a series of research actions (practice-led). I filter words through a singular vision to tell aesthetically appealing stories (creative writing). I mine my memories and artefacts relating to them as primary sources (auto/biographical), I completely involve myself in a diverse range of contexts (immersion) and express those words through a braided lyric form (creative nonfiction).

All are deployed to devise a narrative persona for ‘stories’ anchored in real life, expressed through imagery, narrative arc, characterisation, setting and dialogue. According to Vivian Gornick:

To fashion a persona out of one’s own undisguised self is no easy thing. A novel or a poem provides invented characters or speaking voices that act as surrogates for the writer...The persona in a nonfiction narrative is an unsurrogated one.¹⁷

I question whether I am strong enough to take traumatic memories and convert them to written words that I— with no protective shield— am prepared for others to read. Academia understands the nature of the constructed ‘I’, but what of the general public. So, even as I declare my method, I am already quivering with anticipated rejection.

In my guise as bold scholar, I adopt another persona, one who can assert: I privilege my memories, a personal archive of knowing and a source of autobiographical authority, while respecting an

¹⁷ Gornick, 7.

ethical approach to other lives¹⁸ within my research orbit. At the same time, I work within precepts of historical validity and authenticity when portraying the lives of role models¹⁹ that have influenced the course of my life, and, hence, the narrative.

I point out that I have not engaged with the autobiographical written accounts of other trauma survivors. As an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I have tried, but I am unable to do so without it adversely and acutely affecting my mental health. I can speculate about why this happens and do so in Chapter 3 below. However, I try to ensure my work does not occur within a genre vacuum by accessing the critical perspectives of relevant trauma/life writing theorists such as Kate Douglas in *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (2010). At a remove from first person accounts, they are just bearable.

Other disciplines in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences offer methods related to creative writing research—I mine psychology in particular for Chapter 3, where I will discuss trauma, flow and resilience in Knit Lit.

Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper distinguish creative writing from other theoretical paradigms for its primary focus on the production of new works and its understanding of not only the ideas and actions but also the processes that inform a project.²⁰

In this respect, creative writing research is fundamentally 'practice-led'; or to put it another way, it always has practice at its conceptual core, even when it is dealing with issues of critical understanding or with theoretical speculation.²¹

¹⁸ My nuclear family is notably sketchy in the creative work. At the beginning of this project, I promised to respect their privacy and names have been changed. Other family matters are already in the public domain and a rigorous vetting by the Flinders University Social Behaviour Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) approval process safeguarded bystanders

¹⁹ I am not seeking to uncover primary texts related to their lives. I am interested in the popular cultural offerings that generated my knowledge and construction of, and relationship, to them.

²⁰ Kroll and Harper, 2.

²¹ Ibid.

From experience with previous projects in diverse disciplines,²² I approach practice-led, creative writing research with the foreknowledge that—regardless of the methods chosen—any aspect of the writing processes or products is likely to be resistant to tidy definition.

Moments in creative writing practice are iterative, with constant circling back and forth between complex layers. I think of it as an ecosystem with biofeedback loops. It is a vital, quasi-living entity that has the capacity to lead the researcher in a quest defined by a driving need to answer: so what and what is the next word on the page?

Imagine complete involvement in that research ecosystem. That is what practitioners in diverse disciplines such as auto/biography, creative writing and creative nonfiction do—with nuances particular to their own fields—when they choose to research using the method known as immersion.

Lee Gutkind, drawing on investigative journalism experience, says that immersion requires an invisible presence in the research context: he draws an analogy between himself and a table—‘a rather undistinguished and utilitarian end table’²³—in making the point that it should only be noticed by its absence.

Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, also creative nonfiction writers, see it otherwise. For them immersion means ‘the technique of actually living an experience’²⁴ so that both writer, and the facts the immersion uncovers, can appear in the text.

As a writer of the autobiographical, I seek self-representation and the narrated ‘I’ as the dominant, visible subject and motivator of the work. Memories and related media such as photographs, newspapers and diaries are my primary sources. Additionally, as an

²² Architecture, Constructed Textiles, and The Visual Arts

²³ Lee Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality* (New York, Chichester, Brisbane, Toronto, Singapore, Weinheim: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1997), 103.

²⁴ Miller and Paola, 75-76.

enthusiastic knitter, I completely immerse myself in the world of knitting, knitted artefacts, knitting literature, and the lives of those who have an association with knitting, exert a magnetic pull.

For me, accessing writing through knitting as a performative technique—within immersion as a method—is a longstanding habit. I begin with stitches (knitting) in pursuit of words. Picture me sitting on my bed knitting (or crocheting). You can see next to me a line of writing in a visual diary. Also, notice the pen or pencil? What you can't see is that the line was the last thing I wrote yesterday. It was left as a prompt for the next knitting/writing session, a grounding thread.

I work by entering Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's notion of a state of experience he calls flow. I achieve it by rhythmic knitting movement in an action driven meditation. He says that when one feels the sense of flow from intense concentration: the levels of challenge and skill are in harmony, time and personal problems are suspended, and there is a sense of control, feedback, and timelessness.²⁵ In a state of flow, I write more freely: released from the critical discipline of the conscious mind and the internal critic.

Head, heart, hands, yarn and needles co-operate to facilitate access to memory. When the unconscious state of flow is interrupted by the outer world, free association yields ideas that I capture by scribbling keywords, fragments or mind maps. The exchange between my head and the pen in my hand then generate more ideas. When it reaches the stage where whole sentences emerge, I switch to my computer and type as fast as I can. And, permeating the whole process is the looping feedback between internal beliefs and external influences and theories.

Practice-led by words and stitches, I developed my own iterations of doing a doctorate. My family call it my *Phud*. When I am

²⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi and Auckland: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 71.

Phudding, I dash forward and feel as though I'm flying, go backwards in full retreat, run on the spot stuck nowhere, try to go under, over, around or through obstacles; always, there are reiterations of knitting, writing, reading, trying, failing, persisting and learning how to write this thing called a thesis—a memoir and exegesis—and knit what I think of as knitted memory sites.

I see correlations with the work of artists such as Tracey Emin when I insist on the autobiographical as my preferred mode.²⁶ Like her, and her controversial self-reflective exhibits, I assert my method as a performative fusion, my version of autobiographical immersion, and my complementary research techniques.

Some examples of autobiographical immersion can be seen as autobiography on demand. Around 2003, Sharon Aris intentionally immersed herself in knitting situations and knitting circles to find out what the so-called 'new' knitting trend was about. Her book—*It's My Party and I'll Knit if I Want to!*²⁷—is one of the few examples of autobiographical Knit Lit from Australia. In 2015, Debbie Zawinski wrote *In the Footsteps of Sheep: Tales of a Journey through Scotland, Walking, Spinning, and Knitting Socks*.²⁸ The title is self-explanatory and another example of the author setting out to immerse herself in an activity so that she could write autobiographically about it.

In like fashion, I planned an immersive research journey to Norway in 2008. As a child I had escaped from traumatic memory and PTSD into an elaborate, imagined Norwegian world with a Viking *Shadow Maiden* and a big, white, shaggy, ice bear as my companions. When I was preparing for my Research Proposal approval presentation, it was a natural default to look, in part, to

²⁶ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Interfaces: Women Autobiography Image Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 1-4.

²⁷ Sharon Aris, *It's My Party and I'll Knit If I Want To!* (Crow's Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

²⁸ Debbie Zawinski, *In the Footsteps of Sheep: Tales of a Journey through Scotland, Walking, Spinning, and Knitting Socks* (Pittsville WI: Schoolhouse Press USA, 2015).

Norway for my creative writing research of knitting and knitting literature. Obviously, it was also designed to provide interest—authentic content and background—for my potential audience of globally-located knitter/crafters

I planned a three-month itinerary using an excel spreadsheet to record all the details and track other administrative issues and manage budget arrangements. My prime target was a six week International Summer School in Oslo where I would take courses in ‘Norwegian Literature’ and ‘Art and Architecture in Norway’ as keys to Norwegian attitudes. Then I planned and arranged interviews with four Norwegian knitted textile designers, of whom three—Margaretha Finseth, Annemor Sundbø, and Solveig Hisdal—had published between them a dozen examples of Norwegian knitting literature with autobiographical content.²⁹

Part of the process was obtaining SBREC ethics’ approval for the interview, form letters, and questionnaires I planned to use, and submitting funding requests (which were successful) for a Flinders University Overseas Research Trip grant and to the Flinders University ETHL Faculty for a study grant.

Beyond writing, I decided to knit garments by the Norwegian designers I investigated to add a further layer of texture to my work. I envisaged a braided, lyric autobiography where the writing and writing about knitting would complement each other.

When a lengthy intermission, the result of a motor vehicle accident, voided the conditions of my first ethics approval, I self-funded an immersion research journey to England, Scotland and Ireland including many outlying island groups such as Shetland, Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Aran. In Ireland I was a participant of a knitting tour.

This required a new SBREC ethics’ approval for planned interviews with Jean Moss, a knitting designer/author, and Oliver

²⁹ They are available in English translation.

Henry,³⁰ a well-known Shetland business proprietor from a wool classing background. Both trips are narrated in detail in the creative work titled 'To be fully herself'.

For the exegesis, I concentrate on a reading of trauma, flow, resilience and their intersections in examples of Knit Lit within the two sections of Chapter 3. Identifying the texts I would analyse raised the issue of selection. As Knit Lit nonfiction seems to be a virgin field, a prime question in the absence of prior work is, 'Where do I start?' If you are a PhD candidate, you concede that the entire body of Knit Lit nonfiction is too broad, and tighten your focus to the sub-topic of the autobiographical.

You can go to *Vogue Knitting* magazines and read their Knit Lit pages. You can search online goodreads.com, yarnharlot.com, ravelry.com, and knittersreview.com. You can browse the book catalogues of bookdepository.com, barnesandnoble.com, schoolhousepress.com, interweave.com, and amazon.com, or kindle e-books on amazon.com.au where you will find knitting books and magazines detailed. You can scan entries in digitalcommons.bepress.com or worldcat.com for theses, analogue and digital. You can flick through books in university and public libraries, and bricks and mortar book shops, or on Google Books' previews. You can search for online theses or read the bibliographies in all manner of craft sites. You can set an alert to feed new entries to your email.

I know because over the course of my doctorate I have revisited these sites—and more—many times as part of my research, not so much in survey but to ensure examples of the autobiographical in nonfictional literature of knitting—English or translation—in the period 1998-2017 didn't escape my net. At all these sites, there may be a synopsis and some popular commentary about the contents, competence or beauty of the book.

³⁰ Sarah Laurenson, ed. *Shetland Textiles: 800bc to the Present* (Garthspool, Lerwick: Shetland Heritage Publications, 2013), 26-27.

These texts are predominantly from the United States, but I have found examples from England, Australia, Scotland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden. Blogs, e-books and other virtual texts are considered primarily as future research. In my creative work, I broaden the above limits treating all knitting literature as a source for writing about knitting/ traditions and my own knitting.

In summary, both the creative and critical work is informed in different measure by methodology from practice-led research, auto/biography, creative writing, creative nonfiction and psychology (trauma, flow and resilience studies).

Conclusion



I have introduced you to key elements in my work: words and stitches; knitting and knitting literature; practice-led research; immersion/creative nonfiction techniques; the arc between imagination and Norway; and reading, writing and stitching self-life narrative in the literature of knitting.

Even though the creative and critical works are harnessed in a symbiotic relationship, an artificial separation between them facilitates an understanding of the influences, theories and concepts that have informed my work.

With that purpose in mind, in Chapter 1, I chart the fabric of Knit Lit. Firstly, there needs to be an understanding of what is meant, a definition of nonfiction Knit Lit as it is used in this thesis. Secondly, the context of that literature is given so that the locus of the field is established.

In Chapter 2, I explain the emergence of Knit Lit autobiography, identify the common forms within these texts and establish the criteria I use to select texts discussed in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, Section A, I discuss the nature of trauma, flow, and resilience. Please note, I do not follow the pathway that would precede a literary, trauma theorist's investigation of these topics, although I am informed on their contribution to autobiography: its ethics, limits and the politics of memory. It is the medicalised

paradigm and its impact on my experience of trauma and healing that was paramount in my own practice-led research, and understanding of the texts I examine.

In Section B, I read exemplars of Knit Lit autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience to answer the thesis's guiding question: Do these texts position knitting as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events? This act is the major part of my claim to have generated new knowledge.

In chapter 4, I present the original, creative artefact—'To be fully herself'. This unpublished manuscript tells the story of the trajectory of trauma, flow, and resilience in my own knitting journey of healing. As I have already said, the creative and critical bleed each into the other like dye on silk. There is exegetical content in the memoir that contributes to critical understandings expressed explicitly in the exegesis.

In chapter 5, I present my conclusions and suggestions for future research.

This is followed by the Bibliography.



Chapter 1: Charting the Fabric of Knit Lit

Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to set the parameters of the broader milieu within which my thesis hypothesis operates. I seek to provide an understanding of the world of Knit Lit nonfiction so that when I later discuss autobiographies of trauma, flow and resilience in Knit Lit the reader may better understand the context.

Specifically, I argue in favour of an inclusive understanding of contemporary Knit Lit. I highlight the difference between knitting literature and knitting in literature. I outline the history of knitting literature. Finally, I offer an inclusive working definition. These specifics directed at knitting literature as the subject of inquiry—the definition and contextualisation of Knit Lit—are part of my thesis claim to have made an original contribution to knowledge.



Toward a Definition of Knit Lit

As noted in my introductory ‘Poetics of Words and Stitches’, there is scant published critique of the literature of knitting. Given that absence, it is a necessary prelude to establish a working definition of what I encompass when I use that terminology.

By dictionary definition, one version of the literature of a subject is everything that is written about that subject. And so the literature of knitting is everything written about knitting. This becomes knitting literature or, as shortened in this thesis, Knit Lit. To date, I have treated ‘the literature of knitting’, ‘knitting literature’, and ‘Knit Lit’ as interchangeable terms. I indicate where necessary the fictional or nonfictional forms.

How do I justify this choice? Especially of Knit Lit? Knit Lit is not so much a contested term, but one that is used in contemporary knitting discourse in a rather haphazard fashion. Its use, predominantly from the US, seems to be located along a continuum (like

a grey scale of shifting genre) between nonfiction and fiction with readers/writers/knitters selecting their own preferred term using criteria that isn't made transparent.

An example of the way the term is fluid can be examined by thinking about knitting 'in' fiction. Like trainspotting, some choose to make lists of instances where knitting appears as a minor motif or just a random scene in a fictional character's construction or situation and call it Knit Lit.

Characters are shown knitting by famous authors, for instance, Jane Austen in a number of her works, Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*, or Agatha Christie in crime fiction with Miss Marple as sleuth. A knitter/writer takes that character as inspiration and a nonfiction book—such as *What Would Madame Defarge Knit?*¹—is published with commentary about the character in the original book and a pattern based on the inspiration.

This relationship (between knitting in literature and Knit Lit) forms an interface that can be further complicated by ekphrasis: that is, a textual description of a visual object. I draw my understanding of ekphrasis from James Heffernan's often cited definition.² I employ ekphrasis when I write in my Knit Lit memoir about knitted garments of which I have autobiographical experience.

The earliest printed use of the colloquial contraction (Knit Lit) that I have been able to find comes from the title of a book published in 2002, *Knit Lit: Sweaters and Their Stories...And Other Writing about Knitting*. Perhaps the editors, Linda Roghaar and Molly Wolf, adapted the cadence of Chick Lit, or simply contracted knitting literature, or perhaps borrowed it from an earlier usage unknown to me. As with the history of knitting itself, so, too, ubiquity has served to confuse the paper trail for the history and analysis of Knit Lit.

¹ Heather Ordover and Jen Minnis (illustr.), eds., *What Would Madame Defarge Knit?: 21 Patterns & Essays Inspired by Classic Literature* (Lakewood, OH: Cooperative Press, 2011).

² James A W Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 3.

It could be argued that the terminology Knit Lit represents a particular era in history (1998—present) where there is a feedback loop between texts from the physical and virtual worlds courtesy of the Web with blogs, interactive sites such as ravelry.com, and e-books. This limited view would overlook the fact that texts from previous eras have been made available to a global audience, giving them contemporary currency, through online sites that have scanned and reprinted them, or made scarce originals more available at a premium.

Before I complete my argument for an inclusive view of Knit Lit, I outline the history of knitting literature to provide a context for that understanding.



Outline of the History of Knit Lit.

Knitting and published Knit Lit enjoy a symbiotic relationship: each informs the other. However, their histories, while co-dependant, have distinct extant starting points.

First, extant examples of true knitting—as distinct from nälbinding that uses a single needle—date from around 1200AD. Beyond artefactual evidence in public and private collections, the knitting historian relies on handwritten documents for the period between 1200—1615AD. Susan M Strawn summarises the situation:

The unremarkable and intimate stuff of everyday life, knitting and its story in early America must be teased from the historical record a bit at a time. Letters and diaries, paintings and memoirs, account books, wills and inventories that survived through the centuries reveal the story of knitting, though in fleeting details.³

Knit Lit history by contrast only begins with the published record.

³ Susan M Strawn, *Knitting America: A Glorious Heritage from Warm Socks to High Art* (St Paul: Voyageur Press, 2007), 11.

According to Richard Rutt, two stories published by Edmund Howes in 1615 are significant as the first extant, printed record of knitting history, and thus of Knit Lit history. One of the stories is about the worsted knit hose seen in a Mantua merchant's house and the other relates to silk stockings made for Queen Elizabeth the First of England by Mrs Montague.⁴

Richard Rutt also tells of the first, extant, printed knitting recipe for a knitted garment within an anonymous medical compendium published in 1655. It is called *Natura Exenterata: or Nature unbowelled by the most exquisite anatomizers of her*, and contains a pattern—written as a three-page, single sentence—for the knitting of clocked hose.⁵ It is notable in that it does not tell/teach the knitter how to knit.

A common autobiographical motif in Knit Lit is the story of how a person learned to knit. Some say they learned to knit from a book, or YouTube video, but, many describe learning sessions with significant relatives, or friends, or owner/staff of local yarn stores (LYS) or knitting circles.

Historically the investment by historians in knitting has seen a slow uptake. Rutt says there are a number of reasons for this. He proposes that, compared to other forms of textiles, museum collections have limited hand knitting items, books on the subject were journalistic and amateur, historians were not attracted to domesticity, and the lack of a subject outline discouraged expansion into monographs.⁶

Few printed books in English refer to knitting in the years between 1615 and the latter part of the 1770s. Notable among them is the captivity narrative of Mary White Rowlandson from Lancaster,

⁴ Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting* (London: B.T.Batsford Ltd, 1987), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83, 239-41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

Massachusetts originally written by hand and later published.⁷ She recounts how she traded knitting with her Indian captors for food and goods.⁸

This publication relates to knitting, and, although it doesn't take knitting as its main subject and thus can't be considered Knit Lit, I consider it important to my project as a precursor of the arc I explain in detail in chapter 3: between trauma, flow, and resilience, and knitting.

With the crowning of Queen Victoria, the Anglophone world (including the US) takes its cue from her and the cult of domesticity sees women in urban centres separated in the home from men in outside spheres. Unlike the women in outlying rural regions such as the Shetland Isles which depend on knitting for subsistence, and the droves of evicted farmworkers relocating to the industrial centres, the new middle classes enjoy an existence where the male's ability to provide the female with time and money for leisure, rather than utilitarian purposes, speaks of his status in society.

Coinciding with new levels of education, literacy, unease with the shift to a new credit economy, and exposure to goods from throughout the British Empire, we see a flurry of publication of knitting periodicals, books, and patterns targeting women. Many knitters today are familiar with these types of books and periodicals through facsimile editions and the reworking of vintage patterns to allow for contemporary practices and techniques. Examples are *The lady's assistant* by Jane Gaugain (1840); and Cornelia Mee *Manual of knitting, netting and crochet* (1842); and *The dictionary of*

⁷ Mary White Rowlandson, "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. : Commended by Her, to All That Desire to Know the Lords Doings to, & Dealings with Her; Especially to Her Dear Children and Relations. / Written by Her Own Hand, for Her Private Use, and Now Made Publick at the Earnest Desire of Some Friends, and for the Benefit of the Afflicted.," Samuel Phillips, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evansdemo/R09651.0001.001?view=toc>, accessed 3 May, 2017.

⁸ Strawn, 14.

needlework by S.F.A. Caulfield and Blanche C. Saward (1882). Richard Rutt lists more than 237 books, cards, and 18 periodicals from before 1910. Additionally, he indicates 99 issues of *Weldon's Practical Knitter*.

At times of war and civilian unrest, knitting becomes more visible. Publications from these eras promulgate information and propaganda along with knitting patterns and stories. I am thinking of the role of the press from the time of the American War of Independence (1775—1783) and in Europe, the Crimean War (1853—1856), and throughout the twentieth century, until the present 'War on Terror'.

At these times, more people knit; knitters look for printed patterns they can use to send comforts to troops or aid to refugees, congregate in 'Stitch 'n Bitch'⁹ style knitting groups for camaraderie, and 'make do and mend'¹⁰ to counter shortages caused by war production. Marjory Tillotson's *Woolcraft* (1913), *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book* (1938), and *Mary Thomas's Book of Knitting Patterns* (1943) enjoy great influence and the latter two are still in print today.

Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design (2008) by American authors, Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl, notes the mid to late 1990s as the beginning of a major craft movement. Among trigger moments they list Debbie Stoller's craft column in the magazine *Bust* and her start-up of the New York 'Stitch 'n Bitch' knitting group. Faythe Levine writes:

Our handmade goods were influenced by traditional handiwork, modern aesthetics, politics, feminism, and art...Without really being conscious of it, we were creating an independent economy free from corporate ties. I quickly realized I was a part of a burgeoning art community based on creativity, determination, and networking.¹¹

⁹ Started during The First World War with Debbie Stoller adopting the name in her start-up of a New York knitting group in 1998 and for the many similarly formed and named groups that followed.

¹⁰ This relates to rationing during and after the Second World War.

¹¹ Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl, eds., *Handmade Nation: The Rise of Diy, Art, Craft, and Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), ix.

As someone who came of age in the 1950s and 60s, it has resonances for me with the counterculture—and the knitting publications it generates—that is a complex response to the Civil Rights Movement, Second Wave Feminism, the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson,¹² the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War.

After chunky homespun, psychedelic yarns, mohair and other choices of conscience or fashion, Eve Harlow with *The Art of Knitting* (1977) and Patricia Roberts Knitting Patterns (1977) signal a revival of British knitting, followed by London-based, American Kaffe Fassett's *Glorious Knitting* (1985). These are key examples and the role of other books and periodicals throughout the later 1900s from other knitting design companies and knitting designers are noted.

In America, influential pioneers of knitting include Mary Walker Phillipp who wrote *Creative Knitting: A New Art Form*. Her work challenged the art/craft divide and signalled the arrival of feminist, textile art practitioners and historians. Barbara G Walker authored what grew to be a four volume *Treasury of Knitting* with thousands of knitting stitch samples, plus their patterns or charts that are still major sources for contemporary knitters/designers. Elizabeth Zimmerman,¹³ a US based English knitter/designer/author, introduced a relaxed approach to knitting that was not a slave to prescribed patterns and their presupposed tension/gauge restrictions. I draw a connection between her methods and the pre-literate knitters who didn't follow printed written directions.

Pivotal moments for the contemporary knitting story are the 9/11 attacks in the US followed by the Global Financial Crisis. After such events, it is human to seek a source of comfort, to bond with family and community, to find a sense of control through creativity, to enjoy

¹² It is credited with launching the environment movement.

¹³ Kathryn Parks and Colleen McFarland, "Stitch by Stitch: The Life and Legacy of Elizabeth Zimmerman," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* Winter 2011/2012, 34-47.

distraction, to create rather than destroy and, perhaps, to generate a non-corporate income. For some, embracing and adding momentum to the knitting revival, including the flurry of texts it generated, that began in the 1990s met these needs.

According to the Craft Yarn Council of America:

Knitters and crocheters indicated the top three most important reasons they participate in their craft.

- Provides creative outlet (65%)
- Enjoy making things for others (51%)
- Provides a sense of accomplishment (44%)

It was interesting to note differences in responses by age. For instance, 45–54 year olds (70%) and 35–44 year olds (69%) are more likely than younger respondents to say they knit and crochet because it provides them with a creative outlet. For 18–24 year olds, creative outlet ranked first at 57%, followed closely by helping them cope with stress (54%) and making them feel productive (47%).¹⁴

Knitting books, magazines, blogs and sites like ravelry.com are an important part of knitting discourse as they support and assist knitters to realise their motivating desires/aims, and to participate in the global knitting community. Ravelry.com has more than seven million members around the globe.¹⁵

Systematic scrutiny of offerings from online, libraries, and bookstores indicate that knitting books and magazines today are genre diverse: knitting history, regional knitting traditions, knitter biographies, techniques, patterns, autobiographies, and fiction in which knitting plays an integral role.

As I have shown, printed publications referencing knitting history and patterns have been in existence since the 1600s at least. Knitting techniques were addressed in print in the Victorian era onwards. Other subgenres such as Knit Lit fiction (as distinct from knitting in literature) have appeared before in poems and songs but only evolved in their present form during the contemporary knitting craze. Before researching the topic, I thought this was also true of

¹⁴ Craft Yarn Council, "Knitting and Crochet Are Hot!," Craft Yarn Council, <http://www.craftyarnCouncil.com/know.html>, accessed 4/06/2017

¹⁵ Personal email 6 June, 2017 from Sarah at ravelry.com

autobiography; however, I have found otherwise and will report on this in detail in Chapter 2.

The texts of previous eras haven't been abandoned. They permeate through usage, referencing and citation, the libraries of contemporary knitting aficionados, and act as a guiding principle that informs the structure and contents of current innovative knitting books and magazine.



Conclusion/Definition of Knit Lit

For the purposes of this thesis, I shall use an inclusive view of the term Knit Lit to cover all the literature of knitting both fiction and nonfiction, including those commentaries and knitting patterns based on inspirational literature, as reasonably Knit Lit.

I reject the argument that Knit Lit should be reserved as a descriptor of printed output from the contemporary knitting craze (1998-2017) because of its association with online forms and networking not present in earlier eras. I do this based on the intertextual permeability of historical and contemporary texts. To do otherwise would lead to arbitrary distinctions that would see early editions excluded but reprints and facsimiles included because of publishing date. I believe this would run contrary to the interests of the stakeholders in these publications, including those who reference these texts in knitting discourse.

Not surprisingly, I exclude Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Agatha Christie and authors of other books that employ knitting as a literary device to serve other key textual purposes: these texts are clearly not intended as primarily focused on knitting and, hence, unreasonable to co-opt as Knit Lit authors. Imagine if you will, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* as quilting literature not quilting *in* literature. *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft & Nineteenth-Century Fiction* by Talia Schaffer (2011) provides interesting insights into other craft in fiction.

The definitions and contextualisation in response to Knit Lit as the subject of inquiry offered above are new to interdisciplinary knitting scholarship and make an original contribution to knowledge.



Chapter 2: The Autobiographical Turn in Knit Lit

Introduction

In this chapter, I continue the project of contextualising Knit Lit autobiographies as part of my contribution to original knowledge. From the total subgenre of Knit Lit nonfiction addressed in Chapter 1, I tighten the focus to Knit Lit autobiographies.

I explore the emergence of the autobiographical in Knit Lit, and then, the autobiographical forms prevalent in the literature of knitting. Finally, I introduce the earliest example of autobiographies of trauma, flow and resilience in Knit Lit. This monograph is the first of the collection of books that I subject to discussion in Chapter 3 in search of an answer to my thesis hypothesis: Do these autobiographies position knitting as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for resilience after traumatic events?



Emergence of Autobiographical Knit Lit

At the beginning of my doctoral research, I questioned whether the autobiographical 'I' was 'new' to the literature of knitting. The time frame 1998 to the present was set for my exegetical research because these twenty years roughly equate with what is referred to as the contemporary knitting revival.

As predicated in my methodology, I considered knitting books from analogue and online sources. Only one example prior to 1998 was needed to disprove the premise of the 'newness' of the autobiographical 'I' in Knit Lit.

Autobiographical narration has no one proscribed form and yet readers of those narratives have a heuristic, generic sense of what

they consider as autobiographical.¹ As a writer, I am interested because this touches on what I write, and whether or not readers' expectations are met. As a researcher, a definition of autobiographical narration must precede identification of examples. Of course, the presence of the first person pronoun is an inadequate indicator as it can, for example, represent fiction or nonfiction forms with no reflection on the self or its subjectivities.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that: 'As a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices, autobiographical narration offers occasions for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, and critiquing cultural norms and narratives.'² Therefore, I was looking for examples of Knit Lit where the authors deploy narrators who engage with the past, are self-reflexive about their identities, and write in accordance with or against constructs informed by societies and cultures: theirs or other.

Further, Smith and Watson theorise 'women's self-representation as a performative act, never transparent, that constitutes subjectivity in the interplay of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency.'³ Therefore, in addition to engaging with the past, self-reflexivity, and cultural critique, the narrators I sought use the text to narrate who they are and what they think, feel and believe.

With this understanding, I note *Knitting Without Tears* by Elizabeth Zimmerman, a key figure in American knitting history. It was first published in 1971 after she was the host in the mid-1960s of nationally syndicated TV show *The Busy Knitter*.

Although the topic is knitting techniques and directions, it is impossible to disregard the rich autobiographical voice in her unique

¹ Julie Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Kindle ed. (Waterloo Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013), Kindle edition Location 122-30.

² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Mapping Women's Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces," in *Interfaces: Women Autobiography Image Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 7-10.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

conversational tone. Mixed in with the pragmatic is tantalising glimpses of the subjectivity that builds a self-portrait of the narrator.

So please bear with me, and put up with my opinionated, nay, sometimes cantankerous attitude. I feel strongly about knitting...If you hate to knit, why, bless you, don't; follow your secret heart and take up something else. But if you start out knitting with enjoyment, you will probably continue in this pleasant path....Soft wool from the simple silly sheep can be as fine as a cobweb, tough and strong as string, or light and soft as down. There are scientific reasons why wool is the best material for knitting, and into these I will not go.⁴

But, you protest, this is more about sheep and wool. She isn't the subject of inquiry. But in understanding her world she comes to know more of herself. Her autobiographical tone is indicative of a nascent stage in Knit Lit, and stands out from other authors in the same era. It occurs as:

Personal narrative came to prominence in Western society after World War II...It emerged from at least four contemporary movements: the "narrative turn" in the human sciences; the "memoir boom" in literature and popular culture; the new "identity" movements spanning US culture and transnational emancipation efforts; and the burgeoning therapeutic culture.⁵

Her narrative turn reaches full bloom in Knit Lit in her *Knitting Around: or Knitting Without a License* (1989) that alternates sections of her inimitable knitting directions with interludes of autobiography that she calls 'Digressions'.

Of her pre-adult years in her native England she writes: 'I had a wonderful hideyhole in a gone-to-seed cabbage patch, and one day had the excitement and glory of falling through the roof of an abandoned chicken house, garnering the first permanent scar on my

⁴ Elizabeth Zimmerman, *Knitting without Tears: Basic Techniques and Easy-to-Follow Directions for Garments to Fit All Sizes*, First Fireside ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 2.

⁵ Kristin M Langellier, "Personal Narrative," in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 699.

leg.’⁶ She is using markers of memory, experience, identity, embodiment and agency to tell us who she was and, hence, to comment on whom she is.

At this stage of my research it was then obvious that the Autobiographical ‘I’ wasn’t new to Knit Lit (1998-present) as my preliminary investigation had suggested. Interestingly, the exception—Elizabeth Zimmerman’s book—was a monograph in the sense that it was not a periodical, but subject-wise the book featured both the author *and* knitting, foreshadowing a common hybrid form of Knit Lit publications between 1998 to the present.



Autobiographical Forms in Knit Lit 1998-2017

In Knit Lit nonfiction, autobiographical content is expressed in a range of forms: a sentence, paragraph or full introduction in an otherwise pragmatic text, a personal essay/story in an edited anthology, or a full monograph.

Annemor Sundbø, a Norwegian knitter/author I stayed with in Ose, Norway, published *Everyday Knitting: Treasures from a Ragpile* (2001). Although the book takes Norwegian knitting as its main subject, it begins with an autobiographical story called ‘How It All Started: A pile of rags or a treasure trove’. Amongst explanations of how she came to be the ‘dumbfounded owner of a factory for recycling wool’⁷ she says:

During my childhood, my mother used to say that if I didn’t behave, she would sell me to the ‘rag man’. I did end up in a pile of rags, and sometimes wonder what I did to deserve it.⁸

This excerpt reveals that the narrator didn’t always behave according to her mother’s standards and ‘bogey’ men tales are not limited to

⁶ Elizabeth Zimmerman, *Knitting Around: Or Knitting without a License* (Pittsville Wisconsin: Schoolhouse Press, 1989), 15.

⁷ Annemor Sundbø, *Everyday Knitting: Treasures from a Ragpile* (Kristiansand: Torridal Tweed, 2001), 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

Anglophile worlds; it introduces the notion that what happens to us in childhood still plays in the adult mind.

What I call ‘how I first learned to knit’ stories are common motifs—a form of shared literacy or a membership badge if you will—in personal encounters between knitters, in Knit Lit nonfiction generally, and autobiography in particular. This narration usually involves a significant other, sometimes female, less often male: a mother, a father, or other relative, friend or local yarn store (LYS) staff. Gendered, cultural traditions of domesticity or intimacy and passing the mantle to the younger generation are often attached to the stories, while LYS speaks of the camaraderie of the current knitting wave, and the significant role of the LYS as a transactional hub in that movement.

For example, in *Stitch’n Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook*, Debbie Stoller (2003) writes:

My earliest attempts at knitting were a disaster. At the age of five, I remember fumbling with a pair of aluminium needles and the squeaky pink acrylic yarn my mother had given me to practice with. My sweaty, dirty child hands made the needles sticky and slowly turned the yarn from light pink to gray...That’s when my mother would take the work from me—‘these needles are so *sticky*’—gently put the fallen stitches back on the needles...and hand the mini torture device back to me.⁹

It is erroneous to conclude that other Knit Lit author’s followed the influential Elizabeth Zimmerman or Debbie Stoller and *copied* this aspect of their early work because offering credentials—knitting or otherwise—are such a widespread established aspect of human discourse that such a suggestion would fail. Suffice to say, such narrations—of ‘how I first learnt to knit’—are a staple in Knit Lit texts, often in the introduction, many of which are not autobiographical except in that one respect.

⁹ Debbie Stoller, *Stitch’n Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2003), 5.

Another common autobiographical account is 'how I got involved' in a certain project, knitting tradition, or collection of patterns. Again, these short, essay forms coexist with mainly pragmatic, knitting instructions and patterns. Their focus can be couched in ways that signal mini-travel essays or essays of ideas as in the following case.

Knitted Socks East and West: 30 Designs Inspired by Japanese Stitch Patterns (2009) by Judy Sumner is a charming compilation prefaced by a narration about her reaction to finding a Japanese Stitch dictionary.

Poring over the pages, I couldn't help but wonder where they had come from, and how long they'd been around. Whose mind had seen something—a flower, or a butterfly—and been able to translate it into the ornate and complicated pattern in front of me? I marveled that someone had the patience to work out these patterns, as many were not intuitive, requiring a close reading of the stitches as they emerged on the needles.¹⁰

An example of the autobiographical travel paragraphs can be found in Donna Druchunas' *Arctic Lace: Knitting Projects and Stories Inspired by Alaska's Native Knitters* (2006). She writes:

I first learned about quiviut [¹¹] in an article in *Piecework* magazine in 1996. Janet Catherine Berlo told of visiting a group of Native Alaskan women who knit with this incredible fiber...The article drew me in. I was driven to find out as much as I could about these women and this mystery fiber they were knitting into lace. My quest took me to the Internet, to the library, to conversations with yarn companies in Canada, and ultimately to Alaska, where I finally found Oomingmak ("the bearded one" in the Inupiat language).¹²

Other texts similar to this one feature a knitter/author, most often of US origin, researching, visiting, and representing regional knitting

¹⁰ Judy Sumner and Yoko Inoue, *Knitted Socks East and West: 30 Designs Inspired by Japanese Stitch Patterns* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2009), 6.

¹¹ 'Softer than merino, finer than cashmere, lighter than silk, the fiber...is quiviut, the down of the musk ox.' Donna Druchunas, *Arctic Lace: Knitting Projects and Stories Inspired by Alaska's Native Knitters* (Fort Collins: Nomad Publishers, 2006), 7.

¹² Ibid.

traditions. I note that the politics of memory, ethics of representation, critiques of post colonialism, and subaltern subjects are conjured by these texts. I was mindful of these issues in my ethics application, overseas research, and creative work.

The majority of Knit Lit nonfiction that is not purely expository follows one of the above models. Beyond these hybrid texts, the minority are the relatively small body of memoirs that are either anthologies or monographs.

Autobiographical Knit Lit anthologies (edited books) are rich repositories of stories about knitting, and, for my purposes, those who knit or reflect on how knitting by others has affected their lives. Early examples are the three books—*Knit Lit*,¹³ *Knit Lit (too)*¹⁴ and *Knit Lit the Third*¹⁵—edited by Linda Roghaar and Molly Wolf already noted in part in Chapter 1. More recent books edited by Ann Hood are *Knitting Yarns* and *Knitting Pearls*.

The *Knit Lit* series were compiled from hundreds of submissions.

The looming stacks of stories on our desks approached avalanche point. Stories about sweaters, sheep, grandmothers, boyfriends, babies, 9/11, dyepots, knitting disasters—and then there were the poems, dozens of them...We wanted stories from different places. We wanted stories by men as well as women. We wanted stories to reflect more than the main *KnitLit* themes of fiber obsession and warm, loving relationships; we wanted dark colors to set off lighter hues, for light needs darkness to make it shine.¹⁶

From mention of place in each story, the 74 contributors to *Knit Lit (too)*, 46 live in the US, 18 not known, 4 in Canada, 2 in the UK, 1 in Australia, and 1 in India thus American culture is the dominant voice, as it is in general Knit Lit publications, both fiction and nonfiction. However, within that dominant filter (that is in itself not homogenous),

¹³ Linda Roghaar and Molly Wolf, eds., *Knit Lit: Sweaters and Their Stories...And Other Writing About Knitting* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002).

¹⁴ *Knit Lit (Too): Stories from Sheep to Shawl...And More Writing About Knitting* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

¹⁵ *Knit Lit the Third: We Spin More Yarns* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005).

¹⁶ *Knit Lit (Too): Stories from Sheep to Shawl...And More Writing About Knitting*, xv.

the individual voices range from celebratory to despair. The same is true of the two texts mentioned above: that is, *Knitting Yarns: Writers about Knitting* (2014) and *Knitting Pearls: Writers Writing about Knitting* (2016) both edited by Ann Hood..

For the first Knit Lit monograph I found, I refer to *The Knitting Sutra* by Susan Gordon Lydon. The latter paperback edition in my collection is undated but was after the hardback published in 1997, a year before the period of research, but plausibly during the indie, craft *zeitgeist* that is dated from the mid-1990s.¹⁷

In this text, the narrator falls off a deck in California's Napa Valley and breaks her right arm. This was the beginning of what she describes as 'a series of inward and outward journeys that would drop me off in a different place from where I had started.'¹⁸ She is resilient in the face of a diagnosis of cancer later in the book because of her previous transformation and posttraumatic growth. Such was my first encounter with Knit Lit autobiography that linked adverse events to knitting practice.



Conclusion

As explained above, in my research I considered knitting nonfiction books from analogue and online sources. I assessed these against criteria that sought evidence of narrators who engage with the past, are self-reflexive about their identities and comment on culture as well as narrating their subjectivity.

I found Elizabeth Zimmerman's *Knitting Around: Or Knitting Without a License* (1989). This was the proof that contradicted my initialising research which suggested that the autobiographical 'I' was new to Knit Lit from 1998 to 2017.

¹⁷ Levine and Heimerl, xiv-xv.

¹⁸ Susan Gordon Lydon, *The Knitting Sutra: Craft as a Spiritual Practice*, First Broadway Books ed. (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 18.

Autobiographical expression in Knit Lit is found in seemingly iconic forms: prefaces of 'how I learnt to knit' or 'how I got involved' in specific knitting practices and traditions. Beyond these hybrid texts, the minority are part of a small body of memoirs that are either anthologies or monographs. *The Knitting Sutra* by Susan Gordon Lydon (1997/2004 reprint) is the first of these autobiographies of trauma, flow and resilience in Knit Lit that I will discuss in the next Chapter.



Chapter 3: Trauma, Flow, and Resilience in Knit Lit

Introduction

The process of writing a book demands that the author makes many thousands of decisions to articulate their singular vision of its subject, shape and contents. This interaction between the creative and the critical takes place as a cyclic, background murmur. It dips back and forth between conscious and seemingly unconscious thought; it adds a word here and draws an image there.

In the case of my manuscript, 'To be fully herself', the relationship between trauma, flow and resilience are central to the transformational journey that the protagonist makes. When all else fails, the narrator turns to knitting to save her sanity and find a way to resilience as posttraumatic growth. In doing so, she guides the author's story arc to an exploration of agency through knitting as therapy rather than the related canon and topic of writing as therapy.

In Section A of this chapter, I examine my understanding of those terms—trauma, flow, and resilience—that informed the shaping of the text in my memoir 'To be fully herself'. In Section B, I identify those texts that contribute to my argument that in Knit Lit autobiographies of knitting is positioned as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for resilience as posttraumatic growth. I explore selected Knit Lit autobiographies with the aim of understanding how other authors articulate their particular experiences.



Section A

Introduction

While writing my manuscript 'To be fully herself', I understood trauma, flow and resilience as a dynamic, reiterative process. In addition, they interpenetrated as flow—representative of optimal positive experience—built bridges between traumatic experience and resilience to current and future adversity. I address the subjects of trauma, flow and resilience separately in the following discussion, with the caveat that I recognise the separation as arbitrary; I reunite them in the subsequent section.



Trauma

My dynamic, reiterative view of the process of trauma, flow and resilience accepted the proposition that trauma was constructed through a display of 'symptoms' that demonstrated an 'abnormal' state which indicated a 'pathology' that required 'treatment' by a professional. Under this medicalised paradigm it was desirable to return to a pre-traumatic, baseline of happiness with resilience to future stress. The omission from this model was the possibility of transformational growth beyond the previous, culturally constructed normal.

This position became particularly apparent when I addressed the writing of the critical exegesis for this project. Although I said in the Introduction that I couldn't engage with the trauma stories of others, as my research progressed it became clear that I had to reconsider that position, and so I must read these Knit Lit autobiographies.¹ I found that what I read no more conformed to a solely pathological model than my own experience did. Practice-led

¹ They did re-traumatise me and were only bearable because of the relief provided by the knitting stories.

by research, I sought alternative understandings to the trauma equals dysfunction arc.

Stephen Joseph says that the theory of the shattered vase is central to his book *What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth* (2010).² It provides a metaphor for traumatic experience:

Imagine that a treasured vase sits in a place of prominence in your house. One day, you accidentally knock it off its perch. It smashes. Sometimes when vases shatter, there is enough left intact to provide a base from which to start the process of reconstruction. In this case, however, only shards remain.

What do you do? Do you try to put the vase back together as it was, using glue and sticky tape? Do you collect the shards and drop them in the garbage, as the vase is a total loss? Or do you pick up the beautiful colored pieces and use them to make something new—such as a colorful mosaic.³

He explains that, in the face of what he calls adversity, people can feel that at least a part of them—their perceptions of the world, their sense of themselves, their relationships—have, like the vase, been smashed.⁴

Likewise, Calhoun, Cann and Tedeschi (2010) say, ‘...we use the terms *trauma*, *crisis*, *major stressor*, and related terms as essentially synonymous expressions to describe circumstances that significantly challenge or invalidate important components of the individual's assumptive world.’⁵

According to the Australian Psychological Association:

² Stephen Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), xiii.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., xiv.

⁵ Lawrence G Calhoun, Arnie Cann, and Richard G Tedeschi, "The Posttraumatic Growth Model: Sociocultural Considerations," ed. Tzipi Weiss and Roni Berger, *Posttraumatic Growth and Culturally Competent Practice: Lessons Learned Around the Globe* (Hoboken New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2010), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/10.1002/9781118270028.ch1/pdf>. Accessed 21 July 2017. 1.

Situations and events that can lead a person to experience psychological trauma include:

- Acts of violence such as armed robbery, war or terrorism
- Natural disasters such as bushfire, earthquake or floods
- Interpersonal violence such as rape, child abuse, or suicide of a family member or friend
- Involvement in a serious motor vehicle or workplace accident

Other less severe but still stressful situations can also trigger traumatic reactions in some people.⁶

The dominant message was that trauma can manifest in physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional symptoms which needed fixing.⁷

In the physical domain, there was the possibility of hypervigilance, fatigue, disturbed sleep and body aches and pains.⁸ Cognitively, there may be traumatic memories and intrusive thoughts. Confusion, disorientation, poor memory and concentration were possible, as were nightmares and, during waking hours, visual images of the traumatic event.⁹ Behaviourally, there can be avoidance of activities, sites and people that trigger reminders of the trauma; and social withdrawal, isolation and disinterest in usual activities.¹⁰ Emotionally reactions can include fear, numbness, dissociation, depression, guilt, anger and irritability, anxiety and panic attacks.¹¹

All of the above symptoms are expressions of posttraumatic stress and may be acute (short term), chronic (long term) or delayed. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can be a severe long term effect where a proscribed combination of the above symptoms fails to resolve in the short term. This was the case for the narrator in 'To be fully herself'.

⁶ Australian Psychological Association, "Trauma," The Australian Psychological Society Limited, <http://www.believeinchange.com/Home/Topics/Trauma>, accessed 10 July 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

According to The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, PTSD 'is a mental illness. It comes after an event where a person is exposed to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence.'¹² In simplistic terms for public consumption they say:

Psychiatrists think that PTSD is caused by the brain laying down memories in the wrong place. During the traumatic event it's as if the brain gets overwhelmed. The memories get filed in the 'immediate action' part of the brain, instead of in the normal place.

Not everyone who experiences a traumatic event gets PTSD. In people who don't, it's thought that the brain gradually comes to terms with the memories and they are no longer as vivid.

For people with PTSD, these memories are as distressing and immediate as when the event first happened.¹³

PTSD is a subjective experience and the manifestations vary from person to person depending on their personality, prior instances of trauma, and the support systems available to them such as trusted family, friends and professional supports. It is mediated by the individual's culturally formed expectations, dissuasions and transgressions.

Through the violence of the twentieth century, PTSD has risen to prominence as a specific mental disorder diagnosed by meeting proscribed criteria in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, now in its fifth edition, and used by health professionals in other countries beyond the United States, including Australia. In recent years, public understandings of the misery of PTSD in Australia have been intermittently reinforced by media coverage of the Rolf Harris and Bill Cosby court cases and, in particular, information about the suffering

¹² The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, "Mental Illnesses Disorders, Ptsd," <http://www.youthealthinmind.org/mental-illnesses-disorders.ptsd>, accessed 10 July 2017.

¹³ Ibid.

of witnesses testifying to The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Stephen Joseph questions the dominance in what he calls the trauma industry of PTSD: 'Our understanding of how people adapt following adversity has become lopsided, focusing only on the negative.'¹⁴

In short, while the adoption of PTSD as a diagnostic category has been beneficial in terms of increasing access to psychological therapies for those who need them, it has been detrimental in these three ways: in taking responsibility away from people, in creating a culture of [negative] expectation, and ignoring the growth that often arises following trauma.¹⁵

I agree that his questioning is well placed, and I welcome the emphasis on the potential for posttraumatic growth generated by this relatively recent field of psychological research. It is significant in endorsing the possibilities for nuanced readings of Knit Lit autobiographies of trauma, flow and resilience.

Calhoun, Cann and Tedeschi (2010) write: 'The assumption that facing and struggling with major difficulties in life can lead to positive changes, sometimes radical transformations, is part of ancient myth, literature, and religion.'¹⁶ They also acknowledge that, earlier in the twentieth century, this idea was suggested by 'influential clinicians and scholars': that is Caplan, 1964; Frankl, 1963, and Yalom, 1980.¹⁷ It was the coining in print in 1995 and the '...systematic, quantitative investigation of [Posttraumatic Growth] PTG...' ¹⁸ that was new, and led the way for a focus on the individual's strengths in adversity, rather than solely concentrating on deficits.

Of course, this is not to say that distress and growth are linear or mutually exclusive. They can and/or do co-exist in the cyclic

¹⁴ Joseph, xv.

¹⁵ Ibid., xvi.

¹⁶ Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi, 1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

process that is the individual's posttraumatic stress experience. Evidence based recognition that the person subjected to trauma can experience posttraumatic stress as a natural, normal reaction empowers the individual, avoids an automatic self-fulfilling expectation of PTSD and validates the strengths of the individual.

My manuscript, 'To be fully herself', was inflected by the narrator's medicalised experience as a person who was traumatised as a young child, who then began, as a middle-aged adult, belated, extensive psychotherapy: hypnosis, psychoanalysis and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). There was never a suggestion during this process that her baseline happiness could actually exceed prior levels. During this process the narrator also relied on the popular book *Women Who Run with Wolves* by Jungian psychologist, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, and the self-help manual *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis. She was vaguely aware of a disjunction between the aspirations and of the pessimism of the professional and the optimism of self-help modes, but so caught up in the entire process that she didn't stop to sort it out.

As an author, it has taken me an entire memoir to try to articulate my own experience of trauma. I was conscious that it is a case of trying to contain the uncontainable, a view prevalent in literary theories about traumatic memory. The complexity of knowing collapses and becomes ineffable. Often the burden of not knowing becomes too hard and it is better to knit, immerse one's self in flow and knitting, and imagine butterflies. But through the journey, there were eventually more positive less negative days. Sometimes the transformation is so slow that it slips the notice until there is cause to take stock of the snapshot of before and after.

Research indicates that trauma in Knit Lit autobiographies points more to an expression of the transformational or growth model rather than a dwelling on the traumatic experience itself. I discuss this in greater depth in section B below.

My manuscript in Chapter 4 is the first time an Australian author of Knit Lit has explored Childhood Sexual abuse (CSA) as the original trauma in a book length memoir and stands as an original, creative artefact that provides a regional view to a US dominated field.



Flow

Originally, I thought that the impulse to knit or imagine butterflies was a means of escapism, of avoidance as a coping mechanism of working through PTSD. I recalled folk lore that juxtaposed craftwork—such as knitting—and living with or recovering from mental illness. The encouragement by rehabilitation staff of servicemen recovering from ‘shellshock’ from World War I by basket making, embroidery, or knitting comes to mind.

In art therapy the research was directed more usually to media other than textiles. By contrast, Anne Futterman Collier (2011) researched 821 women textile handcrafters. Her survey ‘reported the frequency and pattern of their handcraft making, reasons for creating with fibers, and [of interest in this discussion] whether they used handcrafts to change difficult moods.’¹⁹

She finds that: ‘Women who used textile handcrafts to change moods reported more success, rejuvenation, and engagement than women who did not use textile methods to cope.’²⁰ The findings were more complex (aesthetics, creativity etc.) than a simple attribution to the mental state known as flow; however, she says, ‘My results are consistent with the flow theory in that the textile-copers, who reported more success and rejuvenation with mood change, were also significantly more skilled and engaged in their handcraft making than

¹⁹ Ann Futterman Collier, "The Well-Being of Women Who Create with Textiles: Implications for Art Therapy," *Art Therapy* 28, no. 3 (2011), <http://tandfonline.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/pdf/10.1080/07421656.2011.597025>. Accessed 24 July 2017, 104.

²⁰ Ibid.

non-textile-copers.’²¹ The highest percentage of her respondents (37.1%) used knitting or crochet as their chosen hand craft.²²

In *Using Textile Arts and Handcrafts in Therapy with Women: Weaving Lives Back Together*, Collier (2012) says: ‘In my own practice and in conversation with other therapists and artists, I have found that the use of textile-making presents an amazing opportunity for growth, development, and psychological wholeness in women.’²³

During the present knitting revival (the late 1990s to the present), newspaper articles that claimed that knitting was the new yoga, and the like, contained the pearls of folk wisdom about therapy through craft. This is a theme repeated in many Knit Lit publications that I have read. So common was this motif that I initially thought it was stating the patently obvious when Betsan Corkhill’s e-book, *Knit for Health and Wellness: How to Knit a Flexible Mind and More...* (2014), was published. When she says, ‘This book is different because it gives you a tool—THERAPEUTIC KNITTING—which will enable you to persevere, take control and manage the process of change,’²⁴ I questioned the *newness* of the claim.

Instead, further reading made it apparent that, rather than anecdotal experience, she offers a systematic research project based on the single occupation of knitting, involving her status as a therapist²⁵ in concert with Stitchlinks/Cardiff University to translate folk lore into qualitative data. She writes: ‘The overwhelming messages in the numerous narratives received, and in the study which surveyed 3524 knitters from 31 countries, were the same regardless of the different cultural, educational and health

²¹ Ibid., 111.

²² Ibid., 109.

²³ *Using Textile Arts and Handcrafts in Therapy with Women: Weaving Lives Back Together* (London, Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2012), 14.

²⁴ Betsan Corkhill, *Knit for Health and Wellness: How to Knit a Flexible Mind and More...* (Bath: FlatBear Publishing, 2014). Accessed.location 24 Kindle

²⁵ She has used therapeutic knitting in her clinical practice since 2006.

backgrounds the knitters came from.²⁶ She quotes these narratives anonymously throughout the book.

In the research article results (2013), Riley, Corkhill and Morris write:

Respondents came from a virtual community of knitters. The majority were female white adults and frequent knitters, who commonly reported knitting for relaxation, stress relief and creativity. The results show a significant relationship between knitting frequency and feeling calm and happy. More frequent knitters also reported higher cognitive functioning. Knitting in a group impacted significantly on perceived happiness, improved social contact and communication with others.²⁷

Their conclusion found that: 'Knitting has significant psychological and social benefits, which can contribute to wellbeing and quality of life. As a skilled and creative occupation, it has therapeutic potential—an area requiring further research.'²⁸ Such was the experience of the narrator in 'To be fully herself'. Not surprisingly 'the rhythmic yet skilled process has the potential to induce flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1988), free up thinking and promote reflection.'²⁹

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is known as the 'father of flow' in recognition of his work throughout the many decades that he studied the psychology of optimal experience. His research explains the conditions under which knitting prevails as a flow activity and partially answers why the textile and knitting study's respondents, and myriad others such as myself, find and speak of knitting as an optimal experience.

'Perhaps, the clearest sign of flow is the experience of merging action and awareness.'³⁰. During this experience the person

²⁶ Corkhill.location 32

²⁸ Jill Riley, Betsan Corkhill, and Clare Morris, "The Benefits of Knitting for Personal and Social Wellbeing in Adulthood: Findings from an International Survey," *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* 76, no. 2 (2013), <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.4276/030802213X13603244419077>. Accessed 23 August 2018

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Claremont: Springer, 2014), 138.

focuses exclusively on their actions. This is literally a state where their focus is so intent that they are unaware of themselves, and the usual sub-vocal questions and answers that is the imposition of the self are silent. This is the state where an observer could conclude that the person was in a world of their own. Csikszentmihalyi says that: 'Typically, a person can maintain a merged awareness of his or her actions for only short periods interspersed with interludes...in which the flow is broken by the actor's adoption of an outside perspective.'³¹

'The merging of action and awareness is made possible by a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field.'³² When knitting, for example, my focus narrows to the rhythm of my hands, the yarn, and the needles until something like a loud bang can make time flow again and make me conscious of the world around me. The same thing happens when I am reading.

'When an activity involves the person completely with its demands for action, "selfish" considerations become irrelevant.'³³ When each player in a game, or the person in isolation, understands what rules govern their activities there is no need for the self, the aspect that guides interchange with others, is not called upon to negotiate with others. This allows for the suspension of self and the life issues that may be pressing under different circumstances.

'A person in flow is in control of his actions and of the environment.'³⁴ In this state, there is a lack of the feelings that come when a person is overwhelmed by circumstances or events that would normally conjure anxiety about control issues.

'Another quality of the experience is that it usually contains coherent, noncontradictory demands for action, and provides clear unambiguous feedback to a person's actions.'³⁵ If I am knitting a

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 139-41.

³³ Ibid., 141.

³⁴ Ibid., 142.

³⁵ Ibid., 144.

scarf in a simple repeat stitch, I know exactly what it is that I am expected to do and what the garment will look like when successfully completed. If I am knitting a new lace design for a pieced shawl and I don't have a picture or measurements of the finished item, the demands are likely to be stressful because I am not sure it looks as it should, nor whether or not it would be fit for the purpose.

'A final characteristic of the flow experience is its "autotelic" nature.'³⁶ For me this means that the process of knitting or writing that creates flow is an intrinsic not extrinsic reward and sufficient unto itself. Of course, I am likely to enjoy the wearing of a garment but that external reward is not why I knit. The outcome is about using the time in a way that makes me totally absorbed and at peace with myself for at least the duration of the knitting.

None of this is to say that knitting and writing are the only activities that deliver the elements of flow detailed above. Any activity that meets the specified criteria can be a flow activity. However, for this project it is knitting that is central to my investigation of autobiographical Knit Lit as an activity that can deliver flow as optimal experience that is a significant antidote to trauma and lesser hard times.



Resilience

The first image that comes to mind when considering resilience is the oft used metaphor of the willow tree that bends with the wind so it doesn't break. Alternatively, the strong eucalyptus tree is known for dropping branches in the face of high wind or with shifts from heat to cool conditions, but it experiences growth after a bushfire. Then there is the olive tree that adapts its shape in response to harsh prevailing winds. This distinction became apparent to the narrator of 'To be fully herself', as she confronts each new adverse experience.

³⁶ Ibid., 145-46.

Inherently strong, bouncing back or adaptable and growth are all definitions positioned along a continuum that can be found in the literature when discussing the rather ubiquitous term of resilience. It doesn't surprise me that early studies of resilience by developmental psychologists asked whether it was an innate set of personality traits or a process that could be learnt. If someone is described as a resilient person or a community is deemed resilient does that mean they have been tested by trauma and bent or bounced back, or is it a form of wishful thinking and they haven't been challenged by circumstances?

At the beginning of my research I questioned whether those such as myself who succumb to negative states after trauma were lacking inherent strength. A 2009 study was provocative. Based on an extensive literature review that resulted in 122 definitions from an original 340 documents, three types of classifications were proposed: 24 as 'basic' meaning those 'that describe resilience as a process or capacity that develops over time'; 80 as 'adaptation' meaning those 'that incorporate the concept of "bouncing back," adapting, or returning to a baseline after experiencing adversity or trauma'; and finally, 18 as 'growth' meaning those 'that additionally involve growth after experiencing adversity or trauma.'³⁷

Conclusions

Through the early to middle drafts of my memoir, my perspective as someone who was trying to crawl out of a very deep hole found me writing in a vein that was commensurate with the 'adaption' model. A survivor is, in that orientation mode, looking for even ground beneath her feet. At that stage of her journey, the notion of resilience as growth is too far-fetched to be considered possible. As mentioned above in Trauma my perspective was significantly affected by a

³⁷ Lisa S. Meredith et al., *Promoting Psychological Resilience in the U.S. Military* (Santa Monica, United States: Rand Corporation, 2011), 45-46.

medicalised paradigm that failed to alert me to the notion of posttraumatic growth. I find it telling that the English language contains the word 'survivor' but not an equivalent term for one who thrives.

In the later phases of my research, propelled by a combination of therapeutic interventions, theoretical awareness and exemplars in the form of experiences and role models, my attitude and the tenor of my writing changed to more positive. Additionally, my experiences on overseas research trips where trauma triggers such as familiar people, places and scenarios were absent functioned as test runs for living without the suite of the posttraumatic symptoms that were part of the familiar. I understood viscerally that it was possible to move beyond a 'survive' to a 'thrive' mentality. Commensurately, I came to view resilience as a process and now visualise it as the trajectory of a journey that is impacted by the entire landscape of a person's lived experience.

Through my practice-led research, I recognised knitting both as a vehicle that facilitated my engagement by providing a somewhat reliable, non-threatening thread through dark forests haunted by monsters, and as a safe haven that protected me through cycles of rest and pauses and silences in the text. My experience alerted me to the possibility of complex renderings of trauma, flow and resilience by other autobiographical authors in Knit Lit.



Section B

Introduction

In this section, I discuss examples of autobiographical stories in Knit Lit monographs to establish if there is a trajectory between trauma, flow, and resilience as hypothesised. To that end, I ask: what kinds of events the narrators present as trauma, how they overcome those adverse experiences, and where their journeys lead them? Braided through these stories of other knitter/authors is a lyric journey through my personal experience of reading trauma for this exegesis. My approach is motivated by a desire to show that trauma texts are a conversation with the reader, and to share the immersion experience.



Knit Lit Autobiographies of Trauma Flow and Resilience

‘To be fully herself’

I have come this far and all that seems to stand between me and doctoral submission is in depth discussion of ten autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience. How could I have been such an ostrich: head in the sand? I wrote in the Introduction that I can’t read trauma stories: they re-traumatise me. Logic forced me to revise my position. I must engage for the purposes of research, understand what others in similar positions have written. How can I expect examiners, and perhaps later other knitters/readers, to risk the text when I can’t reciprocate?

So once again I pick up my knitting and lose myself in that still place where flow leads. I pretend that I am Shadow Maiden, my Norwegian companion from childhood or beyond, and I listen to others as she listened to me all those years ago. It helps me adopt a critical mantle made safer by an altered perspective. I take a deep breath, and open the first book.



The Knitting Sutra: Craft as a Spiritual Practice by Susan Gordon Lydon was first published as a hardback in 1997, a year before the period of my study, and was only made available as a paperback in 2004—after knitting had captured popular attention.

At the start of this memoir, there is the initiating traumatic event. The narrator is concussed after she falls off a deck perched on a mountainous slope while distracted by hummingbirds at a feeder. She is forced to re-evaluate her life after this experience leaves her with a broken right arm near the shoulder's rotator cuff. She suffers intense physical pain, has the arm in a sling, and relies on others for simple aspects of daily life. In an effort to re-mobilise the arm through exercise she returns to knitting:

Though I've been knitting all my adult life, it took the shock of an accident and its attendant change of perspective to make me appreciate the value of the craft and delve deeply into its mysteries, following where it led.³⁸

Certainly, there was the fall, shock, and injury, but she also mentions that at the time she was five years into recovery for opiate addiction. Not a good mix with intense physical pain medication, and possibly a source of distress.

Of her knitting as exercise the narrator says:

What I found is that this tiny domestic world of knitting is endless; it runs broader and deeper than anyone might imagine. It is infinite and seemingly inexhaustible in its capacity to inspire, excite, and provoke creative insight. The activity itself is satisfying, addictive, absorbing, enjoyable, and productive. It is soothing and meditative in nature. And as an added bonus, it results in something useful in the end.³⁹

And so, amidst other attributes, she has acknowledged that knitting was soothing and meditative, that is to say a likely experience of flow

³⁸ Lydon, 11.

³⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

or optimal experience. If the knitting was frustrating she would not have been in a positive ‘zone’ and less likely to keep up the knitting given her physical discomfort. I read flow as the catalyst that kept her engaged with knitting’s other qualities such as creativity.

Toward the end of the memoir, the narrator is diagnosed with cancer of the kidney. The cancer and her ire that she couldn’t knit with an IV in her hand seem to be of equal importance to her:

With the surgery over, the cancer successfully gone, my body healing, and my sweater nearing completion, I looked back and realized that I had managed to sail through the whole horrifying episode as calmly as I had primarily because I possessed a secret weapon: my knitting.⁴⁰

She is saying that without knitting she would not have managed as calmly as she had done. On the topic of this resilience, she says:

I have deliberately cultivated solitude and the ability to live in silence. And I have found knitting to be an aid in all those things. After all, the important thing is not so much what you knit as what happens to you while you knit it. Where the interior journey takes you. What you find there. How you are transformed when you come back home.⁴¹

This means that of the post trauma possibilities—a capacity that grows over time; a bounce back/adaption; or growth beyond the original baseline—she writes in terms of transformation, hence ascribing to the posttraumatic growth model.

In summary, I argue that the narrator was able to negotiate traumatic and life threatening experiences by engaging with knitting as a soothing, meditative source of flow that catalysed her access to posttraumatic growth.



‘To be fully herself’

That night the first of their traumatic experiences invades my dreams, a seemingly, endless repetition of all those nights when I was writing

⁴⁰ Ibid., 133.

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

my memoir. Yet again, I wake stale and sluggish. I can't do it; it is too hard. But you finished your memoir. You can write this too.



The narrator in *Zen and the Art of Knitting* (2002) by Bernadette Murphy writes of three traumatic events that caused her to unravel when she was only 21. Firstly, she was traumatised by the drug overdose death of an ex-boyfriend—only 23 years old—who she had once anticipated marrying. The circumstances of his death were additionally shocking because his body had been dumped in an ambulance carpark. Secondly, on Christmas day of that same year her mother died of lung cancer. ‘The blood and life force seeped out of her pores as she moved the oxygen mask aside to plead for another cigarette.’⁴² The narrator didn’t know how to cope with these losses. The situation is made more poignant by the circumstances of the narrator’s life before these events:

My mother had suffered from mental illness and had been absent from much of my childhood, living either in mental institutions or hidden away in the depths of her suffering. In the wake of her death, my memories of her were colored by the manic-depressive episodes and her desire to stop living.⁴³

And so, we see a possible compounding of the traumatic effect by a precondition of emotional, maternal neglect.

In response to these events, the narrator travels from Southern California to Ireland, where both her parents had been born, and where her entire extended family still lives. She erroneously thinks she can escape the familiar and be distracted by new people and surroundings. ‘In rediscovering my cousins and uncles and aunts—the very soil of my parents—how could I have thought that I’d escape the loss of my mother?’⁴⁴

⁴²Bernadette Murphy, *Zen and the Art of Knitting: Exploring the Links between Knitting, Spirituality, and Creativity* (Avon: Adams Media, 2002), 2-3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

She becomes involved with a dance group—dancing was her college major—while living with her elderly aunt, her mother’s oldest sister. It is here that the third traumatic event happens. She damages her Achilles tendon, and suffers sciatica from a pinched nerve, while performing in a dance show:

I was lucky, they told me. I wouldn’t need surgery. I also wouldn’t walk properly for nearly two months, and I would never dance professionally again.⁴⁵

She describes herself as: ‘Stuck at Aunt Peggy’s’⁴⁶ frustrated by her inability to talk about her mother’s mental illness, and in search of something to replace the family religious faith that she didn’t share.

They look through photographs, of her mother in Ireland and her and her four siblings in America.

Peggy and I had never talked about my mother’s mental illness, and I couldn’t seem to bring up the subject, though my chest burned with desire for confirmation. One of the hazards of not talking about the happenings of your life is that you start to doubt your version of events.⁴⁷

Back home in America, talk about her mother’s mental illness was not allowed and she is unable to break that silence in Ireland either. She is forced into silence by cultural and familial disinclination, even social taboo, in the face of admission of mental instability.

There is a photo of the narrator aged ten ‘...holding knitting needles and a big skein of acrylic red yarn.’⁴⁸ Aunt Peggy asks her if her mother taught her to knit. Craving a mother-daughter memory and so Aunt Peggy would think well of her mother, she lies: “She taught me and we used to sit around and knit together, though I was never very good at it.”⁴⁹ They get out yarn and needles. Awkward beginnings with Aunt Peggy undoing and reknitting her work teach that:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11.

It was a wonderful, painful experience, to see how blunders could be redone, to learn that when I messed up, and messed up in a big way, I could go back to the place before the mistake and correct it.⁵⁰

Knitting provides an opportunity lacking in life where often mistakes are unable to be remedied.

To begin with it isn't fun, and there is no suggestion of rhythmic absorption in flow (optimal experience) for the narrator. Her skill level and the challenge before her are not in harmony. Her attention is not totally engaged. It is otherwise with Aunt Peggy.

Though my attention was riveted on what I was doing and my shoulders were scrunched up in knots with the effort, I began to notice a subtle change in my aunt...Her brittle awkwardness seemed to have left her, the jutting chin and pinprick eyes had relaxed into a gentle softness I'd never seen before.⁵¹

Possibly because she is a captive audience, and has limited opportunity for alternative activity, or common interests with her aunt she persists with her knitting attempts. Or maybe she is enticed by building memories of niece/aunt knitting to replace the untruthful and hence lacking daughter/mother one.

With practice, her awkwardness as a learner eases and she becomes sufficiently proficient that she begins her first real project with knitting a sweater for her widowed father: '...something to warm his heart after the loss he'd incurred.'⁵²

The magic started when I began to shape the neck of my father's pullover. I found myself giving into the trance, relaxing deeply though my fingers were still at work...My mind drifted at first, and then thoughts of my mother bubbled up, unbidden. I wasn't afraid of them now; they surrounded me, like old friends keeping me company.⁵³

Sometimes in tears, she communed with her mother, her father, and her ex-boyfriend saying to them the things that were barred. She

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 13.

⁵³ Ibid., 14.

knitted herself back together as she made garments for friends through a cold winter.

When it came time to say goodbye to Ireland and Aunt Peggy she is able to write:

I had a sense of who I was, and though the wounds of loss weren't fully healed, I was making progress. I had glimpsed the wood at my core and had come to appreciate the simple grain found there. I had a new confidence that I could undertake a long, detailed project and actually stick with it—something I'd never done before—and many more gifts I wouldn't come to recognize until years later.⁵⁴

In this account the reader is told that the narrator has grown beyond her previous baseline. Her mention of wood at her core can be read as a metaphor for strength and hence resilience. Her healing is not complete but a work in progress. Through her persistence in learning to knit, she has found in knitting a vehicle for a meditative state, a comfortable place from which to confront the traumatic events of her past, and make peace with her mother and father.



'To be fully herself'

Knit your way through it. Remember flow, the way you can rest as you need to: knitting in hand. Remember how it was the only thing that sustained you in hospital when reading was too hard.



Perri Klass is the author of an autobiographical collection of personal essays called *Two Sweaters for my Father* (2004). In the title story, the narrator reminisces of her father reading to them throughout her childhood. She describes herself as 'twitchy...and the knitting was a

⁵⁴ Ibid., 15.

happy compromise to keep my hands busy.⁵⁵ After knitting many scarves, she decides to make her father a sweater.

For a reason that eludes her memory, she decides to crochet it. A self-confessed, tight worker of knit and crochet, using a small crochet hook, can you imagine how rigid the fabric would and did turn out? With many mistakes the narrator muses on her personality:

Why didn't I rip out and redo? Well, I've never been very good about doing that; when it comes to the actual knitting (or crocheting), I am tight and compulsive, but I have this fatal tendency to believe that errors in pattern and shaping will all miraculously stretch into place—or at least into invisibility—when the whole project is put together.⁵⁶

Many years passed and, thinking of righting the scales with 'something soft and properly shaped out of expensive luxurious yarn,'⁵⁷ the narrator has him choose yarn and pattern; they buy muted yarn for a Fair Isle vest in an intricate pattern. The yarn and pattern joined other good intentions.

Her father died suddenly in April, 2001. The vest was never made. His sudden death was that of a cultural anthropologist who was seemingly healthy, who had written a book in retirement, and was in the middle of two more. She didn't regret the vest: 'maybe I thought the vest always had more value as a promise to be fulfilled than it could have had as a garment.'⁵⁸

This story talks of grief. It speaks of understanding 'the ways that in family life, errors in pattern and shaping really *can* stretch miraculously into place when the whole project is put together.'⁵⁹ For the purposes of my thesis argument, I am interested in what this story doesn't say. The narrator doesn't call it a traumatic experience, though with the sudden death of a loved father that likely can be assumed. The narrator doesn't write about knitting to soothe, about

⁵⁵ Perri Klass, *Two Sweaters for My Father: Writing About Knitting* (Sioux Falls: XRX, Inc, 2004), 30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

flow, no mention of resilience or posttraumatic growth. The story neither confirms nor refutes my argument. As a test result it stands on the neutral ground of possibilities. Fuelled by conviction, call it personal bias, I want to read between the lines and say of course she is a knitter; she would have knitted to occupy those twitchy hands but I am without evidence.



‘To be fully herself’

I think of my mother’s illness. See how distracting it is to have stray traumatic thoughts polluting the work, making it hard to think straight, and concentrate on the task at hand. A daily struggle to liberate the words you need. Hold onto continuity and follow the thread knitting spins out.



Comfort: A Journey through Grief (2008) by Ann Hood is a hauntingly, beautiful memoir about the sudden death of the author’s five-year-old daughter, Grace, and the aftermath. Just like a hiker lost in an inhospitable landscape, the tale of the trauma loops and twists back on itself in cyclic repetition of Grace’s life, and death.

On the day that Grace breaks her arm at ballet class, her father, Lorne, takes her brother, Sam, on an adventure for his birthday but their car is stolen. The narrator, her mother, takes her to the ER then sleeps beside her at home that night. The next day, like the one before, is hot and the children are kept home from school. Feverish, and semi-conscious, Grace is returned to the ER after they wait for Lorne to bring the sole remaining car home. A roller coaster experience ensues with despair and episodes of hope entangled. But then:

I found my husband and the two of us watched helplessly from behind a pane of glass. Over the intercom a voice called for a cardiologist. “Grace Adrain is in cardiac arrest,” the voice crackled calmly.

I beat the glass with my fists. I screamed, “Gracie! Gracie! Gracie! so loud and so often that my throat remained dry for days afterward.”⁶⁰

Extreme trauma, death from an aggressive strep infection, so close but unable to whisper goodbye, held captive behind glass, and then the news has to be given to Sam.

The narrator is used to reading and writing through hard times but on this occasion they fail, and she finds no solace from platitudes and suggestions offered. A year later she says:

Before Grace died, I couldn’t imagine my life without writing. I put myself to sleep by making up stories. I carry characters and plots around with me the way other people carry their lipsticks and hairbrushes: they go everywhere I go. Sitting at my computer, staring at my own words on the screen, I wondered how I had made it this long without words. Then I realized. Knitting saved my life.⁶¹

This is far from the first time that I have encountered enthusiasm for knitting’s therapeutic qualities in Knit Lit, but it is among the most poignant expressions of it.

The narrator explains how she came to learn to knit. That summer, immediately after Grace’s death, friends urged her to do something manual. Craft had previously not worked out for her. However, that fall Lorne goes back to work and Sam to school. ‘Unable to write, I faced the loneliness of everyday at home without Grace.’⁶²

It was then that she connects with knitting at a busy seaside yarn store thirty miles from home:

Jen, who ran Sakonnet Purls, her mother’s yarn store, with humour and cool efficiency, patiently talked me through the basics...she never grew impatient. However, when I stood up to leave, two hours had passed, the first two hours in

⁶⁰ Ann Hood, *Comfort: A Journey through Grief* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 37.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 45.

months that I hadn't spent crying or cursing or reliving the horrible tragedy that had taken over my life.⁶³

She says that there were many days when all she did was knit. Her description of rhythm, and her total absorption in her task, aligns with the basic qualities of flow: 'The quiet click of the needles, the rhythm of the stitches, the warmth of the yarn and the blanket or scarf that spilled across my lap, made those hours tolerable.'⁶⁴ She writes of herself as in the company of other knitters:

But as soon as we pick up our needles, we enter that still place. Our attention becomes specific to what is in our hands and the outside world fades away.⁶⁵

In Csikszentmihalyi's studies, that still place is inhabited by artists, writers, rock climbers, dancers and all the other people who recognise what it feels like to be in the zone, separated from every day cares and concerns by the bubble of harmonious focus.

It takes years, but the narrator reaches an accommodation with her grief, and is eventually able to grow sufficiently that she adopts a second daughter from China. If, as the narrator says, that knitting literally saved her life, it stands to reason that the safe haven it offered, the still place accessed through flow, contributed to her posttraumatic transformation.

'To be fully herself'



'Remember resilience. You have your knitting. You have harnessed flow. Look how far you've come? You can do it.' These are the things the clinical psychologist tells me at our weekly sessions as I force my way through these stories of trauma. My personal, therapeutic journey has played out over the decade of this doctoral research. I want to be done with it, move on to new pastures where I never have to think of the word trauma again.

⁶³ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 49.



Annie Modesitt is the author of the book *Knit with Courage, Live with Hope: A Year in Saint Paul* (2008). Of her memoir she says, 'this is a day-by-day journal of a year as it unfolds.'⁶⁶ It is an edited version of blog posts from the year 2007 that aggregate to form the memoir.

The narrator is a freelance author, knitter, knitting designer, teacher and event presenter. When she and her husband, Gerry, and their children, Hannah and Max, move from South Orange, New Jersey where they have a full support network to Saint Paul, Minnesota, their experience of shifting is marred by Gerry's experience of a worsening, very painful back and ulcerative colitis. Within the first two weeks in their new house, their beloved cat, Butkis, was killed by a car. This is a situation of stressors mounting. Seven weeks later she writes:

Waiting is crummy. Waiting for tests to be done on a family member, is even harder. Gerry has an appointment with a Hematologist next Wednesday, other tests to be done this week. So far no official diagnosis, but the words "Myeloma" and "Multiple" have been mentioned together in the same sentence.⁶⁷

Gerry resigned his job when they moved, so the responsibility for the mortgage and income falls to the narrator. 'Thank heaven I have two big projects for *Vogue Knitting* to work up between the medical paperwork, taxes and general business nonsense.'⁶⁸

The next months are fraught as the diagnosis of multiple myeloma (MM) is confirmed, and the days are punctuated by tests and treatment and medication. Knitting preserves the narrator's sanity.

I knit in waiting rooms, I thrill and amaze the nurses, and Gerry suffers. Without my yarn and needles, sometimes a

⁶⁶ Annie Modesitt, *Knit with Courage, Live with Hope: A Year in Saint Paul* (Mode Knit Press, 2008), intro.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

crochet hook, I'd be stark raving mad. There is something so soothing in the constant rhythm of my work that helps both Gerry and me put our lives on autopilot and not fret too much as we wait.⁶⁹

They research and find out that MM is ultimately fatal. The prognosis is initially several years, but at the Mayo clinic that retracts to a harsh, but realistic, two years, and a stem cell transplant harvested from Gerry's own body.

In Gerry's weakened state he is generally confined to upstairs where the bathroom is. To improve his quality of life they decide to convert the downstairs kitchen into a smaller kitchen and bathroom. The narrator is the breadwinner, a disability payment is subject to random audit and held back for a few months, but she is faced with constant pressure: full trade-offs as she balances her frequent interstate teaching and event commitments and time with her husband and children. At one point she teaches for a couple of weeks in France.

Apart from her knitting she has intensive support from friends, family and well-wishers. One thing lacking in their new situation are male friends for Gerry to interact with. Still:

Cancer isn't fun. It's rotten, mean and sneaky. But in one of those insane ironies it's also been an odd kind of blessing. It's forced us to see how lucky we are: Things are not dire for us, we are among the luckiest people in the world. We have a good home, indoor plumbing, hot water, all the food we could want and things to amuse us (like knitting).⁷⁰

Four years before, the family had run up a lot of medical and non-medical bills because they were without health insurance when the narrator had been so sick. I assume she is referring to her status as a survivor of a pre-cancerous, ovarian tumor. The sale of their house in New Jersey had allowed them to pay off those debts but Gerry's illness had eroded their 'free and clear' state.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 105.

⁷¹ Ibid., 117.

Did that previous experience contribute to the stamina and resilience that the narrator exhibits that she can think they are the luckiest people in the world when faced with her husband's terminal cancer? I think that the answer is a tentative yes. My opinion is that survivors who have done the hard things in the past know how deep a hole can be and have a partial map for digging themselves out.

Knitting is her mainstay:

I just kept knitting all day, even when the lights are turned out so the tech could do Gerry's echo (*knitting in the dark*). The knitting calms me, and soothes folks around me, too. It's easy to allow the knitting to take us to a meditative state where we can hover at the edge of our consciousness, not fully invested in the moment, but ready to leap up the minute a nurses calls "*Landy, Gerard Landy!*"⁷²

Here, I find partial evidence of that meditative, soothing state that I equate with flow and that significant numbers of authors/knitters of both Knit Lit autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience and other Knit Lit fiction and nonfiction write about. I say partial because flow is fully invested in the moment, though if a person is in deep flow—whether painting or climbing a mountain—calling a person's name seems to lock into an automatic reaction to which s/he, in the main, is socialized into since birth.

In this memoir we don't see the sudden shock of an unexpected death or other violence but an unpredictable accumulation of traumas where the life of a person is at risk. I read this narrative as illustrative of the trauma, flow, and resilience trajectory that I am discussing.



'To be fully herself'

Keep writing. Remember he is dead. He can't hurt you anymore unless you let him. The first trauma: childhood sexual abuse that dug

⁷² Ibid., 136.

a path for all the others to follow—circling, circling, circling the words
a whirlpool pulling you down.



Sweater Quest: My Year of Knitting Dangerously (2010) by Adrienne Martini sends mixed messages. The opening page of the book caught my notice:

Had I not discovered knitting, I would not be the paragon of sanity that I am today...When I had my first baby in 2002, I lost my mind...I don't intend to imply minor weeping or fleeting unhappiness. Two weeks into my maternity leave, I checked myself into my local psych ward because I'd become a danger to myself. At the time, it seemed that reclaiming even a shred of my former aplomb would be impossible. Now the whole thing feels like it happened to someone else...Time is a great balm, of course. So are high-grade pharmaceuticals. But what really helped turn the tide was knitting.⁷³

From this setting of the stage I expected a narrative that described her healing process. That was not to be the case.

It is an immersion memoir, about knitting an iconic Alice Starmore design called 'Mary Tudor', and discussing the prominent knitters the narrator meets during the year. While it is tempting to read this memoir as a silence about trauma, I don't think that this is so, although her statement that: 'Now most of the drugs are a distant memory'⁷⁴ piqued my curiosity.

Her main motivation seems to be crossing challenges off her list. She writes:

...I am not a woman who enjoys process. I am a writer who does not enjoy writing...I'm, the same way with knitting. The process is fine, mind you, and keeps my hands busy. But nothing else—nothing—gives me the rush that I get from finishing something.⁷⁵

And:

⁷³ Adrienne Martini, *Sweater Quest: My Year of Knitting Dangerously* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Free Press, 2010), ix.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., xiii.

Even though my life brings me contentment, I also need a challenge, one whose execution I can control. While my kids and my students and my spouse provide plenty of moments that test my patience...I am helpless before them...But with a sweater—say a fantastically complicated Fair Isle that will be stunning when it is done—I am in charge.⁷⁶

From these sentiments, it is reasonable to conclude that it is aspects of knitting, other than process and the flow it engenders that are the motivating factors. She acknowledges: 'Given the repetitiveness of the craft, your mind has freedom to wander'⁷⁷ that also speaks of an aspect of knitting that is other than flow because the task is not all engrossing.

In my own use of knitting, I seek immersion in flow (task and skill level in harmony) to forget the outside world, but when I want to use knitting for methodological purposes I do easy knitting that doesn't require attention so that I can harness/direct the wandering thoughts. In *Sweater Quest*, flow is seen as the state where one can 'churn out a straightforward hat while watching television without really noticing what my hands are doing.'⁷⁸ She says: 'With stranded colorwork I still have to focus all my attention on each stitch, which kills any flow I could develop.'⁷⁹

This is a contrasting of the term flow that I have seen before in other knitting texts, both fiction and nonfiction. It differs from the flow I am examining that is characterised by its all engrossing nature and what Csikszentmihalyi calls its 'autotelic' nature, meaning that it is an intrinsic reward independent of the external world.

Her grandfather's death at ninety is sad but not a shock to her, but she is surprised by crying:

I went with my better judgement and left Mary T. [her sweater quest] at home. But the knitting has gone from cursed to comforting.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Ibid., xvii.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 114.

The narrator is silent about what aspect of the knitting is comforting. At the end of the book I am surprised when she says that rather than being a product knitter she has learned that she 'just might be a process knitter.'⁸¹

As noted at the beginning of this discussion, there is mixed messages about the relationship between trauma and flow, or perhaps it is an evolution of ideas as the writing and knitting progress. Of my hypothesis that knitting is positioned as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for posttraumatic growth, in this instance I argue that it is neither proven nor disproven but plausible.



'To be fully herself'

Traumatic experience in children changes the course of the child's development. It marks their psyche. It marks the body down to the cellular level as a result of chemicals produced and encoded as fear.

In the face of threat to their life they become hypervigilant and sleep is haunted. Enforced silence and secrets undermines the whole personality structure like white ants in wood. Even as adults there are unfilled voids in the embodied self; they show through the cracks in a memoir's plot line.



In approaching the topic of trauma in Kyoko Mori's *Yarn: Remembering the Way Home* (2010), I am conscious of the cultural distances between East and West, and changes in social mores between eras.

The narrator is faced with a situation that appears exceedingly traumatic and complex for a child in grade seven, whose only worry should have been her mismatched knitted mittens and a D- in home-Ec. A year before, her mother, Takako, used a hose from the kitchen

⁸¹ Ibid., 218.

gas stove to suicide. She had written in her diary: “What will I do when my children are grown? I have wasted my whole life...”⁸² It is 1970s Japan and the family is middle class, well off, and the narrator attends a private girls’ school.

The reputation of the family is her philandering father Hiroshi’s prime concern. He bribes the police to keep the suicide a secret so that the family is not ruined socially. He forces the narrator and her younger brother, Jumpei, to adhere to his orders. They are not to talk of the death nor visit her mother’s family. Within two months of the death, Hiroshi moves one of his girlfriends, Michiko, into the house. ‘Hiroshi said he could have stayed alone with Jumpei and me if I had been more capable.’⁸³ Not only does he act with unseemly haste, he places the blame for his own actions on a child.

Michiko is the evil stepmother who incites Hiroshi to what would be considered physical abuse by current Australian standards:

If I said anything while he was yelling at me, he hit me. If I didn’t, he demanded, “Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?” He slapped me across the face as soon as I opened my mouth, grabbed me by the shoulders, and threw me against the wall. Then he dragged me downstairs to apologize to Michiko.⁸⁴

The narrator carries a traumatic burden. She considers herself complicit in Takako’s death because she didn’t tell her mother that she needed her mother to live, and, that, although the narrator was forced to keep the secret, it suited her:

In the letter she left for me, Takako didn’t ask me to keep quiet about her death. She said that she loved me, that I should be strong and find happiness without her. I had let her down as surely as Hiroshi had. After making her believe that I, too, would be better off without her, I had failed to speak up when Hiroshi asked the police to lie for us. Then I

⁸² Kyoko Mori, *Yarn: Remembering the Way Home* (Boston: GemmaMedia, 2010), 5.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

kept repeating those same lies to everyone, and I had no intention of ever telling the truth.⁸⁵

She didn't want her friends and those at school to know the truth. What a burden children assume when they are victims of misadventure in the adult world.

The story to date is of trauma, and the seed for posttraumatic growth is found in the stories Takako used to tell the narrator about a future life. Those stories focused on success that didn't involve marriage: "When you grow up and go to college," or "If you become a famous author or artist someday."⁸⁶ Marriage was never suggested as an option.

The narrator moves to Illinois on a scholarship, completes graduate school, and ultimately marries Chuck for mutual convenience, so she doesn't have to return to Japan. Neither are romantics, nor believe in ever after, which is precisely why they suit each other.

It was in graduate school that she is taught to knit by an exchange student. It is a flashbulb moment where the narrator finds that there is a different way to approach knitting, as opposed to the rigidity of her schooling in Japan. Sabina tells her: "You don't need patterns. You can make things up as you go."⁸⁷

She thought her mother would have approved of Chuck and his values of honesty and open mindedness:

Takako was like a seamstress who had ruined the only piece of cloth she was given. She didn't get a second chance for happiness. She dreamed of me becoming a writer or an artist so I would have the freedom she never knew.⁸⁸

It is somewhat ironic that the freedom and independence that characterised the marriage, also allowed for indecision, and failure to move forward, except in separate orbits. The narrator is bound to her

⁸⁵ Ibid., 9-10.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 25.

past, although living a seemingly opposite life in Green Bay, mid-west USA. The day before her very, low-key wedding, was the fifteenth anniversary of her mother's death:

...but I said nothing to Chuck. That day was sacred between Takako and me: every year, I took a long walk to think about her and promise her that my life would be different from hers.⁸⁹

The history of knitting and her own experiences with knitting are threaded through the memoir, and provide a frame for her circling around and around her life's course:

I believed my freedom depended on being able to live my mother's life in reverse. I didn't understand that rebelling against every tradition bound me tighter to my own history.⁹⁰

As a reader, I am grateful for the pauses and silences. Immersion in the craft acts as rest stops or respite from the difficult stories of the narrator's sense of complicity in her mother's death, and the silence imposed afterwards by Hiroshi. The memoir breaks that silence, softened by yarn.

In Mori's text, I read knitting as a close link to her mother's love of craft and beauty, as well as a safe haven from which to negotiate and articulate her past. There is also a sense that the act of knitting provides a position to reflect critically about the writing of sins of omission and commission that haunt the living in the face of a loved one's death.

When friends marvel over tiny stitches she doesn't praise the value of the activity or see it as a sign of patience:

But doing the same thing over and over didn't require any patience; the worst I could be alone was bored. The real test of patience was putting up with other people.⁹¹

Her patience, her reticence, is it nature or nurture? In reactive mode she says:

⁸⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 32.

Because my father had no patience, I became patient to a fault. If Hiroshi was fire then I would be a glacier.⁹²

It seems to be this unwillingness to engage, Chuck too didn't choose to argue either, that is at the core of their eventual, amicable divorce. The burgeoning of her knitting skills that are shown by her progression through stages of different types of knitting was absent from her marriage. 'My knitting and my writing were the only things I really cared about.'⁹³

The main statement she makes about her feelings towards knitting are as follows:

When I first started knitting, I had been drawn to the almost mindless repetitiveness of the activity. With one-color knitting, there was little to pay attention to except an occasional increase or decrease. Once I became more adept, though, I enjoyed the added challenge of Fair Isle knitting...holding two or three skeins in my hands and interlacing the strands...Mastering a Fair Isle pattern was like learning a song or memorizing a poem.⁹⁴

Here we see a different picture to boredom. If I were a betting person, I'd lay odds that the narrator understands flow, and relishes the zone, but that would only be plausible given that nowhere in the memoir is it explicitly mentioned.

The narrator discusses knitting in a way that Csikszentmihalyi's athletes would recognise as flow: 'Knitting had taught me to plunge into color and swim through it, each row of stitches like a long lap across the pool.'⁹⁵

After years of circling, it is writing and synchronicity that see her successful application to Harvard for a five-year lectureship to teach nonfiction writing. She says that this was what mobilised her at last. 'For the first time as an adult, I felt decisive and competent: I had a long-range plan instead of staying where I was by default.'⁹⁶

⁹² Ibid., 33.

⁹³ Ibid., 77.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 103-04.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 195.

The role knitting and flow played in her posttraumatic growth is implicit not explicit. Plausibly, the two things she cared about—knitting and writing—acted in concert to cause her to change.



‘To be fully herself’

Shadow Maiden reminds me of distance: ‘You’re writing critical text now. Lose the emotions. The examiners will get fed up with your distractions and lose the thread of your argument.’



Leslie Moise is the author of the lyric memoir, *Love is the Thread: A Knitting Friendship* (2011). The narrator is a woman who flees an abusive ex-partner by escaping from Louisville to Baltimore:

“I believe in happily ever after.” How many times had he told me so? *“The only way for you to leave me is to die.”*⁹⁷

Once there, she very slowly becomes the friend of a sometimes-elusive Kristine who suffers from bi-polar disorder, and later dies of cancer.

As I said of my lyric essay in the introduction above, in this lyric memoir the text does not follow a linear trajectory, but consistently focuses on the kaleidoscopic thread of love and friendship that unites the complete work.

After sending a hat to Kristine—who taught her to knit—and telling her how thankful she is that Kristine exists, the narrator is advised to start appreciating her own existence. Using knitting metaphors she does so:

So I start with myself. I unravel the half-knitted bits, releasing guilt, shame, buried hurts and resentments. Kristine was ravaged by her mental illness long before the

⁹⁷ Leslie Moise PhD, *Love Is the Thread: A Knitting Friendship* (Nashville: Pearlsong Press, 2011), 11.

cancer struck, but I saw only the glowing beauty of her soul. Now I stitch that same acceptance into my relationships with others and myself.⁹⁸

Here we are shown multiple traumas, those of the narrator and Kristine. Knitting surfaces intermittently as the narrator recounts memories of Kristine:

I stood still and watched her knit, hands dip-gliding through the repetitive movements of creation. Creating beauty for herself to wear after her dark, curly hair was gone. One corner of the tight, fear-filled place deep inside me started to unwind.⁹⁹

The narrator finds the knitting therapeutic. Is it the repetition, flow, beauty, or creativity that affects the observer? This quote suggests all of them.

The narrator moves away from urban Baltimore to rural Frostburg, Pennsylvania:

After all, why should I stay in Baltimore? I was no longer petrified that my ex might find me, no longer in hiding. Why not choose a place to live that I actually liked?¹⁰⁰

Here is evidence of posttraumatic growth. She has shared alternative healing rituals, such as Reiki and crystals, with a new circle of friends who she was able to meet through Kristine. Knitting was part of the growth cycle, but there is insufficient information to conclude that flow was a catalyst.

At Kristine's funeral there is a particularly loved photo on display, taken on a day when the friends were involved in having a car washed by Mitch who hams it up for the camera. At the same time Sherry aimed the camera at Kristine who was delighted by the antics:

After only one chemo appointment Kristine still had her hair, so the dark locks lit with red shone around her face. Flushed

⁹⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 63.

and mischievous, her hands appear slightly blurred in the picture because she was—of course—knitting.¹⁰¹

It is a copy of this photo that the narrator hangs in her Reiki treatment room.

Before Kristine's death, the narrator experiences a crisis when a childhood friend reveals to her experiences the friend had with a child molester when only seven. The narrator understands it is the friend's journey to take, but mourns that she didn't notice or help at the time:

But I can do this. I can write about my side of the story and encourage other survivors to share theirs. And I can remember Valerie and myself as the children we both once were, pure and whole and joyful.¹⁰²

I find this statement ambiguous, although the narrator says elsewhere that she didn't think she had been molested. In passing, I note the possibility of references to the controversial topic of repressed memories where the survivor has blanked all remembrance of abuse.

I found this memoir challenging to discuss because of the complexity of the lyric memoir that seems somewhat resistant to linear argument. The lasting impression is of healing from trauma through an interwoven journey of love, friendship, Reiki, crystals, writing and knitting. In this memoir I find common ground with my own where knitting is an important thread, flow as catalyst implied, and part of a complex whole.



'To be fully herself'

Am I near the end? Can I stop reading now? I'm choking on their words: they flay and hurt. I can't sleep. I am so tired. Reach for the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰² Ibid., 106.

knitting. Just a row or two will do the trick. Yarn soft, soothing, comforting: the staunchest of friends.



Rachael Herron authors *A life in Stitches: Knitting My Way through Love, Loss, and Laughter* (2011). One of the pieces in the autobiography addresses the death of the narrator's mother.

We know from an earlier story that the narrator was able to knit quickly even as a young person:

At night, I liked to sit in our living room and use the window glass as a mirror, watching my hands flash. Seen in reverse, it made them look like someone else's hands, not attached to me. They went so quickly, moved so nimbly. I was vain about the way I knitted. "I'm very fast."¹⁰³

When she is thirty-five, her mother—who had survived other, serious illnesses—begins to fade away: weakening and losing weight. Previously, the narrator had been fascinated by an intricate Setesdal sweater that was knitted for her mother decades ago in Norway. The narrator believes: 'It was so far beyond anything I'd ever be able to do...her sweater was *Norwegian*, the pinnacle of knitted accomplishment.'¹⁰⁴

Her mother's reaction is that she would inherit the original so why bother to copy it. This is a distressing idea and the narrator turns to knitting a replica because she can, and obviously wants to do so. She orders the yarn, and when it arrives, she follows details she'd made of the original sweater, and casts on for the sleeve:

I turned on a stupid TV reality show and didn't watch—instead I looked at my hands working the twisted rib cuff...Since it was around the wrist it went faster than I thought it would...I slid it onto my wrist...It was as if my

¹⁰³ Rachael Herron, *A Life in Stitches: Knitting My Way through Love, Loss, and Laughter* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2011), 18.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

mother's arm were right there, coming around me...I was knitting my mother's arms around me.¹⁰⁵

Here are the hallmarks of flow. She ignores the TV and concentrates on what her hands are doing. Flow can only be sustained until something conscious intrudes. Then connectedness with her mother is prompted by the feel of the cuff on her hand. Another of knitting's purported therapeutic attributes of fostering connection is apparent.

After her mother's death from Multiple Myeloma, the narrator's friends—physical and virtual through her popular blog—orchestrate a beautiful gift. As a surprise, they knit her a Love Blanket:

Composed of more than fifty knitted squares, each one completely different from its neighbor, it was seamed in black, which gave the back a stained-glass effect. I knew this kind of blanket, had read about them online, had in fact contributed to the construction of several over the years, but I'd never seen one in person before. It quite literally took my breath away...Inside the box was also a red fabric bag filled with handwritten notes from the knitters, personal notes of love and loss, kindness and grace.¹⁰⁶

Krista who facilitates the construction of the blanket is blindsided by her younger brother's stroke as she is seaming the squares: '...I laid out your squares and began to join them. Your blanket became my therapy too.'¹⁰⁷ By the time the blanket is finished, the brother is on the mend, and the narrator finds she is healing, too, wrapped in the blanket.

In turn, some six months later, an online friend has one of those sequences in a few short months where several events contribute to major trauma: she '...seriously injured her back, lost her job of eighteen years, and was diagnosed with breast cancer.'¹⁰⁸ The narrator coordinates a Love Blanket for the friend:

Friends and family gathered one Saturday afternoon in an updated version of a quilting bee. Just as communities of women used to gather over a quilting frame to quilt, we

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

gathered with a singular purpose first at our computers and later to sew each loving square into one blanket. I felt connected to generations before me as I realized that my Love Blanket was the result of another bee in another place, and I knew I was extraordinarily lucky.¹⁰⁹

In this autobiography, knitting is positioned as therapeutic. At the time of the narrator's mother's illness, I argue that flow from knitting was the catalyst for comfort/resilience as her mother was dying. After the death, and with the circle of illness among her friends, the complexity of knitting's therapeutic aspects is highlighted. It is that complexity that causes me to question how much flow can be separated from other therapeutic practices in attempting to address my hypothesis.



'To be fully herself'

Breathe deep, down into the lungs, and yet again. This is the big challenge. It is the story that resonates too closely with your own experiences. Like a movie set, pull out for a long view. No close-ups allowed.

Shame and self-blame etch self-image and self-esteem. They are the outsider in a crowded room. Flashbacks are triggered by the senses, and they try to not see the sites of abuse as they later visit their parents' house. The flashbacks aren't memories in the usual sense. They are a reliving of the event. Thoughts circle, digging deep grooves that each new trauma inhabits. There are no rosy tinted windows. Instead there is a dark cloud that filters blue skies.

I am dreading reading Lee Gant's story, and rejoice that I am a speed reader; it is only a few hours of reading, and the last story I have to endure. But, then, I must engage with it, must remember how I constructed my own story, the chunks of months lost as my psychiatrist reminded me of all the practice I'd had of resilience, and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 105.

encouraged me to re-engage. But, I only grew through it because of the rest stops allowed by losing myself in knitting's flow, history, and traditions. Without them, I could not have discussed these books.



Love in Every Stitch: Stories of Knitting and Healing by Lee Gant (2015) opens with the description of a troubled person, but the originating trauma is only revealed at the end of the story:

For years I betrayed myself, acting out and doing bad things. It took a great deal for me to believe that I belonged somewhere in this world, that I was worthy, and that my behaviours could be forgiven. My only choices became death or jail or change. Eventually, alcohol and drugs brought me to my knees, and it was knitting that saved my life.¹¹⁰

The narrator says that in knitting she found choices, direction, purpose, the capacity to share, accomplishment, self-worth and success—all things that gave her the choice to change her life's course.¹¹¹

At a time when she is missing her children who live with their father, she meets a mother and daughter who have just opened a local yarn store; they welcome her and tactfully give her a meal even though she buys nothing. They recognise that she has knitting knowledge and ask her to knit a fisherman's sweater to display in the store:

Night after night...Intently focused on twisting cables, I hardly realize the passing of time. My thoughts drift to a place where I believe that I might be capable of good things, where I might be able to get well, a place where I am a good mother, and while I knit, I find a place where I feel something close to happiness.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Lee Gant, *Love in Every Stitch: Stories of Knitting and Healing* (New York: Viva Editions, 2015), vii.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, xiv.

Here, I argue that the narrator is experiencing flow. She is intent on the work and loses her sense of time. She also talks of her thoughts drifting, an effect found as people move in and out of the unconscious realm of flow.

The autobiographical stories in the book show the narrator's encounters with other people who are troubled. In doing so, she reveals her own subjectivity. Sitting with Stacie, she talks about an incident outside the store where a man yelling reminds her of her father. The reader must ask if her father is implicated in her past trauma.

Her journey is not a smooth glide forward. As is often the way, there are setbacks. She overdoses, and is put on suicide watch, sobriety blown away. Ten years, and many support meetings later, she writes:

I knit and knit. I knit because it allows me to fit into the place inside myself where I find comfort, and fully engaged, transcend and unsnarl...I still have the scarf Paula wrapped around my neck all those years ago. It reminds me that all things are possible, and in the joy of moving on and beginning again each day, knitting frees me to recover.¹¹³

I note this as a clear indication of knitting as therapeutic, and an agent for change, but can't say from this that it is flow acting as a catalyst for posttraumatic growth.

In a knitting group, she is talking over knitting with a girl named Abbey who says:

"I fidget a lot, but if I'm crocheting or knitting, all of that goes away. My mind slows down. I get into a rhythm and the world falls away. Nothing else matters. I'm a million miles away just floating along."¹¹⁴

The narrator responds in kind:

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

I want her [Abbey] to know that I know the place too, where you get to float away and, no matter what bad things happen, you can find a place where no hurt lives.¹¹⁵

When questioned by the narrator, Abbey reveals that she was abused by her father. Again, the narrator backs away from mention of ‘father stories’ and is reminded of a recurring nightmare of cats and sharp teeth. Like Hansel and Gretel and the bread crumbs, the narrator is leaving clues that allude to childhood abuse in her own experience

After her discussion with Abbey, she says:

It’s late and I’m exhausted, but perfectly knitted stitches drop from my needles. My mind slows down. I get into a rhythm and the world falls away. Nothing else matters. I’m a million miles away, just floating along. Thank God for knitting.¹¹⁶

Time and again in this book, the reader encounters mention of flow that makes the world and hurts disappear, and it is in these intervals of respite that healing takes place, and the knitter allows herself posttraumatic growth.

She sees her dying father and gifts him with a bear that she knitted—although she’d only intended to show him what she likes to make:

He is suddenly childlike, grinning and amused with his gift. How different he is from the father who frightened me with his loud obscenities, smashing of furniture, and drunken rages. How playful he seems against the image I carry of him pressing a butcher knife to my mother’s throat.¹¹⁷

As a reader, I think I’ve reached the core of the narrator’s trauma and dysfunctional episodes, but, then she visits her mother and the source of her self-destructive behaviours that the knitting has saved her from is revealed.

There are many things the narrator wants to share with her mother, all of them disturbing. One thing makes me feel sick to my

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

stomach, and makes my mind want to leave my body. I stop and knit, find my still place, so I muster the will to type the words.

The narrator reveals the traumatic secret at the core of her troubles:

I want to tell her I feel awful because I didn't tell on the neighbor down the street when he raped me and Maryellen, because I might have saved the children who followed.¹¹⁸

I am writing this at three o'clock in the morning. I read and noted the book last night, and have been waking fitfully since bedtime. I can't write anymore about this story. I'm going to make hot milk, take a Valium, and knit until sleep claims me, to put distance between myself and someone else who can understand where I've been and the roads I've travelled in my own memoir.



Conclusion

The majority of these autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience support my hypothesis: I argue that these autobiographical, analogue texts in knitting literature (Knit Lit) from 1998-2017 position knitting as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events.

In *The Knitting Sutra* (1997/2004), the narrator was able to negotiate traumatic and life threatening experiences by engaging with knitting as a soothing, meditative source of flow that catalysed her access to posttraumatic growth.

Zen and the Art of Knitting (2002) shows that, through her persistence in learning to knit, the narrator has found in knitting a vehicle for a meditative state, a comfortable place from which to confront the traumatic events of her past, and make peace with her mother and father.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 203.

Two Sweaters for my Father (2004) does not explicitly support my hypothesis. The narrator doesn't write about knitting to soothe, about flow, no mention of resilience or posttraumatic growth. The story neither confirms nor refutes my argument. As a test result it stands on the neutral ground of possibilities.

In *Comfort* (2008), if as the narrator says, that knitting literally saved her life, it stands to reason that the safe haven it offered after her daughter's death, the still place accessed through flow, contributed to her posttraumatic transformation.

Knit with Courage, Live with Hope (2008) doesn't show the sudden shock of an unexpected death, or other violence, but an unpredictable accumulation of traumas where the life of a person is at risk. I read this narrative as illustrative of the trauma, flow, and resilience trajectory of posttraumatic growth that I am discussing.

As noted at the beginning of this discussion of *Sweater Quest* (2010), there is a mixed message about the relationship between trauma and flow, or perhaps it is an evolution of ideas as the writing and knitting progress. Of my hypothesis that knitting is positioned as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for posttraumatic growth, in this instance, I argue that it is neither proven nor disproven but plausible.

In *Yarn* (2010), the role knitting and flow played in her posttraumatic growth is implicit not explicit. Plausibly, the two things she cared about—knitting and writing—acted in concert to cause her to mobilise.

For the narrator of *Love is the Thread* (2011), the lasting impression is of healing from trauma through an interwoven journey of love, friendship, Reiki, crystals, writing and knitting. In this memoir I find common ground with my own memoir, 'To be fully herself', where knitting is an important thread, flow as catalyst implied, and part of a complex whole.

In *A Life in Stitches* (2011) knitting is positioned as therapeutic. At the time of the narrator's mother's illness, I argue that flow from knitting was the catalyst for comfort/resilience as her

mother was dying. After the death and with the circle of illness among her friends the complexity of knitting's therapeutic aspects is highlighted.

With *Love in every Stitch* (2015), critical distance fails me. I am undone by her not being able to tell her mother about childhood rape. I know knitting saved her, as it saved me/the narrator in 'To be fully herself' (2017). Time and again in this book, in my manuscript, the reader encounters mention of flow that makes the world and hurts disappear, and it is in these intervals of respite that healing takes place and the knitter allows herself posttraumatic growth

In the above summation, the majority of texts tend to support my hypothesis, either explicitly or implicitly. However, it is the complexity of the healing process and the complexity of the progression to posttraumatic growth that causes me to question how much flow can be separated from other therapeutic attributes of knitting. I therefore reassess my position and suggest an amendment to the hypothesis. I find that these autobiographical, analogue texts in knitting literature (Knit Lit) from 1998-2017 position knitting, in part, as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events.

Chapter 4: 'To be fully herself'

TO BE FULLY HERSELF

Part 1: Old Stradbroke

First Stiches

The words, 'Just one more page, or row', have passed my lips so often that my family roll their eyes and walk away, or speak very emphatically to break the spell. Disoriented, I look up at them. The world of my imagination fades, my eyes lose their otherworld glaze, and, finally, I see them.

In that instant, within myself, I recognise Cynthie, my mother, cup of tea poised at her lips before that first sip: so self-contained, focused inwards, where we couldn't reach her.

I can't remember a time before I could read and write. Always, it seems, there are words and stories. They call to me. They cajole and seduce—a lover's whisper. Landscapes, scenes and roles on offer: liminal spaces where anything is possible.

Other becomes self—sanctuary from self—their passions, my passions, are tides pulled by the moon. Our hearts beat in harmony. Interruptions are painful ruptures as I am pulled from the intimacy of imagination, from the suspension of daily life, back to reality.

Knitting and crochet are only marginally subordinate to reading and writing. Just the proverbial bee's whisker separates them. What delight that progression from inspiration through yarn and flying fingers to completed artefact? The spark of a neuron is captured in a stitch. The mind and body become one, embodied: eating texture and inhaling colour, delicious synaesthesia.

My world is awash with text and textile. Despite Arachne, the common root '*textus*' smacks of Roman senators and medieval monks. I prefer, rather, the matriarchal goddesses of Rowan tree and Samhain, think more of myth, of narrative archetypes and transgression as Pagan is styled Christian, of the silk that flows from the spider's orifice and tinsels the landscape. The spider speaks knitting crone, storyteller and wise-woman. She is me: the golden orb in the garden that spins the web across my face between car and front door. But, even crone was once child.



Think first knitting lesson, tangled in memory with the heat of scarlet fever and tears: eyes fever bright, rash itchy, sandpaper-skin stretched so tight it must surely split. Fear was absent. I hadn't known enough to be afraid. Precocious reader aside, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott was beyond my abilities. Too young for it, only five—maybe six—according to my mother, and so was spared Louise Alcott's message that scarlet fever could be fatal.

Memory lacks precision. I can't place the scarlet fever in time, but it was after my collarbone. That was in 1956 when the Murray River's flood was, at the time, South Australia's worst recorded natural disaster.

Little Nan and Pop, Dad's parents, lived in town of Mannum next to the river. They judged the dirty rise of the water from their veranda above the bank.

Pop growled, 'Bloody, silly woman. Get a move on.' Nan glared at him, muttered under her breath, and turned her back. Years

before, they had been divorced and remarried after he'd threatened her with not seeing their three children who had been placed in his custody.

Pop was a 'shell-shocked' Anzac, a machine gunner, taciturn after tours of both Turkey and France where two of his brothers had died. One shot at Gallipoli—he found out a week too late that they were in adjacent trenches—the other in a field hospital in Flanders. He never spoke of those times. He never spoke to me at all.

The river didn't care about discord or invisible wounds. It swirled and swallowed the bases of eucalypts and willows. Ants and geckos scuttled higher up the trunks, refugees fleeing the primordial. Pelicans glided overhead, intent on fish. Predictions said the flood would cover the roof of their house, pollute the rooms with greyish-brown, dead-stink slick. Family had rallied: race the water and evacuate everything.

'Stay put,' Dad called over his shoulder as he ran down the bank where the road cut through a hillock. It was mid-morning. I tried to follow in his footsteps, but my five-year-old legs were too short. My feet slipped, and 'arse over tit she went,' said my sailor Uncle.

'You whined all day,' they would say later. There is a group photo, see me there, Dad's coat draped over my shoulders and a scowl on my face. It was late at night before they took me to hospital. Stoicism was admired in my family. We didn't run to the doctor with every little snuffle. My right collarbone had snapped in a clean break. It hurt—a lot.

It was not at all like the rescues when riders in the Tour de France take a mountain curve in Spain too fast or misjudge corrugated roads in Belgium. No heroic team mates, nor global aghast TV audiences as the rider rolls in agony, no on site medics, stretchers, nor helicopters.

How primitive the times? A wooden ring around each shoulder joint, padded with horsehair under white bandages. How uncomfortable, poor Christmas turkey, trussed across the chest and upper back with white tape fraying at the ends?

A sonorous voice, 'Don't let her take them off, even for her bath.'

The memory lingers down the years as iterations of insistent pain remembered, hot, sharp, adrenaline driven, less important than rescuing objects from the advances of the river. That is what happens to naughty girls who don't do as they are told. Hindsight suggests a precursor of events to come, ghost actors awaiting cues.

I wasn't actually sickly. I was robust and, my parents said, 'Too adventurous for her-own-good. She will talk to anyone.' Mum can't remember all that happened to the five of us, the ages and the years are a muddle, but she never forgets to say that I was a magnet for illnesses with spots. More often than not, over the years, my three brothers, and much later my little sister, were merely quarantined while I was stuck in bed, and they were sent on long hikes to get them, 'Out of Mum's hair.'

High up, they climbed, toward the summit of Black Hill where spider orchids grew in profusion among eucalypts, acacias and rocks blackened by the hellish, wildfire of 'Black Sunday' on 2nd of January, 1955. The locals, recruited to help the beset Country Fire Services said, 'We'll give it a go.'

Acrid ash and smoke had clogged nostrils as Dad walked away up our dusty driveway, lips pursed as he whistled—his usual response to stress. In one hand a wet hessian sack that conjured images of jute and dank, drainage ditches somewhere in the British Empire. The other clenched around the rake slung over his shoulder. Only a year later, the resilient Aussie bush felt the tramp of my siblings' smaller feet.

If not Black Hill, then Mediterranean adventures, vineyards cloyed with grape sugar-ferment and the buzz of bees in the Salvation Jane, lazy in the heat. Mind you don't cut your arm as you strain between the pig fencing and the rusted, barbed-wire strand. Don't want another bloody tetanus shot. Run when old man Barbari growls in the dialect that his Athenian born son-in-law later called

Macedonian peasant Greek. Remember lush, green market gardens where Chelli threw plump carrots, fresh picked, still wet with a hint of pungent, black earth. The Italian kids were Dad's model of industry, not like us, 'Lazy sods.'

The Billy Goats' Gruff stone bridge over the creek harboured no trolls, instead trails of green slime, tadpoles and towering walls of canes, worth the sting of thorns for the fat, sweet blackberry juice they could lick from their stained fingers.

Cool, cool water, a blessing on sunburn from the Sunday school picnic at Glenelg beach. Smears of Zinc ointment across the bridge of the nose offered no defence against the South Australian sun or the wind-driven abrasion of fine, white sand on tender flesh. The science of a massive hole in the ozone layer over Australasia, 'slip slop slap', sunscreen, melanomas, and Vitamin D deficiency lurked in the future.

They climbed Straddie Hill, scratched their bare arms and legs in scrub olive trees, and hacked at century cactus spikes for jousts. Never mind eyes and the lethal points of the tips.

At the T-junction, habit turned past the steep-concrete drain that I always slid down on my school case. Nesting magpies swooped, and my brothers yelled, 'Duck for cover.' Gullies with beehives and eucalypt gum—smooth or crackled, dry surface, sticky inside where sap bled from the trunk—amber globs when held between eye and sun, less than malleable even after a blow with a rock. Finally, past the Morialta kiosk, they munched their sandwich lunches and dipped cupped hands into the pool beneath the First Falls.

Once upon a time, then, my head hurt, my body pulsed with heat and the light hurt my eyes. Or was that the two bouts of chickenpox? I cried for the doctor. Surely, he would make me better simply by his presence. His bald, egg shaped head only reached to Mum's shoulder. I used to think Humpty Dumpty, but he had eyes that could see through most attempts to bunk off from school.

‘Scarlet fever,’ he said. ‘No doubt about it.’ They whispered in the corner. Mum’s mouth smiled but her eyes held worry. She patted my shoulder and they left the room. I pulled the blankets over my face. Maybe, cat-like, if I couldn’t see them, the spots would go away. I wouldn’t feel so hot and head-achy and cross.

I was a rubber ball, quick on the rebound, and drove Mum crazy.

‘You do my head in. Get back into bed!’ she used to shout at me through the vertical slice where my tiny bedroom’s and the kitchen’s doors aligned across a small square hallway. A narrow band of light shone through the gap and let me sneak yet more reading after lights out. My bed was my spy post. Mum to Dad, ‘She’ll be the death of me,’ easily heard as they went about the business of survival.

No television set, with black and white daytime movies to distract sick kids. Mum and Dad bought ours years later after the birth of my wriggle-pot sister—a pity about the family ritual of Friday night at the Drive-In.

We dashed at intermission to the playground beneath the screen and, later, squabbled over the pound of Arnott’s yo-yo biscuits bought with shillings and pence from the corner shop: ‘Now you’ve torn it,’ split, brown-paper bag, biscuits on the old Chevy’s sticky vinyl seat. Did they really think four children would sit squashed like that after MGM’s roaring lion fell silent and the *Mau-Mau* and British fought a colonial battle in Kenya? My oldest brother’s elbows were so, well, pointy. Do all firstborns know how to guard their territory?

‘Shit a brick, shut up you lot,’ snarled Dad. ‘Is a bit of peace too much to ask? I work hard all day so you can eat. Think of the starving kids in Africa.’ Everyone thought he was an easy going Aussie bloke. When young, I bought the myth—not so, when my legs stung with strops of his leather belt if I lost my unruly temper and whopped my brother across the knuckles with the flat of a bread and butter knife. ‘I’ll teach you to hit, to keep your temper.’

It is hard to remember generosity and laughter before he turned middle-age-crisis bitter. The voice is so loud when memory conjures reductive snapshots of an atheist, teetotaler, frustrated colonial-explorer and domestic patriarch—words peppered, unconsciously, with a paradoxical dose of, ‘God might be looking over my shoulder’ rhetoric.

And that look on my mother’s face, incredulity writ large, when he said that they should adopt what he called, ‘A poor little aboriginal kid’. Eras change. I have no idea what she was thinking. Was it the White Australia thing or her budget and the seven mouths she shared a can of PMU, chemical soup between for lunch? ‘Fill up on bread.’

He had been rejected as medically unfit to serve when the Second World War came along. There were two culprits. First, a mastoid operation on his left ear festered from packing that had been overlooked for several weeks. Then Polio at fifteen stole the muscles from the left calf, ankle left rigid. A pronounced limp and that lapel badge, the one stowed in the tobacco tin in his gentlemen’s wardrobe, possibly saved him from white feathers. But, he couldn’t be a soldier like his father. He couldn’t join in his mate’s stories of battles in Europe or his cousin’s tales of being left behind while grading military airstrips on coral islands in the Pacific: to me futile wars, so much lost. Still, he wanted to belong.

Dad started our house with a couple of rooms that grew like topsy over the years, testament to post-war austerity with rationing and pockets short of cash. Wouldn’t get away with it now—did he even apply for a building permit?

A breezeway joined the laundry to the outside dunny. It offered a tin can in a box-seat; an old oil-can—complete with scoop and filled with ash—sat below the long nail that held torn up newspaper squares. But, watch out for the occasional redback or huntsman spider. ‘It’s a country toilet,’ my godmother, Auntie Ruth, told her niece, Pam, who recoiled from the offense of night soil.

A block of ice, home delivered by a man with wicked-looking iron pincers, filled the top cavity of the icebox. Your tongue froze to the ice if you were too slow. 'Get away from that, you little sods. It melts quick enough as it is without you always lifting the lid. Wait till your Dad gets home.'

Bread will never smell quite like that first whiff of yeast, browned crust and sugar as the baker swung open his van doors. Once in a blue moon, Mum let us have an iced, finger bun, so fresh that it seemed to dissolve on the tongue. The puffins, the first slices at the join when we broke apart the twin loaf of bread, begged for home-made jam and scalded cream. Fig was my favourite, the thicker and stickier the better—special when it had almond kernels to suck and crunch.

I always asked the postie if I could blow the whistle he used to signal letters in the box. He wouldn't let me. Guess it was the spit. Mr Waldron called by less often in his mobile haberdashery van.

Every day meant small adventures. Each time we would push and shove to reach the door first, anxious not to miss anything. Maybe adults forget the wonder of the everyday when they plead for order.

When the milkie called, he ladled whole milk from the churn with an aluminium pint dipper into our billy. 'Remember when,' we asked down the years, 'that milkie at the caravan park let us ride in the tray of his truck to the Port Road depot?'

We caught the nightly serials on a Bakelite radio that sat on a shelf by the wood stove. Green-bottle's schoolroom antics made us laugh. Would the flying doctor escape the cannibal?

On our very own special day, we crowded that radio so the 5AA Kids' club could tell us where Gandy, I think he was a kangaroo, had left our birthday chocolate frogs. 'Thank you, Mum.'

They believed in long convalescences in the 1950s. Kept abed, missing all the daily adventures, made me irritable. In desperation then, once the worst of the scarlet fever had passed, Mum taught me

to knit. 'In, around, through and off,' still sings in my head. The child's mnemonic and the feel of my tongue protruding at the side of my mouth are the only things I can remember with certainty about those first lessons.

Rough stitches for doll's clothes and family socks to darn on Mum's wooden mushroom populate memories. Little Nan's voice is the first memory. 'A bad, selfish little girl,' she said, patting my older brother's red-gold curls as he smirked at me and took the coveted red glass bottle. She was looking after us because my second brother had just been born. I was three. The bilious yellow yarn and pink needles are from later on when I tried to knit fast to impress my cousins. They couldn't have cared less.

When Mum was born in Melbourne, her 'little', left hand had only a residual forefinger and thumb. She used them as a clamp and managed with a versatility that we took for granted when young but wonder at now.

Mum called herself a housewife and there seemed nothing she wouldn't tackle. School had been a nightmare. She had argued with Big Nan and Pop. 'Dug in my heels,' she said. 'Flat refused to go to high school.' She was a voracious reader who loved scrabble and crosswords. Home schooled herself.

A decade or so ago, one of her reproduction porcelain dolls won a blue ribbon prize as 'Best in the Show': exquisite hand-painted body and face, hand-made outfit, and hand knitted lace socks. They were the children of her autumn years: the ones who sat where she put them and never answered back.

By trial and error, I adapted her unique way of knitting. We knitted in the British manner, little finger cocked as though taking tea. I threw the yarn with my right forefinger unlike Continental knitters who pick with the left.

Mum showed me the basics of sewing and knitting. Nostalgia for an idealised past is the brush of her hair against mine as we try to work out a problem while drawing a full-sized pattern from her Enid Gilchrist books of scaled-down sewing drafts, or as we try to fathom

a perplexing knitting pattern from *New Idea* and *Home Journal* magazines or brochure patterns from Patons.

'My good woman, you can't get scarlet fever twice,' the doctor had squawked at Mum as she stood in the red PMG phone box at the corner of our street. She held the earpiece in her right hand and, as a tall woman, stooped to speak into the mouthpiece mounted to the coin tube.

'Have it your way,' she said. 'Come and see for yourself.' She was right. A reportable disease no less: imagine the consternation within the walls of the Department of Health. That second time, men came and stuck newspaper to all the walls and ceilings of the house with flour paste before burning smelly coils. When I was on the mend and driving her to distraction, yet again, Mum taught me to crochet.

There are still a couple of scraps of newspaper in my parents' house hidden under the multiple layers of paint on the bathroom door and beneath my initials, two inches high, in oily, dark-red lipstick. Memories are sunbeams avoiding a child's eager grasp. Every now and then, newspaper and initials under paint suggests I may be who I say I am.

The only relic of work that remains from my very early years is an afghan made from scrap yarns begged from all and sundry in haphazard thicknesses and colours. I finished crocheting the circular motifs, each as round as bread and butter plates, when I was in grade five, the same year Mum bought me, for my birthday, my first, full-sized, sewing machine: black and gold, shiny and so precious.

The elation was the same rush that made my body pulse as I jumped off the shed roof into the tangle of honeysuckle and breathed the crushed blooms before I popped their sweet ends into my mouth and sucked hard.



Hard Times

Dark room, no night-light allowed. Australia was safe in the good old days and the back door was never locked. Anyone could help themselves anytime. Tea caddy was by the kettle, women and girls in the house. Belonged in the house? In the kitchen: In the bedroom. Belonged? Didn't belong: not to themselves.

Children were supposed to be seen and not heard.

Didn't answer back.

Didn't say no.

Don't misunderstand. It wasn't a true relative or friend. Not a doctor, priest nor teacher: just a stray, a foreign cur. He infiltrated our pack for a while and then deserted his de-facto, leaving a litter as lasting evidence of his passing through, to follow a new heat trail.

Didn't say no.

Didn't say yes.

Couldn't breathe.

Couldn't speak.

Talked in my sleep.

Walked in my sleep.

Was dislocated every day, awake or asleep.

Deep, deep, deeply asleep. Then, no gentle transition to wide-eyed rictus. Chilled to the bone despite the weight of the covers. Said he'd come back. Said each time he hurt me that he would see me dead if I told.

But I'd done nothing wrong.

Wasn't my fault.

Never told.

Never told no-one.

Couldn't tell.

The empty lump in my throat throttled, stillborn, the mere thought of telling.

Couldn't swallow the lump away; the void would get bigger and bigger, pushing against the sides of my throat and threatening to swallow me whole.

Couldn't tell

Didn't know the words.

He was long gone, but, still, those scratches on the window glass? It must, must, must be him. Not allowed to wake Mum and Dad: a newborn, premature, and an emergency hysterectomy.

'Your mother needs bedrest,' people said.

'Help your mother,' the doctor said. 'Be a good girl,' he said.

After Dad's day job, he worked all weathers until midnight in the shed making things to sell from steel and wood. 'It takes it out of him,' people said. He had to put food on the table.

He had to employ Rosalie, a State Ward, from the Morialta Children's Home. They gave her my bed while I slept next to her on a folding camp bed; she was only fifteen and couldn't cope. Then, at a higher cost, came Mrs Weddell, as live-out housekeeper. What else was a working man to do with a convalescent wife, and brood of kids all under eleven: one a newborn and four other youngsters who scattered into their days like pool balls at the first break?

No one talked about a sister born eighteen months before, smaller than Dad's hand, who'd died after only six hours, or that Mum still mourned her. Didn't need to be told to help, I was the oldest girl—in grade five with a precious, new, sewing machine—and just turned nine after all. But still people said, 'Help your father with the younger ones. Be a good girl.'

Hard Times left me to occupy myself where it should have been safe: in my bedroom, in the kitchen, in the lounge, in the little shed, at the local park, among the towering rocks at the beach, and, worst of all, under the huge tree with foliage that touched the ground next to the swift flowing creek.

Hard Times left me vulnerable to the careful ploys of a twisted mind. My aunt's de-facto stalked me with words and cut me from the safety of the herd. I tried very hard to believe that it was no-one's fault but his—mostly think that now, many years later, after a million years of blaming, grieving and gut-wrenching sobs.

And still, sometimes, shame and self-blame, lurking viruses in my cells, can't hear me. Besides, platitude says, 'Shit happens. Always has. Always will. Just get over it!'

Surely that scratching on the window like a fingernail flicking couldn't have been merely the espaliered grapevine tendrils, still turgid and yet to dry or be pruned away after a bumper summer crop. He was long gone, but it had to be him, must be him, night after night.

Always, the room would soften and glow with light and I would see the moon below me as I looked down from above. I would see my body, a frozen armature, shaping the covers into sculptural relief. Then, again and again, my great, white, shaggy, ice bear had arrived just in time to free me from the rictus of terror that stole my breath away.

The first time my bear came, he ambled out of *East O' the Sun, West O' the Moon* from where it was opened on the floor: my favourite story, in my favourite book of Norwegian folk tales. He carefully stepped over my knitting needles, my current knitting project and the spare balls of wool.

He carefully stepped over that crocheted afghan when I was nine, a pink knitted Aran jumper at fifteen, a pair of blue and black Fair Isle ski jumpers at eighteen, a black full-length medieval coat at nineteen, a deep-red lace bed-jacket at twenty when newly married—

and over other projects down the years—when the traumatised child subsumed the adult.

The back wall of the room would no longer be white. Instead, a wash of pale blue gave way to purplish grey, and the pine trees atop jagged mountains were a frieze of black shadows. There was a tree of twisted yarn with slender trunk and fine weeping branches.

The white bear stopped by my bed; his great swaying head stilled. His eyes were deep pools of compassion. In his best *Nynorsk* he asked me if I was afraid.

‘Not now,’ I replied. ‘Not now you’ve come back.’

‘Climb onto my back and hold tight to my fur. You can come and live with me now if you want.’ The moon followed us out of the room and illuminated the falling snow. The warmth from his fur penetrated my frozen body. The moonlight fell on fresh pillows of snow as we aimed for a cleft in the mountains. Depressions were shadows defined by its light, but the bear’s footsteps left no trace.



Part 2: Norse Yearning

Shadow Maiden

My Norwegian shadow persona wore a white home-woven tunic caught at the neck with a dragon-incised, heavy, silver clasp. A multi-coloured tablet braid decorated the ankle length hem. Her hair fell in a long and golden plait over one shoulder.

It occurs to me that she has become a tad ridiculous. She was eternally young: a lithe Viking maiden. Any and every reflective surface shows me to be a woman in late middle age with a too-well-padded mid-section whose own long hair is white, stranded with dark grey, and overlaid with a corona of untamed regrowth that reminds me of echidna quills.

Once crucial to my survival, Shadow Maiden has refused to return to her own time. And, still, she and my great, white, shaggy ice-bear hover, a formless mist of poetic image, during times of acute stress.

The first time we met, she had stepped from *East O' the Sun, West O' the Moon*, straight from Norway in company with my great,

white, shaggy ice-bear. The Kay Neilson illustration of them gained substance and came to reside in my mind. Ever after, older and wiser than me, she led the way when triggered memories made me stumble.

Folk tales are never burdened by exact dates, nor are children. My imagination transported Shadow Maiden into the Viking Era.

Once upon a time, the folk tale said, she was a poor cottager's beautiful, youngest daughter who left her family to live with her great, white, shaggy ice-bear in a castle full of gold and silver under a mountain. She, or was it I, had but to ring a silver bell and anything she wished for would be hers.

The only condition demanded that she didn't look upon the bear in the dark as he slept. At her mother's instigation, she lit a candle to look at him asleep and, of course, saw the loveliest Prince who was troll-spelled to wear the shape of a white bear by day and of a man at night. Impulse made her kiss him and, as she did so, three drops of hot tallow fell onto his cheek, and he disappeared.

By her impatience, she had forfeited her initial chance to save him. He was swept away to his wicked-troll stepmother's castle sited East O' the Sun and West O' the Moon where he was doomed to marry Princess Long Nose. The story told of my Maiden's ultimate quest, with the aid of the willing North, South, East, and West winds, to find and save him.

Shadow Maiden did save the Prince, and she saved me. Through our insatiable reading of anything printed, blissful hours when the real world ceased to exist and traumatic memory was temporarily silenced, she led me to other worlds—especially Norway and all things Norwegian.

The pattern of my life took hold: outwardly competent, inwardly under siege. Shameful memories resided in a special, mental cave dug deep into the back of my skull, separate from the rest of my mind. The price was eternal vigilance. Shore up the stone wall raised across the cave's entrance; don't let the evil mass escape! The wall

always needed repair as it was constantly bombarded by memories of what he had done to me. They were vigilantes who scouted the borderlands of conscious thought.

Those times when my mind floated free, it deserted my body and left it, an automaton, mindless, so clumsy.

‘Sir, she nearly got run over by a car outside school,’ the kids said. ‘Serves her right,’ my teacher, Mr Conroy said. Mum sent me to ballet classes; they were supposed to teach me graceful movement—the Hippos from *Fantasia* had a better chance of success.

I ran fast, sang multiplication tables in my head, and knitted or crocheted until my fingers ached: anything and everything that would shelter me, break the flow of memories, and exorcise the void from my throat.

‘Doesn’t pay attention,’ my teachers said, ‘doesn’t try hard enough; gives up too easily.’

When I was not in perpetual motion—nor helping Mum with housework, cooking, or the younger children—my hands always held books or needles, thread, fibres and yarn.

‘Why don’t you get outside in the sun and play?’ Dad always interrupted. ‘Why aren’t you helping your mother?’ I wanted his approval but, no matter how hard I tried, how often I helped Mum, it seemed I could never get it quite right. I often thought of telling him and Mum about what had happened—but the void, the vigilantes stopped me—and what if Dad hurt him and had to go to jail? Thank goodness for books and needles: sanctuary. Well, mostly.

Over the years, during those many hours spent with my ever-curious nose buried in books, I uncovered much that distressed. The brutal decades began with the sack of the Christian holy centres in the British Isles at Lindisfarne, Jarrow and Iona. They heralded the Viking breakout around 793AD from Scandinavia. The flames, the pain, the terror joined my personal torments in my mental cave.

My sympathies were for the victims of Odin’s brutal warriors, supposed *berserkers*, who were perpetually in search of a glorious

place in the sagas. They lusted after battle, treasure, power and fertile land. They hoped for a violent death in battle, a pre-requisite to selection by Odin's *Valkyries* to an afterlife of endless fights and feasts in *Valhalla* until the foretold destruction of the old gods, until *Ragnarök*.

There was that sick thrall, it repulsed but attracted me. I didn't understand that the traumatised can be encoded deep beyond language and share an invisible, emotion-saturated conduit that defies the rational. Much safer to focus on Viking women and girls: a clean fascination.

They would have been mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. I thought about them left at home in Norway to manage the steadings, and watch for distant sails. Later, history said, just as conquest and farming followed brutal lightning raids in shallow draught dragon ships, the women and girls followed the men to foreign lands.

Recently, archaeologists have found the remains of women who were Vikings. However, the books I read back then were full of tantalising images at archaeological sites with evidence of female, domestic skills and possessions. Much nicer than their menfolk, but they did wear the stolen bracelets and instruct the slaves snatched from ravaged territory.

Very tidy partitioning on my part: warriors, blood and horror into my mental cave, but women, weaving and beauty into my conscious thoughts. How naive I was despite my own battle scars.

Five or so decades later, I know that trauma feeds on trauma and energises negativity. Back then, I knew nothing of the unconscious mind. History was just a story and the people might as well have been made of cardboard; except that sometimes I felt the fires burn, the sword in my guts; and the frantic race from the marauder Viking whose face morphed into that of the man who haunted me.

After I read something particularly nasty, Shadow Maiden was more tangible and my great, white, shaggy ice-bear came more than once a night. I talked and walked in my sleep.

‘Found you on the backyard swing,’ Mum and Dad said one morning. Then, Mum chased the snick of a locked caravan door when we stayed up at Blanchetown on the Murray.

‘First, we searched the river bank, terrified you’d drown,’ she said. ‘Then Dad and I raced to a shack with a light on and men were inside playing cards. They hadn’t seen you, but, then, we all heard a noise in the kitchen. We found you in there helping yourself to a glass of water.’ I didn’t know, then, that the trauma of self and others can resonate, reverberate, and trigger flashbacks, re-lived horror.

How much better it would have been if I’d been attracted to fairy stories where little people with wings danced in groves, wore flowers, and worshipped peace. Instead, I was hailed by a vibrant Viking culture with the destructive capacity of rampant tree roots.

There were never enough pictures to satisfy me. My fingers flexed of their own accord, reached through time and stroked the textiles and mythological carvings on dragon ships, portals, furniture, rune stones, combs and brooches of impossibly intertwined baroque-like animals with legs that became tentacles, and with tails circled into their mouths.

I blithely added different Norwegian cultural eras to the mix. A Viking maiden probably slept on a straw pallet in a smoky longhouse with reeded roof. The wooden interiors and furniture I coveted belonged to a much later century—oh, that carved curtained bed-closet with hand-painted, black scrolls and flowers in folk blue, green, red and yellow.

I envied the wealthy brides who wore elaborate wedding crowns handed from mother to daughter with other gold and silver jewellery, and were attended by relatives or friends in the local costumes of their birth rights; diverse fabrics, styles and accessories all tied by tradition to the town, tiny fisher inlet/fjord, isolated farm steading, or valley they called home.

The Vikings endured the cold of North Sea crossings wrapped in woven or felted-cloth, leather and furs. Centuries later, their descendants popularised waterproof, navy-blue, sea-farer's textured knits or complex, iconic, Norwegian stars, crosses or roses on lice-patterned pullovers, *lusekofa*.

Books in Australia about Norwegian knitting were rare or beyond my reach; there were just a few pictures in 'National Geographic' or quaint black and white faded photos in books like *History of all Nations*.

I never tired of seeking out the slightest reference to Norway. In a tireless well of dreaming, the folktales and the myths enriched my days. Norwegian cultural traditions resonated in a way that eluded me in their Australian counterparts. I never read *Seven Little Australians* nor *The Gumnut Babies*—iconic Australian children's books—until I was an adult.

A brief visit to Norway, in 1980 with Liam, my husband, before our children (Joel and Anita) were born, far from satisfied. It was a whirlwind portion of a budget tour called 'Scandinavia in Fourteen Days'.

Sitting in a quiet grove on a hillock way above some other tourists, it felt as though I had come home but was moving too fast to say hallo. Later, as I fingered examples of coveted—but far too expensive—knitting and textiles, I promised that, one day, I would make some of them for myself and would come back soon. I couldn't know that twenty-eight years would pass before I returned.



Dropped Stitches

In *Blade of Fortriu*, the second book of the *Bridei Chronicles*, fantasy writer, Juliet Marillier, describes a journey through swampy marshes where the main characters have to negotiate a perilous course between tiny patches of safety and bogs that threaten to suck them under.

The tension between safety and peril, or the light and the dark, has been a recurrent preoccupation of humankind since perhaps the dawn of *Neanderthals* or, at the very least, *Homo sapiens*.

Knitters are not immune. Witness the self-explanatory *Knitting Through It: Inspiring Stories for Times of Trouble*, edited by Lela Nargi, or *Yarn: Remembering the Way Home* by Kyoko Mori that begins in Japan with the suicide of the author's mother, or *Comfort: A Journey through Grief* by Ann Hood in which the author circles heartbreak with the sudden death of her five-year-old daughter.

The too tight necks and dropped stitches of *When Bad Things Happen to Good Knitters: Survival Guide for Every Knitting*

Emergency by Marion Edmonds and Ahza Moore are minor by comparison.

I wish I had rosy coloured lens in my glasses so that I could see the course of my life other than through the dark tint—or taint—of childhood trauma. Maybe then, the happy times could stand proud and the painful times would recede. Maybe then laughter would be louder than tears.

‘The Advertiser’ was opened at the ‘Employment’ pages as I sprawled on the lounge floor with my coffee to hand. The daily job search was non-negotiable ever since job satisfaction had given way to disenchantment.

‘No, we can’t release you. We need your knowledge in your current role,’ the Director said. Patent nonsense, of course; what if I was hit by that proverbial bus? Afterwards, losing the chance of a temporary promotion was bearable. The caveat wasn’t.

‘Make sure he doesn’t do anything he shouldn’t,’ the Assistant Director of Community Development said to me about the person who successfully appealed against my internal job opportunity. ‘He doesn’t know the work like you do.’

Without speaking, I slammed the door of his office so hard the adjacent walls shook. My mind was swear-word-central as I stormed around the city streets to cool my temper.

The doctor approved sick leave. He saw emotional dysfunction. He didn’t know how my default to extreme distress battered the walls of my mental cave, or that flashbacks and nightmares stole my energy.

‘Petty behaviour; can’t stand the heat,’ critics said. ‘That’s what comes of letting women work.’ I bided at home, poured my soul into my knitting as a distraction from my mental turmoil until I could face what had become a toxic work environment.

Crucially, I was thirty-two, stymied professionally, and I questioned my long term conviction that I wouldn’t have children—a

hard topic for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Who could be trusted?

My usual job was permanent—pay and hours excellent—and maternity leave on offer. But, my skin was so thin as to be almost non-existent despite my masquerade as an extrovert, and I didn't want to be pregnant in an inhospitable, sexist environment with its tendency to vulgar joking behaviour that was passive aggression laughed off as humour.

I still recall how humiliated I felt when a well-endowed cartoon body beneath a photo of my head was published in a social club newsletter.

'It isn't officially endorsed, you know,' the Director said when I objected; as if that made any difference to how I felt.

If I tell the truth, it still rankles today. How could a person maintain respect under those circumstances? When the 'lads' published the cartoon, it was just over ten years since 1972 saw equal pay for women. There was much that still needed radical change as gender prejudice was still rife; often, the Federal regulations seemed akin to lip service.

My sister, Anne, and I had visited the Jam Factory, especially the knitted textile sponsored workshop, for both craft exhibitions and on an open day when the public had been free to tour the building.

Red brick external walls supported huge, squared-timber trusses clad in corrugated iron. The saw tooth roof saw light flooded onto the raw concrete floor and laid shadows across the painted yellow footprints that guided the visitor around the artisan complex.

Apart from the retail shop at the front, and SA Craft Council offices, independent craftspeople unleashed creativity in leased workshops that lined the perimeter of the cavernous interior akin to a cubed beehive. A three metre wide full height corridor sat between them and the central block of large workshops and gallery. The raw cellar of bricks, beams and posts housed cobwebs and a furniture enterprise.

The SA Government sponsored four workshops with trainees and assistants supervised by a 'Head of Workshop': knitted textiles, leather, pottery and glass blowing. I lingered alongside Gunda, a current trainee. She finessed a bed of hooked needles, yarn and carriage. Weights hung from the fabric that grew beneath the machine—rows of alternating red, green and yellow teardrops on a black ground. I could learn to do that, I thought.

To Anne, I said, 'I want a chance at this.' I'm sure my eyes glowed as I spoke. 'Do you remember when Mum bought her knitting machine and made all those school jumpers?'

'I'm sure she hated the sight of grey by the time she was done.' Anne fingered a row of finished garments hanging for sale on a dress rail.

'Probably, but this is more like knitting a rainbow with a pot of gold at the end.'

Day one, enter me, new knitted textile design trainee. Smiles hurt cheek muscles. Gone were the drooped lip corners. A hand full of domestic knitting machines sat silent, in wait. Deep shelves of yarn, balls and cones in every colour imaginable, delighted the eye on the blind wall behind them.

There was a murmur of voices in the office under the mezzanine. I already had the broom in my hand when Annie, a former trainee, came to tell me that Jennifer, the workshop head, wanted me to sweep. It was first thing Monday morning, before people had had a chance to regroup after the weekend, and down their first coffee of the day. Of course I got busy work.

I didn't mind. This opportunity carried my hopes. Motivation came from thoughts of a future where I could be a self-employed, knitwear artisan producing limited edition garments that were impervious to fashion fads while raising a child on my own terms.

Liam, weary from a night shift at the radar installation at Adelaide airport, had copped the full brunt of my enthusiasm when I had started this journey with the Jam Factory's wanted ad.

Poor man—I feel sorry for him now. Back then I was caught in the web of a dream and he was the mate the spider ate. I thought the living allowance might be the deal breaker. I would be receiving less in payment than I had previously lost to taxation but Liam was sanguine about it and we both thought we could get by.

My love/hate relationship with machine knitting began. I missed the gentle rhythm of hand knitting, but I loved the speed of moving from sketched design concept and swatches, through the mathematics of gauge and target measurements, and then *voila* the finished garment. It was very satisfying to watch each stage play its role in the accumulating piles of finished garments in the orders' cupboard. As is my way, I wasted time stopping to admire and fondle the yarn and fabrics as I worked.

The workshop at that time focused on Fair Isles garments with many colour changes in five ply pure wool by Patons and Cleckheaton. On a particularly hateful day, I fought my way through dropped work (weights on toes too), split stitches and wrong colour sequences only to find the pocket slit was on the wrong side of the front. I had to frog (rip it, rip it, rip it) the whole piece and ended up with a pile of small balls of wool to show for my efforts. A whole day wasted and tears of frustration running down my cheeks. Other days the work flowed serenely.

Jennifer grew cacti and succulents on the edge of the stairs up to the assembly area where Joanna operated an industrial linker. Guided by her skilful hands, chain stitch joined two sections of knitting held on wicked teeth and produced sleek seams. We sat around a huge table, on mismatched chairs, sewing; Jennifer managed the workflow and often stood near us and steam ironed pieces from our machines or those of outworkers.

'You can have tomorrow off,' Jennifer sometimes said Thursday afternoon. 'But, you need to finish ten garments each.' The first time, I thought she was joking until I found my Friday and entire weekend taken over by handwork.

‘Sew in all stray threads, hand graft cuffs, waistbands and collars plus oversew double button holes and buttons...within forty minutes for simple jumpers to an hour and twenty minutes for the more complicated jackets,’ she instructed. It seemed beyond my reach.

Over time this became my favourite part of the process, sitting upstairs with work in our laps despite high summer heat, chatting too much, as we finished orders in time for the next winter season in boutiques in Melbourne and Sydney.

A choreographed show at the Festival Theatre—called ‘Worlds in Collision’—represented collaboration between Annabelle Collette’s hand knits and Jennifer’s machine knit private work and our Jam Factory label. Jenny, the other trainee, and I were invited to submit work. Jennifer and Jenny: so confusing.

Jenny designed and knitted a pair of black leggings, no easy project with complicated prior calculations and much hand shaping on the machine. Black is a challenging colour for the eyes at the best of times and many increases and decreases make it more so.

I designed and knitted a quilted jacket that featured royal blue, flecked blue and maroon stripes with hand-made triangle buttons on maroon bands. The thin sleeve stripe contrasted with the wide bodice stripe but matched that of the split-sided overskirt. The underskirt was whale-bone, rib corduroy. The blonde model, flushed with the heat of the lights and the weight of the outfit, rightly belonged on a Mongolian steppe in the middle of a blizzard. With shaking hands and roiling stomach, I sewed the last button in place minutes before the model was due on stage.

I explained my nausea as show time nerves. I was actually pregnant. Joel was on his way. I crowded as much as I could into the days remaining before his birth, but I was always tired and the bulge between me and the machine seemed to double each night. I often wondered what the noise of the carriage whirring across the needle beds was doing to my little passenger whose head was literally centimetres away.

Before I got too big to get close enough to work the knitting machine, I learned to design, produce and sell limited edition knitwear. A skinny, black skirt was needed to go with the workshop's jackets, jumpers and cardigans that were scheduled to be used in a *Vogue Australia* magazine fashion shoot. I designed and knitted it under the workshop's label 'Lincz'. I still have the 'As seen in Vogue' label that was attached to the skirt when it was returned, and my copy of that *Vogue Australia* I bought for my brag collection.

Then the doubting thing kicked in. 'If I can get a garment in *Vogue*,' I said to Liam, 'they can't have very high standards.' He, of course, told me it meant no such thing. In my wise-woman incarnation I sometimes believe him.

I heard the cry of a newborn, loud and indignant, as he sucked air for the first time. Liam held Joel, gazes locked, and I was a mother, responsible for this tiny, vernix-coated critter.

'She thinks she feels faint,' the nurse said as though she disbelieved me, 'get a barouche.'

'I beg your pardon,' I chilled. 'I *do* feel faint.' An hour later, the same nurse hit the emergency bell and she and a sister fought to stop the red tide that gushed from me. My face was grey. Days later they found me collapsed on the floor.

'You should have a blood transfusion,' the doctor said. 'I know you don't want it because of the AIDS scare, so its spinach and stout for the next few months. And you can't go home alone.'

'But Liam just started a new job a month ago.' The doctor just looked at me; Liam took a month's leave.

Have you ever watched Kevin McLeod in *Grand Designs*? Remember the look on his face each time people start a new build or a major renovation with babies complicating the scenario? We did just that. In our case, the answer was we needed bedrooms with doors. Open plan was fine for adults, not so convenient with little

ones that crawled and walked and climbed ahead of schedule. New job, new baby, and new build: the life stressors were mounting.

Liam, weary from a steep learning curve at work, tidied the building site. Joel scooted his little red toy horse with yellow clucking plastic duck on wheels tied behind. Gutters, two storeys on top of a daylight cellar, vertigo as I painted them ochre from a dodgy, wooden-jerry-built scaffold because the builder was too tight fisted to hire industry standard.

When Joel turned eighteen months, I was plagued nightly by two thoughts: *I am going to die. How can I protect Joel from the low-life out there?* Was this normal for a mother? Was the biological urge to reproduce satisfied and I was redundant. Restless and fed up with living in a building site, I rented a small textile studio and interleaved that with part-time work for an Indigenous community organisation.

At the day care centre for the first time, tears and thrumming heels and my little boy broke my heart. I hid around the corner and watched. He dusted himself off and climbed into a toy car.

In my studio, I machine knitted. Carriage whirring, yarn built tidy coloured rows on jumper and jackets, orders for Jennifer at the Jam Factory. Then, there was garments for the '*Labor Vincit*' exhibition by workshop heads and invited artisans also at the Jam Factory.

Thirty-five-years later, I still wear the pieced tunic. Cobalt-blue, stylised, *Hypatica* flowers flow from front to back hems in an inserted jacquard panel. The stocking stich batwing sleeves are a testament to comfort. Liam has the Persian carpet pullover—bold oversized white motifs on a French blue ground, small scale floral tessellations on the sleeves with blue-red, toothed borders.

One morning as my Fiat X1-9, a two-seater low sport's car, was stopped at a red light, and just as I turned toward Joel in the passenger seat, singing, 'Going on a Bear Hunt', a car rammed into the back of me.

‘You bloody idiot! What the hell do you think you were doing?’
I think was a mild reproof when there was a toddler on board.

If I’d known that severe whiplash was only days down the track, and that my lower back and neck had been permanently damaged, heralding a future of chronic pain and disability, I think I would have been less restrained.

If I’d known it would cause extreme depression, trigger and amplify episodes of PTSD from childhood trauma, and then cost me my job, and set a five year medico-legal process in train, I think I would have broken down. I was terrified they would find out about the childhood sexual abuse and judge me mentally deficient.

If I’d known how it would impact the trajectory of Liam’s health and employment future, or how it would alter the style of parenting I’d imagined for Joel, and then later Anita, poor little tucked-around-the-edges mites, I would have dissolved.

If I’d known that the whole episode would be repeated only eleven months later when an old man drove into the back of my car while I was stationary at a stop sign, I don’t know how I would have reacted.

After the second crash, I just sat in the car and sobbed my guts out. I was still undergoing physiotherapy and healing from the first crash. Where would I find the stamina? How would we survive?

I worked again in later years: a messy mix of full-time that I couldn’t sustain, then, part-time and contract hours where my strengths were in lateral thinking and setting up new initiatives, never regular maintenance or daily grind. I was never physically robust again and our income was claimed by debt accumulated during the lean years, raising Joel, and then Anita, and skyrocketing mortgage repayments. I had little time or inclination for my textile work.

When Joel was ten, and Anita five years old, Liam’s parents both died suddenly: first his father, and eighteen months later his mother. His father was taken by ambulance with complications of what seemed to be a heavy cold, but he had a fatal heart attack on a

gurney in a corridor of the RAH Emergency Department. Liam's mother's demise followed a massive brain stem stroke at an Easter Sunday beach picnic, panicking Joel and Anita, and traumatising us all.

I couldn't get past how bizarre it was that, in the following week, we were eating an Easter cake that had been cooked by a dead woman. I can still feel the bites of cake stuck in my throat like that old empty void from childhood. Surely it was traumatic shock, a fixing on a trivial detail, when the reality was too hard to face.

My hands held my temples together while my body shook; old patterns of response to trauma surfaced and my mind hurt all the time. Liam was hardly better placed. We both ceased working. Neither of us ever had a permanent job again. Liam took on several episodes of part-time contract work before taking early retirement.

I had always wanted to study at University. After a lengthy break where I used what capacity I had to tend to our children, I started tentatively as a part-time student. By then, Joel had turned thirteen, and Anita nine. Often, I crashed and burned, and put in a 'Withdrawal no Failure' form on medical grounds. I took one subject three times before I completed it. Part-way through my undergraduate degree in Professional and Creative Communication, I took an elective subject called 'Constructed Textiles' with Australian textile artist and academic Kay Lawrence.

I have fond memories of a week-end camp where I made a woven *Maori* satchel from flax; a *Ngarrindjeri* twined dilly bag from Aunt Eliza leaves with a subtle strand of purple tapestry yarn, a stitched coiled bowl, and a freeform piece using dragon-tree wiggly, fruit stems.

We, then, had to make contemporary pieces using the same techniques. I wove a satchel from computer connector ribbon, a twined dilly from torn rag, a coiled bowl from wool over a rubber core, and a plastic freeform piece.

We sat around steaming pots and dyed fabric or yarn using bark, flowers and leaves. My tapestry project was a landscape woven using a small table top loom. My main project was in felt: a beige, stitched piece about paths taken, and a lurid red and yellow organic piece that represented traumatic memory. I still have the first, the latter I symbolically binned.

Kay said, 'Beware the visual arts.' She turned out to be right. For my main project, I had read *Women who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* by Maria Pinkola Estes, based on Jungian psychology. She linked certain folk tales and archetypes with human problems. The story and Estes' analysis of the 'Ugly Duckling' hit a nerve with the protagonist's uneasy situation of difference from his family of origin. A seed fell onto fertile ground.

It bloomed when I signed up for The Barbra Hanrahan Community Tapestry Project sponsored by the Bob Hawke Centre at UNISA. Hanrahan was a prolific Adelaide born writer and artist, primarily lino-cut prints. I hated it when the 'Puppet Master' was chosen as the main project. I thought it the most sinister of her work.

After reading her books, I wondered if she had been abused and saw the 'Puppet Master' as a figure manipulating a person's thoughts and actions. An art critic would protest that I was reading Hanrahan's life not her work. It is always so difficult to separate the author and the character she narrates: indeed, to separate oneself for that matter.

A tapestry I designed called 'To Be Fully Herself', a computer generated collage of images from Hanrahan's work, was one of three chosen from Tapestry Project participants by their colleagues to be made as companion pieces by the group. A fourth was also selected. Mine would form my central work for a guided study for University credit. I hadn't realised my back wouldn't allow me to sit at a floor loom and my mind followed an increasingly negative trajectory.

The following sequence is a blur of memories. Looking back, I can see now that once childhood sexual abuse is admitted out loud—

the big secret revealed to a totally unprepared audience—there is no putting the genie back in the bottle. She has escaped and it must play out as it will. There is no way to steer the consequences or soften the blow for shocked relatives. The proverbial shit hit the extended family fan like a parody of a hippo I'd once seen at the zoo standing defecating in water, its tail a windscreen wiper flicking muck indiscriminately.

It doesn't seem now that I was naïve, or lacking in perception, it was just I was so enmeshed in my own distress and dysfunction that I just hadn't anticipated that extended family members would assume adversarial positions, even though the predator was nothing to them and long gone. To this day, some still either don't believe me or think I should just 'get over it'.

My fragile sense of belonging—already challenged by work with Barbara Hanrahan's books and prints—shattered, and hidden chronic dysfunction devolved to recognisable mental illness that could no longer be hidden.



Solitaire¹

I watched as a large bundle of laundry thudded down the chute from a floor above. Another patient, Arthur, hunched on a seat by the nurses' station, ignored it. Somewhere, sometime, he had learnt how to wait and he did it well. Often the nurses handled their assigned patients with, 'Go away and do something else, *anything else*, for just half an hour and then come back again.' Arthur was doing something else already: sitting and not asking for anything.

Rik, a nurse, frowned at Arthur, 'Take your street stench somewhere else, and why don't you have a shower like any normal person? Because, God knows, you stink and probably have lice.'

¹ Please note: the above piece named 'Solitaire' appeared disguised as third person fiction in course work for my Honour's year. It is necessary to the trajectory of this memoir and has been revised as an autobiographical narrative.

Besides, someone else will need to sit in that same chair. Haven't you any consideration for others at all?'

Arthur didn't reply. His mouth, face and eyes withheld any hint that Rik had even spoken.

In another era, in England's Bedlam perhaps, Rik could really have made Arthur's existence hell. I remembered reading Horwood's book, *Skallagrig*. I had never personally encountered that alternate reality of mental asylums—until then. Rik would have been cast as Dilke, the male nurse who tormented and repeatedly assaulted another Arthur, a patient with a brilliant mind but a disabled body and distorted speech. In this time and place, Rik had to content himself with futile attempts at getting Arthur to wash.

Arthur's outer layer was a filthy overcoat, always fully buttoned. His hands lived in the pockets; his bare feet with overlong dirty nails protruded from the frayed edges of tatty pants that were once a muted plaid. Everyone felt sorry for Maddox who had to share a room with him. Maddox had severe schizophrenia and was mainly in another place and didn't mind anyway. If anything, he was comfortable with Arthur. He treated him as part of the furniture and that didn't help Rik's campaign at all.

A few of the patients got chummy and told one another secrets that took days to confess. All the inmates knew about Arthur was garnered from how he behaved. They also knew he was a ward of the Minister of Health, sectioned, not allowed out. He had to settle for what he could see beyond the window of his shared room. Through its venetians with bent blades that someone threw a chair at—and no one had bothered to repair—he could look beyond a stone wall at the tall sky punctuated by Norfolk Island pines. From the dining room, from the day room, the windows overlooked a busy street.

There were other windows in other rooms but they were only available to the medical staff and students who frequented the ward. There was the lobby defined by two sets of double doors. A pen at a wildlife park came to mind. Flight was impossible. Staff, visitors and voluntary patients came and went. 'Push the button', instructed the

sign. A nurse looked up, sighed *not again*, and released the lock. The door stayed closed if Arthur pushed the button.

Seraphina was also held under the guardianship of the Minister. Unlike Arthur, she was not the least bit resigned. While he was a smooth surface of brown water, she was an old sun just before it exploded. She was fully dressed as required, not through a willingness to conform but because, for a detained patient, the ward was not unlike a cruise at sea. There was a limit to the number of places designed for sitting. Apart from the shared bedrooms, they were all accessible to other patients. She mainly stayed on her bed but kept her shoes on even when she slept. They were shiny, patent-leather lace-ups with rounded toes. Even the soles were immaculate.

The room I shared with her was divided in half by a 1950s-style back-to-back built-in wardrobe, dresser and mirror. She had the cubicle closest to the door, with the only hand basin; my side had the only window. I had been on the ward a week or so this admission, and had already given up trying to talk to Seraphina. After lights out, the main bathrooms were locked. In the corridor, between the dispensary and the high-risk room, a unisex toilet cubicle without taps was left open. There were always urine splashes or worse on the floor. A gender war raged over the position of the seat.

I came back from the toilet and tried to use the hand basin. Seraphina snarled at me, 'You don't want to use that. I wash my feet there.'

My hands felt grubby. The toilets were a thousand years old and full of germs, even if they were scrubbed every day. I slunk back to bed, hands unwashed. Seraphina scared me shitless. Violence hung in the dark and tears slid down my cheeks.

'You keep me awake. You're noisy, you know. The bed creaks when you toss and turn. And you snore, loudly.' The vindictive voice fell silent.

Seraphina was partly right. The Largactil, a sedative, made me snore. But, I didn't toss and turn. I clunked my feet together. My

whole body and the bed shuddered in sympathy. If she wasn't such a cow, I would feel sorry for her with me as a roommate.

'Can I have a sleeping pill, I can't sleep?' she asked Lou or Anya or Lara, whoever was her assigned nurse for the shift.

'Just go back to bed for another half-hour; then we'll see how you are,' they answered.

Seraphina couldn't sleep anyway. She'd slept intermittently all day. I wasn't keeping her awake, but, nonetheless, she finished the conversation by slamming her body into the mattress. Seraphina had challenged the nurses once or twice before.

'What happens if I refuse the tablets?' she had demanded her pale face drawn and angry.

'We call the security guards and fill a syringe.'

Seraphina wouldn't use the privacy curtains around her bed. She kept the heavy, oversized door shut even though the nurses checked each room on the hour, especially through the night. The nurses offered this as a present to new patients.

'You're perfectly safe here,' they said. 'We check every hour. Just ask if you need anything or tell us if you have a problem.'

I had a problem, many in fact. But, most immediately, it was Seraphina. I didn't know or care why she was sectioned, just didn't want to be in the same room with her. Every time I had to move in or out I had to confront the door that, somehow, Seraphina had claimed for her own.

'Why do you keep looking at me?' She looked up from writing and spat out as I walked past. 'Do you expect me to have my boyfriend in bed with me?'

I was at a loss. My instincts told me not to take Seraphina on because she couldn't help herself, and who knew what she'd do. What a puerile thing for her to have said. My mouth twitched. This woman really had lost it; she was a total loony. The absurdity of my thought in the context of a psych ward led to a full-blown smile.

Enraged, Seraphina demanded, 'What have you got to laugh at? Fuck off.'

I was in deep shit now, I thought, and skittered out of the room. I ran into Hugh.

'I want to take your blood pressure because of your new medications. I need you to lie down for half an hour so I can get an accurate reading.'

'Do we have to do it now?'

'Yes. What's the problem? After all, you've got nowhere else to go right now.'

I turned and opened the door. Seraphina widened her eyes and stiffened for the kill.

'Have you got a pathological need to go in and out of doors? I told you to fuck off.'

I retreated. Hugh was still in the corridor, acted as though he'd heard nothing.

'Why aren't you on your bed? I want to get this done before I write up my shift notes.'

I felt sick. If things were bad with Seraphina before, what would I be in for now? My stomach roiled but I told him anyway.

'It's Seraphina.'

'What about her?'

'She doesn't want me in the room.'

'That's not for Seraphina to say. We assign the beds and she'll do as she's told.'

'You don't under...' I try again.

'Yes I do,' he cut me short, opening the door and raising his voice. 'Go and lie down now.' Seraphina was curled up on her bed and pretended to be asleep.

For respite from her, I often sat in the small lounge where the patients' telephone was mounted on the wall, always knitting—looking for that still place that excluded the outer world.

'A focused activity will help you control your thoughts,' the nurses said.

As if I didn't already appreciate the meditative benefits of knitting.

I moved along three chairs when Arthur sat next to me. He was okay but the stench made me gag. Arthur was doing whatever Arthur did when he was still and stared. He had just ignored Fran, a teenager from the country, who made a point of coming up to him several times a day with a sing-song, 'Hi there Arr-thur.'

At night she didn't smile or sing. She screamed in her sleep and tried to climb the walls to get away from the rats. During the day she pestered staff, any staff, to buy her lollies and soft drinks from the canteen, or to let her use the office phone to ring her mother long distance.

Seraphina came into the room and I looked down at my work.

'Go away Arthur,' was Seraphina's starting salvo. He ignored her but I started to move off.

'Don't go I, I need your help.'

For once Seraphina wasn't snarling or glaring at me. I was too stunned to say anything.

'I want to make a phone call. It's really private and I want you to stop anyone from coming in. Don't listen though. Go over by the door where you can't hear.'

Arthur stayed put and I was undecided. There were two doors. Which was I supposed to guard? I stood then decided I didn't care and leant against the nearest wall. I wasn't helping Seraphina, no way. I'd just listen to annoy her. She deserved nothing from me.

Just as Seraphina put her money into the gold phone, the double doors leading to the lobby opened and a domestic pushed the meal trolley along in front of her. I looked at the clock. It was half past five, tea-time, and far too early for me. At home I didn't eat until eight. I abandoned Seraphina to her phone call, and, with Arthur a pace behind, headed for the dining room.

The dining room was all Lino, steel, vinyl, and Laminex so voices echoed. Greg, the longest detainee at two months and counting, was killing time; he cleaned the kitchen area and placed jugs of cordial on each table. Even if no one drank them, they were

colourful, but, their cheer in that sterile setting added a jarring touch to an impulse that should have looked homey. No hearth here.

Arthur pushed past Greg to a group who looked for their names on the lidded dinner plates. He never filled in his menu the day before, and grabbed the first tray to hand. I had written a big red 'S' inside a circle on the bottom right corner of my menu tapped to the lid so that I could spot it quickly and didn't get stuck with Arthur's rejects.

That night, he was foiled. Anya was on duty and she'd seen him in action. She'd picked out his meal and steered him toward a table. None of the patients except Fran ever tried to talk to him; her taunting sing-song hardly counted as conversation. No one ever sat with him. He hunched over his plate as though warming himself at a fire and shoveled with his fork until there was nothing left. Next, he peeled the seal off the pre-packaged, sugar-laden dessert and did the same with that.

His ritual was complete when his long musician's fingers dragged a small tobacco tin and packet of cigarette papers from his pocket. His whole attention was focused on taking a paper, holding it on his lip while he teased out threads of tobacco. He took the paper from his lip, aligned the tobacco so he could hand-roll the thinnest 'cigg' I'd ever seen. Perhaps it was a case of economy for a homeless person. He left for his smoke ration.

I watched and thought 'Nowhere Man' could have been written just for him. Then, in an instant of self-recrimination, I asked myself, who was I to judge anyone?

I didn't have a friend and usually sat wherever there was a vacant place. There were a number of people, apart from Arthur, on my list of people to avoid at meal times. I was not comfortable near Jerry who walked from the men's showers in his jocks despite warnings from the staff. His jokes were sexist and smutty. Janet held an invisible knife towards anyone who got too close.

'Leave me alone, I'll kill you,' was her usual refrain.

Harry, barely twenty, burped and farted often—thought it was funny. Two other women endlessly explored their medical histories. Beryl had Alzheimer's and was incontinent. I felt sorry for her but couldn't handle her distress each time she peed herself. Seraphina, for once, wasn't an issue because she broke the cardinal rule about food and drink in the bedrooms. She took her tray to our room to eat in private. The staff must have known and couldn't be bothered with her fusses.

The tightest group in the ward was made up of the smokers. I couldn't believe that a hospital had an inside smoking room. It was a tiny glass cubicle at the end of the TV and billiard room. Six chairs, I had counted them, fitted across the back wall and the room was just deep enough for people to stretch out their legs. There was a flue fitted with a fan to draw out the carcinogenic fug.

It wasn't fair. They got a constant flow of sedatives from the nicotine on top of their prescription drugs. Maybe I should take up smoking too? I thought of lung, throat and mouth cancers and abandoned it as a dumb impulse. Funny, wasn't it, to worry about death, when I was suicidal? I was beset with scenarios: pills, ropes and exhaust fumes. They didn't get it. I needed to kill the memories not myself.

Every week, I looked forward to the visits of groups of volunteers—the little luxury and dose of normalcy that they brought with them. The Red Cross ladies came every Tuesday. I especially enjoyed the warm, soapy water before my manicure.

I think of my godmother, Auntie Ruth, in her matron's garb: sterile, starched. She wore a red cape over a white uniform and a big triangular white scarf on her head. Her stockings and shoes, lace-ups, were both white. Mostly, I saw her when she came to help Mum with housework or take me on outings with her niece, Pam. Then, she didn't look as official, as proper, as she did on the odd occasions I saw her at work at the Magill Old Folk's Home. How different the casual comfortable clothing of hospital staff now?

Auntie Ruth was such a contrast to Harry. He was hauled out of bed by his nurse. He always missed breakfast, and the shower, ward routine demanded. He came into the day room where the volunteers had set out all their equipment. Harry used the single toilet in the corner. There was no airlock and he left the door open. Valia, a voluntary patient in for electric shock therapy for chronic depression, yelled at him past the bottom lip she'd bitten through as she convulsed.

'Don't be such a pig. Shut the frigging door.'

Harry ran true to character and just laughed.

The Red Cross ladies tried not to show their disgust. They failed when he came over to the day bed and pushed aside their stacks of clean, white, hand towels and face cloths so that he could lie down and go back to sleep.

Were they enlightened, brave or stupid? I wondered about such women. The psych ward didn't have alarm buttons and a padded room for no reason. I wouldn't be here if I had a choice. I had seen a woman brought in the night before, handcuffed between two policemen. She struggled, swore and was the second patient who threatened to kill everyone.

The police had been having trouble controlling her. She was sedated now in the high-risk room, under constant surveillance by at least two nurses in the duty room.

Ward gossip said she was a *schitzo* who'd gone off her meds and taken crack. Of course, it wouldn't be the first time ward gossip was wrong.

Reminded of the ward's potential for violence, I began to shake. I couldn't bear to go back to my room, to Seraphina. The TVs in the billiard room and the day room were too loud and I hated reality pap or news anyway. I found Arthur in the small lounge with a couple of others. He stank but at least he was quiet and there was no TV. Then, Rik was on duty and he was after Arthur. Arthur saw him first, at the end of the corridor, and slipped away quietly to the men's.

'Have you seen Arthur?' Rik asked me.

‘No, sorry,’ I lied. It was the least I could do. Arthur was harmless and Rik was a bully.

In the small lounge, there were two new patients. Bandages wrapped one man’s wrists, the fingers splinted. He was reading a book. Lucky man, I hadn’t been able to read for ages. My eyes saw the words but sentences, most attempts at order, eluded me. The second wore a grey, pin-striped suit, with navy blue tie shoved in his pocket.

Then I flinched as if struck. What had happened to me? Books and suits and slashed wrists, all normal, of equal import? I needed to get out. Pretend I was better, the thoughts gone, so they’ll let me go.

‘Do you know where Arthur is?’ Rik asked the men.

I had forgotten he was there. They didn’t know who Arthur was and the nurse hadn’t the wit to describe him.

‘No,’ they said and he finally walked away.

Should I tell them my name? I remembered how awkward my first time on the ward had been. It wasn’t like a training course where an icebreaker will do the trick. Every topic could turn to quicksand.

‘How are you?’ absurd.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ fatuous.

‘I wish I was dead,’ true but harsh.

There’s only one common factor here. We were a legally sanctioned label, the mentally ill. Not dangerous to others just ourselves.

‘Hell, this place sucks.’ I startled all of us, blushed and left.

I leant against the metal door of the warm, blanket closet in the corridor between the self-help laundry and the room with the deep, green bath where one could sink below the water and forget all. I enjoyed the heat from the door on my back. I slid down the door ‘til my butt touched the ground and hugged my knees tight. I began to rock, comforted by the movement.

‘I’m whole...whole...whole.’ As if repetition would do the trick: wipe out a paedophile’s traumatic legacy.

The quiet, the heat, the soothing rock were bliss. I decided to brave Seraphina and took two hot cotton weave blankets from the closet. I held them to my face as I headed for my bed.

‘Didn’t the nurses tell you part of your therapy is to stay out of here and do things?’ sneered Seraphina, from her bed where she was surrounded by sheets of paper covered in handwriting.

So much for privacy!

‘Get stuffed. Go tell them. See if I care.’ I pulled a pillow over my head and absorbed the heat from the covers.

I watched from above. Mandibles bit white skin. Psychotic spiders all with the same monstrous face, that man’s face, crawled into mouth, nostrils, eyes and ears. There were screams and a body jerked to a sit; scuttled back into a corner. It thrashed then pulled up its arms and legs, cringed from the swarm. A syringe slipped a sedative into an arm.

Briony, my nurse, woke me. I felt groggy and my mouth was dry. My body ached all over like a leg muscle after a cramp.

‘How do you feel now?’ she asked. ‘Your Psych came to see you this morning. He’s back again now with a student. They want me to bring you to the interview room.’

Arthur was coming out with his nurse as Briony and I arrived. Had Arthur spoken? I’d never heard his voice.

I tried to listen to the Psych but I was distracted by his yellow, bow tie; and mesmerised by the long eyes of the medical student. They asked me the same old questions.

Briony read to them from her shift reports. ‘Apart from the hiccup this morning, she is no longer critical.’

Oh goody, I thought, just the usual chronic shit.

‘We’ve got you on more appropriate medications and Briony says you’re tolerating them well,’ Psych said. ‘Coming into hospital doesn’t help you get better...encourages dependency. Your private psychiatrist will continue to see you weekly. These things take time. Blah ble blah ble blah...’ the words turned to static.

I could hear the blood as it pulsed in my ears.

‘...you can call on your home care liaison team if you need help. We’ll discharge you in the morning. ...the half-way hostel, if you like, for a couple of days to help adjust between hospital and home.’

I’d heard it all before. What gave? My whole body shook and I had trouble breathing. Yesterday, Anya thought it was reasonable to suggest that I plan a dinner party for friends. Now this doctor wanted me to go to a freezing brick halfway box under the flight path to the airport. The hostel was an ex-motel with painted concrete block walls where the vegetables were soggy, and everything else was deep fried, where very young or dubious residents banged doors as they argued into the small hours.

Okay, if the alternative was the street. That made me think of Arthur. But I was not Arthur. I’d never lived rough. I began to shake. Couldn’t get my breath; thought it was a heart attack.

‘You know it’s just a panic attack,’ they said. ‘Slow your breathing. You can cope with it.’

Sanctimonious sods. Didn’t they know I was worn out? How hard it was? I was tired. I just wanted it all to stop.

I began to sob. I was folding in on myself. The shakes, the breathing, the sobs and anger, futile anger at this predicament, brought me to the floor.

The psych with his yellow bow tie, Briony with her case notes, and the student of the long eyes and satin skin watched: tough care and behaviour modification in action. They didn’t reward weakness. Sedation into oblivion was reserved for the violent. At least I’d be rid of Seraphina, and Greg’s jugs of cordial were truly pathetic.

‘Breathe. Breathe,’ they chanted.

I remembered the terror. I remembered the need to escape my mind. Then there was the memory of the intrusive, nosy, curiosity of a relative who was only interested in gossip, not my well-being.

My head felt as though it was stuffed with an impenetrable fog. Details eluded me. There was no recollection of an ambulance or of paramedics. I slowly regained full consciousness and opened my

eyes. I remembered a nightmare, massive panic attack, and the misery that drove me to take every pill in my flat. It obviously hadn't worked. I felt numb. I was strung out and desperate. The point of an intra-venous drip was partly dislodged and hurting my hand. A tube of activated charcoal fed through my nose into my throat. I lifted my head and saw the security guard seated at the foot of my bed.

The general nurses were scared. They wouldn't look after sectioned patients without the guards. How could they know I'm only a danger to myself?

I knew the drill. Had I damaged my brain or heart? They'd keep me here until they thought I was medically stable. Then it was down to the psych ward, if they'd got a bed. I was dressed in a backless hospital gown and they'd cut off the ties. As if I could have choked myself with cotton strips?

No one came to visit me. After too many admissions, relatives and friends stayed away—tough love.

'Don't reward her,' the mantra said.

I was sure that they thought I was weak.

'It's just a matter of will power.'

A lady in the room opposite was going home. She waved to me and asked a nurse, 'Would you give this vase of flowers to the woman in that room? She hasn't had any visitors and she always looks so sad.'

I was taken down to the psych ward in a wheelchair by an orderly who treated the hospital corridors as a racing track. I took the flowers with me. The first person I saw was Hugh who opened the lobby door.

'I'll get Lara to check you in. I just need half an hour and then I'll come and talk to you.'

'Is Seraphina still here?' I had to know.

'No she's gone.'

'Did she appeal her detention?' I was remembering the pages of handwriting.

'You know I can't talk to you about another patient.'

As I was shown to my room, the second person I saw was Arthur. I couldn't believe he was still detained. It had been weeks. But, wait a minute. I looked more closely. Arthur's shoulder length hair was still matted in dreads but not greasy. He was wearing the same clothes but they looked as though they'd shrunk.

Arthur had been cleaned up. His overcoat and pants were distinctly threadbare because the filth that had held the fibres glued in place was gone. The holes and splits were more obvious. His feet were still bare, still callused and weather beaten, but devoid of dirt. Rik for sure: I had to find out what happened. I thought, I'd wait and see who was still here. Someone had to know.

A friend came to see me and brought a crochet kit, a cushion cover with an intricate pattern in natural coloured yarns. Grace didn't want to refer to my latest suicide attempt. I had nothing safe to say and the conversation faltered. After she left, I sat on my bed and made the first crochet slip knot.

I loved the rhythm of the hook and the feel of the yarn. Muscle memory took over, the first row completed. But it wasn't the intricate pattern Grace had chosen. Basic was all my brain could handle. I had the bed nearest the door this time round.

'Take that Seraphina,' I said with the door and curtain wide open so I could look beyond the confines of the room.

'Hallo there. Do you mind if we watch?'

I looked up to see a woman in an unfamiliar uniform standing in the doorway. Just behind her was a middle-aged Arabic woman in loose trousers and tunic top with long dark hair plaited and falling over one shoulder.

'Hi. It's fine by me. Come in and sit down.' I gestured to the visitor's chairs against the wall.

'I'm Vicky. You can see the uniform. I'm Federal police. And this is Tanida.'

'Hi Tanida, I haven't seen you before.'

Tanida points to herself and says, 'Iran, Iran. No Iraq, no Iraq.'

‘Tanida doesn’t speak English. I think she understands a few words. She’s down here from Baxter Detention Centre,’ Vicky explained.

I kept working, but saw that Tanida watched my fingers with a wistful look in her eyes. I pointed to my work, touched my chest and said, ‘I, yes.’ Then, I pointed to Tanida with my eyebrows raised, ‘Tanida: yes?’

She nodded, so I handed her the crochet. The Iranian woman’s fingers worked the hook with the ease that only comes with great familiarity. She had a delighted smile on her face and I sat back and watched as five rows formed a raised design. Tanida brought the crochet to me and together, in wordless rapport, we read the stitches.

I held the work to my chest and patted it saying, ‘Good, good.’

That afternoon, I passed a room, and heard foreign speech. I hesitated.

Tanida cuddled a girl, about eight-years-old, in her lap. She talked with a younger woman who sat on the other, unoccupied bed. Tanida looked up, relaxed and smiling widely. She gestured ‘come in’.

The other woman spoke English, and I said, ‘Please let Tanida know I’m going to leave her work in my cushion? I won’t take the rows out. Tell her I’m going to keep them in the design to remind me of her.’

‘It’s nice of you to take the trouble,’ said Vicky quietly from her corner seat. ‘The others have ignored her completely.’

That evening, I stood with my food tray and looked for a seat. A grey haired man with a cheerful, square face looked up and waved me over.

‘Come and join the merry gang. I’m George. They say I’ve got holes in my brain but I’m not going down without a fight. This cheeky little girl’s name is Margaret, and next to her is Brigitta—she’s a back-packer from Germany. And our friend at the end of the table is Don. He writes poems. Got stacks of them in a case; he’ll show you. Bound to, he shows everyone.’

I was a bit overwhelmed by the force of his personality but introduced myself and pulled out a chair.

Margaret, like me, had to be the wrong side of fifty but she didn't appear to be the least bit bothered by George's introduction. He dominated the conversation, but I didn't mind. I liked the warm feeling of inclusion, so different to last time with Seraphina.

We were sipping coffee or hot chocolate when George said, quite casually, as if it was a perfectly ordinary statement, 'We're having a double wedding tonight.'

A spray of coffee spluttered from my mouth. What? Is this a soapie?

'I'm about to marry this saucy little wonder and Brigitta will marry her boyfriend, Sergei. He's Russian but we won't hold that against him. Do you want to come? Don's agreed to be our celebrant. But we need a couple of witnesses if we're to do it properly. Don't you agree my precious?' he asked Margaret. Her answer was an enigmatic smile.

'Ten o'clock at the alcove between the corridor and the TV room. Good time. The movie won't be finished and all the early birds will be asleep. Don't be late now will you. Have you worked out yet what you're going to wear girls?' It took everyone at the table a moment to realise that he'd actually paused for an answer.

'I have dear,' says Margaret softly. 'There's no need to worry.'

'What about you Brigitta?' George persists.

Brigitta has a gruff voice and I have yet to see her smile. 'I will wear what I have on,' was her flat, monotone reply.

'You can't do that,' said George. 'Tell her the rest of you, this is a special occasion. She must dress up.'

Feeling quite bold but wanting to enter the spirit of the event I said to Brigitta. 'I've got a long, silk dressing gown. It's got Yves St Laurent on the label and the silky fabric is a lovely blue and silver geometric pattern. It would fit you if you want to borrow it.'

Brigitte thought for a moment and then nodded. 'Okay. I will do it.' She sounded as if she was getting ready for a bungee jump. They were nuts, all of them, totally nuts: but it sure broke the monotony.

At ten o'clock, George held Margaret's hand and Sergei, a visitor to the ward, was looking decidedly sheepish as he stood next to Brigitta.

They'd taken the boom box from the recreation room and were playing some song I didn't recognise. I had Don's camera ready. Photographer and witness in one.

I expected Don to read something he'd written himself. Instead, he had turned up with a prayer book and began to read the familiar, 'Dearly beloved we are gathered here...' He ended with the traditional, 'You may kiss your bride.'

The couples kissed and I snapped my last photo.

A delighted George looked at me, but, then, his smile turned into a heavy frown. Before I could ask him why, he pointed at me, and shouted, 'It's no good. We've only got her. We've only got one witness.'

'It's alright dear,' Margaret soothed him. 'We've got two. Arthur's here. He's been standing by the door watching the whole time.'

'It's ruined. Just look at him. Someone like that can't be a witness. Arthur doesn't count,' George shouted. Talk about *Lord of the Flies*, I thought. They all looked toward Arthur and they stared. Arthur said nothing. His face was frozen. He pivoted and walked away.

'Arthur, wait!,' I called and hurried after him.



Jessie & Stella

‘Are you of Norwegian descent?’ people at home, and later in Norway, inevitably asked when they became aware that my doctoral programme included a fascination with Norwegian culture and knitting.

‘No,’ I always answered with regret. ‘When I was very young something a bit nasty happened to me. To feel safe, I used to read a favourite folk tale that was about Norway. My interest grew from that.’ If pressed for more I would divert the talk away from a memory place I didn’t want to visit with casual acquaintances by telling them about Jessie Bedford.

She was my paternal grandmother and, unbeknown to her, or anyone else for that matter, she fuelled my passion for Norway. She came to Australia from Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, in 1913, when she was thirteen. I never thought of her as truly Australian and, with relatives still in Scotland, she gave me a sense of being partly a ‘New Australian’.

As a child, I saw Jessie with her link to Scotland and its Viking history as my best chance of inheriting Norwegian heritage. Her paternal grandmother was Margaret Fraser, reputedly the daughter of a soldier, who married John William Bedford in 1868 in Dumfries, Scotland. He was a woollen weaver from Yorkshire, another Viking hot spot.

A Scots' origin was more desirable than my other regular English ancestry. As an adolescent, Rosemary Sutcliffe's allusions in her historical novels to the dark people who preceded the waves of invasions in the British Isles always made me sad. The elusive Mother always intrigued with her priestesses and mysterious sacred groves, lingering above Hadrian's Wall and in other outposts in the British Isles—and I liked Scotia's flouting of the Roman Empire.

As a child my resentment of the English was based on their clearance of the Highlands and their attitude of cultural superiority towards Colonials such as Australians. I mentioned before that my grandfather and his two brothers fought at Gallipoli, and then Flanders. Only my grandfather, Jessie's husband, survived 'being used as cannon fodder by the bloody British politicians', according to my father.

So, fixating on Jessie from Scotland, I casually dismissed the history of the Norwegian genetic presence elsewhere. The Irish and the Western Isles had their centuries of turbulent Viking settlements and overlords; the Dane law with Norwegian allies ruled more of England than Alfred the Great, and William the Conqueror from Normandy and his Normans were only a hundred years removed from Northmen. Viking genes were scattered throughout Northern Europe; my blue eyes and fair skin, foreign to Southern skies, could have easily been a Nordic legacy.

The idea that Jessie, and hence I, may have had a Norwegian ancestor, albeit many times removed, was exceptionally appealing. I wanted Norwegian culture to belong to me by right not merely by a bizarre vicarious appropriation. At times Shadow Maiden and I were almost of one mind, subsuming entirely my identity as an Australian.

With research into DNA and genomes rapidly advancing, I think of forensic science and ask what it could tell about my forebears as knitting passed through my fingers.

The knitting community worldwide all deposit detritus—skin, hair, and oil—as an unwitting record of our DNA in our knitting. That DNA travels with the fibre thereafter. It may hide in clothing. Or it may lurk as an invisible presence in a knitting installation in an art exhibition once everybody has gone home for the night. Or it may pass down through the generations in a treasured afghan or lace doily.

Generally, people aim to keep records of their DNA out of computer records. History teaches that lists and markers of identity can be fatal, although modern genetic science offers miracle cures. And ‘curiosity killed the cat’, says the old adage. Too bad—I wanted to know whether genetic genealogy could place me in Norway. I found familytreedna.com. It was a company that seemed to have the right connections to respectable organisations.

Some would say I have never lost a certain naivety, a blind spot, where dangerous potentials are concerned. Money paid by Visa to the internet site, the virgin cheek-swab pack with a bright yellow label—‘Opened by Australian Post for Quarantine Inspection’—duly arrived from the US. Scraping DNA laden saliva from inside my cheeks only took a moment, and then the swabs were off the next day to the lab.

Reading about genetic genealogy wiled away the couple of weeks needed by the laboratory to process and interpret my DNA. For females, the mitochondrial DNA test would establish the maternal lineage flowing from a common ancestor far back in time. Who was my most distant ancestor? What had been her name? What had she looked like? Where had she called home? My interest wasn’t so much in where my DNA sequences had mutations, information used by family tree buffs to match-up with others who have the same patterns. What I wanted was my haplogroup.

The basic premise is that *Homo Sapiens* originated in Africa with a single ancestress called Eve, and that the haplogroup is indicative of major outward migration thrusts. I picture a sophisticated game of leap-frog after that beginning, with pauses and arrows eventually covering the entire Earth. What if this haplogroup mutation marker could defy the lack of written records from pre-historical times to the present? With mine identified, I was supposed to learn the places where my many-times-great grandmothers congregated after Africa.

An on-line graphic showed how each haplogroup mutated away from its precursors and the direction it took. No surprises here. I hoped my particular arrow would stop at Norway with my name written clearly on it.

My results arrived just before the 17th of May. I remember the timing; it immediately preceded The Scandinavian Association's national costume parade and picnic at Brownhill Creek Reserve for Norway's Constitution Day, first celebrated in Norway in 1814. I was an enthusiastic but frustrated spectator. Always I lament that Australia doesn't have a tradition of a beautifully constructed National costume that we can all wear without becoming ensnared in the negative politics of appropriation. I am caused to think again. We are a multi-cultural nation. There are costumes of organic origin—animal pelts, feathers, leaves, beads, woven dilly bags, and coloured ceremonial paint like ochre—that Australia's indigenous population have been clothing themselves in for the last sixty thousand or so years. And immigrants from non-English backgrounds adorn themselves in traditional garb.

I envied the traditional *bunader* owners I saw. Wearing any one of the stunning regional costumes in colourful diverse styles, heavy with skilful embroidery and filigree jewellery, would have pleased me. Apart from me, it seemed that every person not in *bunader* was wearing a Setesdal jumper, a *lusekofte*, with its Norwegian crosses or stars.

The only *Sámi* costume present was especially noticeable. From a tiny fjord in northern-most Norway, it was blue and red all adorned with woven braid. A full-pleated circular skirt that flipped up at the hem swirled as the owner walked: she had turned up skin boots with woven braid wrapping that ends in tassels. On her head was a horned cap. Was she from a *Sámi* family that fished or herded reindeer? I had dreamt of a life as a reindeer herder's child when my need to escape was at its most extreme.

Not surprisingly, *When Jays Fly to Bárbo* (1968), by Australian author, Margaret Balderson, is one of my favourite books. I was in my mid-teens when I first read it, and having difficulty with meshing precocious knowledge of sexual acts beyond my years and the demands of normal relationships with my peers, especially boys. Each time I read the book, I lost myself as I traced the coming-of-age story of a Norwegian girl, Ingeborg, who lived on an island in the north of Norway at the time of the German invasion. Shadow Maiden and I shared Ingeborg's quest to find out about her dead *Sámi* mother, as she explored her own identity.

At the picnic, I had been reminded of Ingeborg. Afterwards at home, I had ingenuously suggested to my family that we all go to Norway to live. The 'no ways' deafened me. How crazy I must have sounded? An adult stuck in a child's dream. Still, if I could afford it, I would spend several months of each year in a different region of Norway. I would select the time of year and place to visit guided by whimsy alone. First would be the island of Svalbard with its polar bears. Just as I saw in the DVD I was given one Christmas, *Joanna Lumley in the Land of the Northern Lights* (2008), the Arctic cold would crust my eyelashes as I watched the breath-taking lights of the Aurora Borealis play on the night sky. Next, would be north again, but in June, to stand on the farthest edge of Finnmark for an uninterrupted view of the Midnight Sun suspended on the surface of the sea.

‘How could you bear to leave so much beauty behind? And, why come to Australia where it’s so dry?’ I still ask Norwegians I meet here.

‘The weather in Australia is fantastic, the outback and the beaches are amazing, and we can’t get enough of the sunshine,’ they say. ‘In Norway, in winter, it is grey and gloomy and we hardly ever see the sun. It is dark when you get up and dark when you come home from work. It’s hard work living with ice and snow. You have to always bother with layers of thick clothing. Here we hardly stop to put on a jacket to move about in winter. Back home, we’re often stuck inside for days on end. Further north they’re building psychiatric hospitals because many people can’t handle the dark months, especially those susceptible to depression.’

‘We miss many things of course but, in Australia, the food is so varied and affordable: so many fruits, vegetables and wines. Here, we can eat out quite often. Back home, the food places, even just a pizza bar, are so expensive. Much food has to be imported because of the scarce agricultural land and the short summer. The cost of living in Norway is very high since the North Sea oil rigs have made us one of the wealthiest instead of the poorest country in Western Europe.’

If I had no ties here in Australia, I would test the truth of their words. I certainly wasn’t convinced. Still, in more rational moments, I laugh at my own blinkered thinking. In summer when my arthritic joints don’t ache, it’s easy to think, there is always cosy knitwear to pile on to chase away the shivers. Perhaps more critically, there is my daily fight with the rollercoaster ride of chronic depression, a legacy of my hijacked childhood.

My DNA results were encouraging. A certificate sent to me detailing the specifics of my mutations (sounds like spores from Outer Space) also declared I was haplogroup V. Mitosearch.org predicts that less than three percent of the world’s inhabitants will be from this group. The genetic marker for haplogroup V is thought to have emerged relatively recently, about 10 000 to 15 000 years ago,

when humans were herded together into the 'European Refuge' by the northern glaciation of the earth's latest ice-age.

I already knew that I was of European origin but that belief gained a certain weight when it was supported by the evidence of my own DNA. It wasn't about Jessie, my father's Scots mother, and the reasoning of my childhood. That was still untested. I made a mental note to ask a female relative of Dad's to do a swab. This was about Mum and her mother Stella of Southern English heritage that is only known to me through photos and family stories as she died in her mid-forties, sadly riddled with cancer, when I was only three.

The unexpected information was that the highest incidence of haplogroup V was among the Sámi in Finland (and the Catalunya region of Spain). I got excited for a while but several emails to Family Tree DNA established that often isolated population pockets split off from a previous branching and this protects the haplogroup from change. Sámi were effectively very distant cousins.

From a broader perspective, two full years later, not a single person has been posted to my results page as a DNA match. Perhaps all my relatives, distant or otherwise, are more circumspect than me and unwilling to place their DNA on record.



Oslo

My first week in Oslo seemed surreal. I couldn't believe I'd finally realised that promise made to myself nearly three decades ago. No need to rush around. There was all of the summer to see the treats in store.

I caught the T-bane from Ambiose B&B into Oslo Sentrum. I was supposed to be looking for yarn. However, a cultural peek wouldn't hurt. The Rådhuset, Oslo's Town Hall, is a Modernist landmark in dark brown brick. Famous works by prominent Norwegian artists celebrate Norwegian life and history throughout the interior. But it was the coarser carved panels in niches lining the main courtyard and illustrating the Nordic mythology recounted in the 'Voluspá' saved for the future in the Icelandic *Elder Edda*, itself in a 13th century manuscript, that I wanted to see.

And there they were. *Ask* (ash) and *Embla* (elm) are the first man and woman born of the Scandinavian creation myth. The World tree is *Yggdrasil*, a giant ash, whose canopy reaches into the

heavens, whose branches fill the world, and three roots reach beyond the places of mankind. The god *Odin* rides *Sleipner*, his eight-legged steed. Sentient eagles, squirrels, deer, ravens, wolves, dogs and the evil serpent *Nidhogg*, gnawing the root of *Yggdrasil*, all play their part in the interactions of gods, giants and humans. I look my fill, and then return to the hunt for yarn.

Den Norske Husfliden and Heimen Husflid were both shops in Rosenkrantz Gate featuring traditional crafts spanning a thousand years of history, side-by-side with modern Norwegian designs. From the Vikings to Oleana: rough to superfine. Wooden turned bowls sat alongside, forged iron, gold and silver jewellery, knitwear and *bunader*—Norwegian regional costumes—with all the trimmings from delicate white blouses with lace, intricately woven multi-hued scarves and clumpy black shoes with buckles.

I was supposed to be looking for yarn suitable to knit a Setesdal jumper guided by Annemor Sundbø's book *Setesdal Sweaters: The History of the Norwegian Lice Pattern*. While in Norway, I wanted to at least start knitting one of my jumpers. After my stay in Oslo, I was headed to Ose in the Setesdal Valley where I was spending nearly three weeks in a flat above Annemor's knitting workshop and retail outlet.

Of all the jumpers I planned to knit, the traditional Setesdal jumper with its colourful embroidered *wadmal* (felted woollen cloth at cuffs and yoke) used more unknown techniques than the rest. It seemed wise to get a head start so I could identify problems and ask Annemor my questions.

I also had a romantic notion about capturing the spirit of Norway in a garment knitted with Norwegian *Spælsau* bought on its home turf. This short-tailed sheep is thought to be the original breed in Norway. The wool has two layers: an outer long-haired layer of wool protects the underlying layer against wind and rain. That underlying layer in turn keeps the sheep warm. Apart from clothing, from olden times to the present, both Viking sails and Norwegian old

tapestries—Renaissance and Baroque—were made from *Spælsau* yarn.

The assistants in Heimen Husflid were most helpful. One woman translated into English the brochure for the Norwegian National Costume theme cruise on the Hurtigruten ship MS *Polarlys* that I was taking in late August along the western coastline from Bergen to Kirkenes, a bare stone's throw from the Norwegian/Russian border.

I got lost in the shop's treasure trove of stock and didn't make it down the street to Den Norske Husfliden to buy my yarn that day. Were they used to customers treating it like a museum and staying 'til closing time, looking at and photographing nearly every object in sight? There was no yarn there but, for the first time, I was able to not only see but touch Solveig Hisdal's wonderfully fine wool-silk blend knitwear.

I had found her work in her book *Poetry in Stitches*; in her contribution to the collection *Norsk Strikkedesign*, and in her own company Oleana's website photographs. I looked forward to late August when I would visit the Oleana factory itself and interview Solveig in Bergen.

Upstairs, the entire floor was given over to *bunader*. A pre-teen and her mother were in earnest conversation in Norwegian with one of the two assistants. Not for the first time, I cursed my lack of Norwegian. In a country where English was widely spoken but a Norwegian variant, either *Norsk Bokmål* or *Nynorsk*, was of course the dominant norm, I was beginning to realise how much we take for granted our being able to eavesdrop on casual conversations. I made a vow that I would master the language in case of a future Norwegian visit.

Through one doorway I saw cut cloth in a sewing room. Readymade *bunader* from several regions hung on shop stands, but custom made costumes were obviously the prime objective. Some people make their own. Others pay thousands of *kroner* to those who are prepared to do it for them. It is an expensive investment in

identity with no un-self-conscious national-scale equivalent in Australia or the other English speaking countries of the world. The closest I can come to such a display would be to own and wear the Fraser tartan of my great, great grandmother.

My focus was abruptly centred on the counter where there was a set of three books. They were titled *Norsk Bunadleksikon*. The editor was Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen. In front of me was the ultimate reference, with a wealth of illustrations, to all aspects of *bunad* and *folkdrakt* from every location in Norway. I struggle to do justice to these glorious books. I have one open beside me as I write.

It is a photographic kaleidoscope of colour, handcraft technique and sheer beauty. The diversity and scope of the research that has resulted in these books astounds me: knitting, weaving, lace, embroidery, filigree silver, beading, and tooled leather—some examples simple, some complex beyond imagination. I thought that if nothing else would do it, my desire to read these three books and to understand the complexity of the regional costume and folk dress traditions of Norway would draw me to learn Norwegian.

As I exited the shop, I glanced to the right and was taken captive by a *bunad* that was my personal notion of grace. It was in the window of an adjacent hotel. I went in and asked if I could look at and photograph it.

The receptionist said, 'Of course it's okay.'

I peered. I photographed, and, as with Solveig Hisdal's knitwear, broke again in the space of an hour my own rules of good manners towards fabric I don't own. I gently reached out and reverently fingered the various elements of the design: the thick black quality wool of the jacket and skirt, the intricate silver grey braid on the stunning apron, and the different weights of the woven silky shirt, necktie and shawl. I didn't know anything about it. I just knew that one day, somehow, I would own one and, depending on where it was from, perhaps even wear one. All I needed was around \$AUD5,000!

I have since read that it was an outfit called the 'Jubileumsdrakt Fra Oslo', designed by Eva Lie for Oslo's one

thousand year Jubilee. When a town councillor of non-Norwegian descent was chosen to lead the National Day parade a dilemma about her lack of *bunad* was solved by her wearing this folk dress which has less restrictive conventions about its use. If I could afford one, I could wear it as a celebration of Norway.

I walked back to Karl Johans Gate with the Royal Palace on the hill at its head, and went into the Grand Cafe which was set for the evening with napery and silver. Back when Oslo was still called Kristiania, Norway's world famous dramatist Henrik Ibsen lunched there daily.

I had promised an Icelandic friend in Adelaide, Yr, who studied in Oslo, and ate at the Grand as a treat, that I would order a bowl of lobster soup and savour it with her as my invisible companion. I sat at a formally dressed table and supped on delicious fresh bread, butter and divine lobster soup in a small terrine.

The waiter knew I was a tourist on a limited budget but he made me feel as though it was perfectly okay for me to occupy his time and the space. He didn't hurry me nor offend with subtle disdain. I thanked him, then. I thank him now.

Afterwards, I went into a nearby bookshop called Tanum and wished yet again that Liam was there with me. I would have needed to prise him out with a shoe-horn. There was a huge range of books on all the topics that interested us both. I didn't know where to look first, until I found the three-book-set I'd just seen at Heimen Husflid of *Norsk Bunadleksikon* presented in an elegant, but robust, slip-box with embossed red flower.

I have trouble spending money on consumables. A three-course meal at the Grand would have been impossible to contemplate. Books and textiles are a different matter entirely. I get to hold onto and revisit them as often as I chose, and leave them to a loved one in my will. Food is a joy but here one minute, gone the next. I bought the three books in their slip-box without even blinking despite the 1,980 *krone* price tag. Five hundred Australian dollars well spent, was my thought at the time.

The books now sit on my bedroom dresser where I can see them. I still think that I must learn to at least read Norwegian so I can devour every word on every page. A dictionary really doesn't cut it!



Interregnum

Despite quips to my family about hiding out forever in Norway, I had come back from that hand-built log cabin in Karasjok, from far above the Arctic Circle. It nestled amongst hectares of stunted sub-arctic pines that sat lightly on the northern, autumn landscape. A footstep from the wooden porch, damp layers of sweet wild blueberries stained my lips, and dense pads of mosses sprang back underfoot.

My return was to the South Australian spring, to transient green growth pushing through the barely damp top soil. It softened my transition from a land over-endowed with water—fjords, lakes, rivers and glaciers—to the reality of the soon-to-arrive summer sun with its inevitable sucking of all moisture from the drought stricken Adelaide coastal plains.

Shadow Maiden and my great, white, shaggy, ice bear did not follow me home. Their work was done. My yearning for a fantasy Norway had been overwritten by the reality of a thriving Metropolis of modern urbanites, refugees, tourists and North Sea oil.

My obsession with Norway, the terrain of a traumatised child stuck in childhood, had played out. I imagined Shadow Maiden back in her own time with her prince in the cave under the hill.

When a black cloud with my name on it emerged without reason and parked over my head, I missed her. When unexpected triggers in daily life caused traumatic memories to flash, I missed my great, white, shaggy, ice bear.

Well-honed techniques learnt through psychotherapy for coping with the mental paralysis of traumatic memory and its legacy, chronic depression, were not nearly as satisfying as was the familiar embrace of my intrepid, imaginary companions who had been with me to hell and back.

Memories from childhood seem indelible, resistant to erasure. They are the stories that knit together our core sense of self. Days are long. Experiences are novel. For good or for ill, impressions have time to translate from short to long term memory.

On the cusp of old-age, too much is lost in competition for time and neural space. New memories push into oblivion their immediate predecessors as the years speed by and novelty declines. Traumatic events are the exception. They dig in. Resist shifting.

I woke up to an ordinary Thursday morning. For days the sun had been gentle. Liam and I had laughed and chatted as we worked and played. I'd made steady progress on Elsebeth Lavold's pattern Havor, one of the garments I wanted to write about for my thesis.

Simpler knits were respite when I was in the mood to just cruise and use knitting as the vehicle for my writing—several scarves, a horn-collared jacket by Norah Gaughan, a baby kimono for a pregnant friend and a bulky, garter-stitch afghan for Anita. My studies were progressing nicely in the afterglow of my exciting research and experiences in Norway.

The evergreen eucalypt and acacia trees which dominate the Australian landscape stood dust free, washed by recent rains. When the moist green combines with the milder weather, I found it easier to

forget my preoccupation with summer's harshness. Then, I could appreciate Australia's attractions. I especially liked our unique wildlife and plants.

We lived at the top of a steep kilometre-long hill where houses meet bush at the edge of one of Adelaide's Eastern-most suburbs. Our block was a tangle of native vegetation and many creatures, fleeing lawnmowers and pesticides, made it home. We left out fruits, carrots and seeds, and then sat back and watched the circus. We smiled as the ring or brush tailed possums, koalas, raucous kookaburras, Rosella parrots and black cockatoos seemingly performed just for us as we sat on a favourite wooden bench.

An old gnarled olive tree shaded us. In high summer, its foliage was often buffeted by gully winds that gusted and pushed the heat before them from the hills while the plains still sweltered. We saw an echidna at our place for the first time. It moved with wallowing gait across the veranda before digging into the dirt when we disturbed it. Liam, hands in leather builder's gloves, tried to pick it up but its feet were dug in and splayed. He couldn't budge it.

From the bench we could see vertical slices of the city centre, sun glinting off office block windows, some seven kilometres to the West through the foliage. There were a number of tall buildings but none that warranted the word 'skyscraper'. 'Overgrown country town,' mocked Melbourne and Sydney. Adelaide retorted, 'At least we were not settled by convicts.'

Beyond the city, depending on the level of cloud, smog or smoke, the salt water of St Vincent's Gulf appeared as a narrow ribbon of silver or blue or grey that separated the horizon from nearly seventy kilometres of suburban sprawl from Osborne to Sellicks Beach.

Just over a million of Australia's twenty three million inhabitants live in Adelaide. Australia is of a similar size to the continental US but we are mainly coastal dwellers, constrained in huddles around our few overharvested rivers like frogs and fish in drying ponds.

It's strange how my musings on Australia's attractions circle back to our lack of water. A few years of drought and water rationing when we could only take two minute showers and water our gardens for two hours twice a week do that.

That morning, then, was pleasant. But, four hours later another car accident dramatically changed our situation—much as those two accidents in the 1980s had blindsided us.

I couldn't decide if I resented most my aches and pains or not being able to knit. Poor timing as I had finally accepted that Hervor needed to be re-started. The fabric was far too stiff. I should have listened to my doubts (aka knitting experience). A larger needle would give better drape, but I also needed a bigger size so Hervor fitted more loosely.

After the accident, I wouldn't be losing more weight anytime soon. Usually, I walked on my treadmill daily, for an hour. I raced the flashing lights of the lap's indicator. The treadmill would have to wait.

In the car accident, the other driver, a very old woman, didn't give way to her right. Our front passenger-side door was rammed in and stuck shut. I climbed over the floor gear stick and the driver's seat to get out, rendered silent by shock and suppressed anger. My entire left side was pressed against the door at the time of impact. I had a stinking headache. There was acute pain in several joints. Some merely ached.

Liam had troubles of his own. He was driving and so it was his right shoulder that slammed into his door. He couldn't lift his arm far enough to put his hand into his back pocket.

'I've just picked up my car from the repair place,' she said. 'Can I borrow a phone?'

I shook my head and, unrepentant, turned away and pointed at the phone box across the street.

Time compressed into a sense of 'only yesterday' as my mind tried to run the same boring, outmoded, pain-response programme it ran those twenty-odd years ago: whiplash, immobility, pain, and depression.

In the following days I couldn't knit. My methodology rendered mute. No knitting to plot with; no knitting to write about. I had lost control of the trajectory for my manuscript. I had slides and notes but they refused to come alive on the page.

It was as though the Norwegian heart of my story had been killed. I was a beetle in a steep-sided trough, condemned to endless circuits with no way to climb free. Norway and my knitted garments, designed by authors I had interviewed in Norway, were lost beyond recovery. The death knell came as my ethic's approval lapsed because I failed to meet defined conditions in time. Gone were the four taped interviews with Norwegian knitter/authors and was now not allowed to use.

'Withdraw, withdraw, withdraw,' beat in my head like the drums from heavy rock. How could I still write my book? Such a huge build-up to my time in Norway: it would be too anticlimactic without it: a total flop. The stress was an ill-afforded assault on my mental vulnerabilities.

Art was the mimic of reality. How often do we raise our hopes only to get to the ticket window and be told, 'sold out'? I remember admonishing myself. Think girl, think. There must be a solution. Don't they tell authors 'kill your little darlings'? You need to get past this. But before I could, the second shoe dropped.

I read in the newspaper, a glowing obituary about the foreign cur's admirable life—they might as well have anointed him as a saint. Bastard, I thought, but, then, I span, span, span down into the dark.

There are tens of thousands of discarded words held in myriad computer file versions of my story. I dipped my fingers into a sea of traumatic memories and the primordial fluid was too hot. I pulled them back burnt and tried to find a bath of cold water to erase the sting. So ran the cycle: pull back, erase, and try again and again and again. Silence would be less costly. But no; I've tried that too, again and again and again. Besides, the story was too insistent; it burbled or exploded towards the surface. It wouldn't be silenced.

The telling was tortuous, heavily edited, not all that happened, all that I couldn't handle. I told as much of the truth as I could bear: I told myself that the reader's curiosity must accept the limits of my truth telling. At the very least, my day was fraught with old memories. At worst, my day was fragmented by flashbacks. Action: regurgitated scene three or, mercy, ten. Cut. Replay. A lifetime, it seemed, where the joy was often pushed to the margins by memory and dissociation. I peered from above and watched the stills and takes from a hijacked life.

Should I forget the doctorate? Was the doing worth the pain? Should I stop dipping my fingers in hot water? If only I'd been able to get help sooner, not let it fester for four decades. Sedated every night or sleep eluded me. Even so, I tossed and turned and cried out.

Liam woke me and I curled into myself, beyond comfort. Slowly the adrenalin subsided and sleep reclaimed me. In the morning I felt battered and stale. Sometimes, I re-engaged; other times I abandoned the work for weeks, even months, and knitted intricate socks or two triangular shawls in Noro's luxurious yarns, or crocheted a grannie blanket for Anita's cat, La Petite.

But the words just would not be silenced. They circled like wolves moving in for the kill. My mind cried blood-red tears through my fingers onto the keyboard.



Part 3: North Again

What If?

My spoilt Burmese-cross, Rumpelstiltskin, had listened to me moan on for month after sub-productive month about my writing. I had been working part-time on my Doctorate forever.

Some days I tried to think but the thoughts were shattered and rendered useless when a casual comment, yet another newspaper headline in an epidemic of childhood sexual abuse disclosures, or the smell of the smoke from a/his hand-rolled cigarette triggered traumatic memories. Some were like a swarm of mosquitos that didn't know when to quit; others were the floating ash from obsolete newspapers on a bonfire.

Chronic depression (caused by bi-polar disorder one psychiatrist said, and then another said it was from an irredeemable legacy of childhood trauma) would arrive uninvited and stay until it was ready to move on despite my best efforts to evict it. Lower back pain had rumbled and stabbed every day for the past twenty-five years. On good days it merely hurt, on bad days I couldn't stand-up.

When memory, depression and back pain intersected, I had learnt to stay in bed and not to make any decisions, especially about quitting study or ripping knitting off my needles.

Traumatic memories, chronic depression and chronic neck and back pain were my three fickle fates: they were my nemeses. They were all I could bear. Anything more, a harsh word, a broken tooth or inner ear infection, would reduce me to sobs. Others were doing it far tougher than me in life-threatening circumstances, but pain—constant pain—is personal, relative and very tiring.

Motivation coaches exhort you to punch through pain. I had been doing just that for so long that my reserves were periodically and often empty. I was erratic about public disclosure of childhood sexual abuse as it is euphemistically known. Rape was hidden and cloaked by fancy legal terms like ‘penetration’ with meticulous attention paid to re-traumatising specifics. Their stigma silences me and thousands of others. The numbers of hidden victims and survivors is often likened to the tips of icebergs where the bulk is hidden under the sea.

I would write thousands of words about what happened to me; I would engage, and then retreat, and erase the words, or set them free and panic. I tried to abandon the topic, skim the surface with knitting anecdotes and travel commentary, but the real version was so integral to my life story that avoiding it constituted a huge sin of autobiographical omission.

I had begun to panic about the submission date for my Doctorate but simply couldn’t work more consistently or faster.

Rumple was sprawled belly-up, with paws splayed in careless abandon, on top of the knitting and crochet paraphernalia I had scattered over our queen-size bed, my preferred fibre arts stage. A chair is never big enough for my knitting style. Not that it mattered at the moment. I’d been in the doldrums, again, and was trying, unsuccessfully, to spark creativity. My mind hurt, caught between my will and my nemeses.

Rumple's pink tongue tip protruded between glossy, black, lips. Apart from the faint rise and fall of his chest and the occasional twitch of a whisker, he was without movement. I envied him his oblivion. In my next life, I would definitely choose to return as a cat. I would be a particularly pampered puss who was certain of her next meal and a cosy bed for the night. She would dream only of snagging yarn as it snaked from ball to knitting needle. Unlike me, she would have exceedingly few cares and excellent health.

My restless feet reflected my negative state of mind. They refused to settle. When I knitted, my feet—usually bare—were never still, but the tempo and rasp of skin, toe circling toe, varied. I preferred it when they imitated a gentle dance. It wasn't one of those times. I would have to rip back the stitches just knitted as mental tension had translated into over-taut loops.

'Liam! Liam!' I called. He was in the bathroom thumping the plastic, toothpaste dispenser against the hand basin. Only he and Uncle Scrooge would chase that one last drop.

'Stop that racket for a minute and come listen!' I shouted. Perhaps not the best start to persuasion but I was not in the mood to wait. For days I had been particularly irritable, usually a sure sign that my subconscious was brewing mischief. Some people think logically. My thoughts are more like ingredients that cook on a back burner for days and deliver a polished broth. Quantum leaps, not rational increments, are the order of the day.

The broth was done; I had been practising my sales pitch.

'I've been thinking about my research trip to Norway. I can't believe it was three years ago,' I said as he entered the room with one eyebrow raised over notably intelligent, warm brown eyes.

He was a forty year veteran of my circular thought patterns. He didn't offer a comment but stood poised with right shoulder slightly forward, jaw angled. He rested lightly on the ball of his right foot. Okay, I thought. He knew it was going to be a large, not tiny, shoe that dropped.

‘Things were going really well just after I got back. Now it’s a bloody mess. Liam, I’m nowhere.’ I bit my lip on self-pity. There is always someone in a worse situation. I regularly tell myself that I have a lot to be thankful about: family who love me, a roof over my head, food in my belly, and health issues which aren’t life threatening. All else is window dressing.

‘I am so sick of chronic pain. I can only knit in short spells. Really ticks me off.’ I realized that I had been focusing on knitting, a supposedly secondary priority where my academic aspirations were concerned. I hadn’t even mentioned the difficulties involved in sitting for research and writing. I switched direction.

‘I am desperate to get back some momentum and lift my physical fitness.’ It wasn’t just about work. My mother was in a bad place; her situation of strokes, of physical and mental decline, was thrusting my mortality right into my face, a repeat of when Joel was a baby, and it scared me witless.

Her hands had been crippled by rheumatoid arthritis and she could barely hold a cup to drink. Not being able to hold a book or knitting needles was a terrible fate. Already, I had hot knuckles that protested as I held a pen or knitted. I didn’t want to waste any more precious time on illness and indecision.

I met Liam’s eyes.

He shifted his foot further forward and lifted his chin ever so slightly. He continued to watch me.

‘I want a fresh start. Remember what new stationery felt like on the first day of school? I want to go overseas again. I want to hunt up new research material, knit a new memory garment or two, kick start my mind and body. Fix my life. It worked last time. It should work again. What do you think?’ I fell silent.

Liam’s expression didn’t change, but I could feel the pattern of his thoughts: consider, reject, test hypotheses, reach conclusions, and settle.

I knew we really couldn’t afford an overseas trip and a draw-down on the mortgage was our only option. The long flight from

Adelaide to Europe and physicality of luggage should be an impossibility given my back, and why did I waste Liam's time even thinking otherwise?

My breathing was shallow, my hands clenched in fists. I was poised for the obvious outcome. He would point out my impossible back, the paralysis of depression if things came unglued, and the money. And he would be right of course.

With Liam it is always a mistake to expect the obvious.

'Would you go back to Norway?'

Memory conjured images of Shadow Maiden and my great, white, shaggy, ice bear.

Liam was staring at me. 'Norway?' he repeated.

'No,' I shook my head. 'Norway seems to have played out. I want to try somewhere else this time.'

Northern Europe was still a constant magnet. I struggled to understand why I felt like a displaced European. I could speculate about my formative years. My schooling in the 1950s and '60s focused away from Australia toward European history, English literature, Latin and French. At that time, the dominant white folk culture and, in particular my family's traditions with a paternal grandfather and two great uncles at Gallipoli and Flanders, celebrated men's histories and achievements: the ANZACs, explorers, stockmen and larrikins.

Such a focus excluded an identity other than one embedded in domesticity for the majority of women and girls some of whom had been pushed back into housework and lower status jobs as the men returned from war. My godmother, Auntie Ruth, was atypical in our circle. She was a spinster and a nursing sister. It is only through hindsight that I realise she was a role model that spoke to the rebellious aspects of my nature.

Auntie Ruth was a country girl who was outspoken to a fault. She was sacked from her first job as a fourteen-year-old kitchen maid on a sheep station after she burnt a cake. It wasn't the cake so much as her telling her social climbing mistress in front of guests that

said employer was welcome to 'have a go and do better if she could'. Auntie Ruth wasn't a blood relation but she became the grandmother of my heart.

I didn't know my maternal grandmother. As I said before, she died in Melbourne when I was only three. My paternal grandmother found me too boisterous and, perhaps, too much my mother's daughter.

Auntie Ruth turned up at the house one day out of the blue and introduced herself to Mum as a friend of Dad's family from up north, from Koolunga. Mum was juggling crying toddlers and babies at the time. Auntie Ruth took one look, put on an apron and started in on the backlog of housework.

When I was older she took me to pantomimes, plays, and the ballet with her niece Pam. We'd argued about the Burton/Taylor film *Who's afraid of Virginia Wolf?* I was fifteen and sometimes arrogant. Most of the film's themes went over my head. All I saw was the incessant arguing. It was beyond my experience. Auntie Ruth insisted that it was a fine film. For years her statement puzzled me until much later when I saw the film again and started to understand.

My father, the ultimate pragmatist, was riding a pushbike around Australia when he met and married my mother in Melbourne in 1949. The babies came thick and fast and grounded him. Perhaps his thwarted plans were partly why he encouraged me to travel, why he took out a loan with my mother's insistence to support me spending a year in El Paso, Texas as a Rotary Exchange student. Northern Europe wasn't on offer at the time.

Despite my deeply rooted problems, I'd earned the title of overachiever. I'd completed my Queen's Guide Award, been elected a house captain, prefect and won a part in the school play. My grades were modest except for the humanities, but I wore the mask of the complete extrovert and was selected by the District Rotary Committee as an exchange student

I was forever changed by new perspectives from my travels and experiences within the US; I spoke frequently at clubs and

conferences and showered with new experiences: we often made the short trip across The Rio Grande to Juarez in Mexico.

I learnt more about cultural diversity from road-trips by campervan to St Louis and Canada, and by bus down to Guadalajara in Mexico. Then there was Tahiti, Fiji and Hawaii: heady stuff for a seventeen-year-old. Despite all this, I recognised Adelaide as a good place to live, but the travel bug had bitten deep and was in my blood to stay.

Soon after my return, I found out that my father thought a university education for a girl was a waste, educated them away from their family of origin. He laid out my options: help Mum with the younger kids, go to teacher's college, or get a job. These were acceptable roles for a girl.

I was eighteen. My probation in a very boring, entry level, Commonwealth government job was extended to see if I would settle down. I wasn't sufficiently invisible. Second wave feminism was just beginning to stir my local pot. By the time I was twenty, Liam and I had married. A friend from Rotary days and my father said that I was wasting my life and, 'needed my head read'.

The Australian 'Cultural Cringe' still held sway and refused to lessen its grip; other young men and women headed for Europe in pursuit of artistic and cultural experiences which surpassed colonial taint. In reverse, droves of European immigrants looking for a better life away from war scarred landscapes and unemployment headed to Australia: 'The Lucky Country'. Non-whites were barred by the infamous 'White Australia Policy'.

I will never stop asking: 'Why had my ancestors chosen South Australia, the driest state on the driest continent, when I craved moisture and year round greenery?'

Historically, lines had been drawn on a map and South Australia was born as a convict free English colony. Begun in 1836, the first Adelaide—slab and daub huts—was the modest start of an economic venture by a company of businessmen. This was forty-nine years after the First Fleet left England and began formal European

colonisation of Australia at Botany Bay on the eastern coast with a dubious band of soldier and convict settlers.

Only the built landscape is relatively new. Occupation is ancient. Indigenous Australians, custodians of the land for at least the past sixty or so thousand years, were killed by the settlers and by imported illnesses; those who survived were evicted from the land: locally from the fertile plains contained between the silver slice of St Vincent's Gulf and the gum covered Adelaide Hills that I can overlook from a bench under our olive tree.

Australia was different from Northern Europe in all its natural aspects. I hated the heatwaves, the baked earth, the flies and the constant threat in summer of consuming bushfires. However, I loved the native flora and fauna, the gentle breezes of spring and the green of mild winters, and our big skies.

As I aged, I knew our Mediterranean-style climate was more suited to my damaged joints than ice and snow but, on balance, it was as though my body and mind had never accepted their transportation from green hedgerows to a land of 'sunburnt plains'.

I craved the worlds of my family's history which pre-dated the mid-1800s in Australia. For that to happen, I needed to look at the stories and myths from my countries of origin in Northern Europe.

All these thoughts passed through my mind in a blink while Liam patiently waited for an answer. I was stalling. I knew I wanted northern Europe but hadn't committed to a specific locale: Scotland, Ireland, Iceland all had exciting knitting traditions.

'I want to go to Ireland,' I told Liam with a sense of relief at finally settling on one destination.

'I have several books by a British knitting designer and author Jean Moss. She is running a two week knitting tour of Ireland. I'd love to join it.' Until I heard the words, I was not sure which of the several knitting destinations that I'd been considering would win.

'Okay,' he said, not one to string things out once he'd thought it through. 'We'll just have to make it work!'

‘When would you leave? More importantly, what do I do for my meals while you’re gone?’

Liam’s meals were far from my thoughts. Already I was clicking through the possibilities inherent in Irish knitting traditions. With knitting and a fresh start on offer, I didn’t give the vexing disempowering issues of depression or my impossible back another thought.

It was all Liam’s fault. He said, ‘You’ve always wanted to go to Scotland. It seems a pity to fly so far and not go there too.’

My mind flooded with images. Fair Isle and Shetland lace knitting, Mary Queen of Scots, Pictish sculptures, and Jamie and Claire from Diana Abandon’s *Outlander* series with time travel to the 1700s all clambered for attention.

I’d weighed the merits of Iceland, Scotland and Ireland in the lead up to my talk to Liam, and Ireland had won by a slim margin. One would eat into our slim resources. I hadn’t dared to dream of more.

Liam said later he’d meant a few days diversion. But, who could go to Scotland and not visit The Shetland Islands? After all, with our limited resources and my impossible back, when was I likely to make another trip from South Australia to Northern-most Europe? This was surely my swansong.

The final leap of the imagination targeted remote Fair Isle, part of The Shetlands, but closer to Bergen, Norway, than London. What self-respecting knitter could go all the way to The Shetlands and not hop on a tiny plane, fly out to a dot of land in the middle of nowhere, to visit the home of Fair Isle knitting.

As soon as Scotland was mentioned, the notion of knitting a fair-isle garment took root. I knew of the firm Jamieson & Smith, Shetland Wool Brokers Ltd., from the Schoolhouse Press website of master knitter, Meg Swansen. I downloaded a Jamieson & Smith book called *Knit Real Shetland*. A design called Olly’s Allover caught my attention.

The intriguing factor was that the pullover was a hybrid of two traditions. Aran knitting was used on torso and sleeves (think Irish fisherman's cables and trees of life in twisted stitch) while wide bands of Fair Isle knitting were used on the lower body, sleeves and yoke (think of two-stranded colour work in symmetrical bands). What a perfect embodiment of my journey?

There would surely be a day or two during our Mediterranean-style, South Australian winter when the winds would blow from Antarctica and I could wear a garment made from 12ply (chunky) yarn. I'm sure I'm remembering the Kookaburras, which often sit on the pole outside our house atop a hill, laughing at my optimism.

The downside of Olly's Allover was that purists would say that it broke all the rules of both knitting traditions by combining Aran and Fair Isle. However, time had become an issue and I didn't have time to knit two separate garments in an attempt to capture in fibre the key places I intended to visit.

I had sympathy for purist views but it seemed to me, when you let loose an urban Australian on knitting from a specific traditional, cultural milieu, involving harsh winters, island families, and subsistence living, the parameters are already stretched out of shape. But, once upon a time, probably in more than one location, early people made crude loops on sticks, inventing knitting; every knitting pattern was once innovative.

Human cultural history is a continuous story of innovation, of working to improve or modify based on prevailing circumstances, values, tastes and fashions. Fair Isle and Aran knitting are no exception; forever linked to tiny islands in turbulent seas, their original vocabularies of techniques, stitches and patterns are a continual, ever-evolving conversation within the global knitting community.

So, I would knit a contemporary pullover showcasing both Aran and Fair Isle knitting. My mind worked overtime when I took in with my second reading that Olly's Allover was designed by Jean Moss, the British designer who was leading my knitting tour of

Ireland. I would be lying if I didn't admit to a sense of serendipity. A chance at an interview was opportune. Then, of course, I could talk to those involved in the production of the book as Jamieson & Smith was based in Lerwick, on Shetland Mainland, where I would be staying.

The pullover was featured in earthy tones that conjured up images of a South Western Pueblo. It seemed a very strange choice, far removed from the blues and greens of northern Scotland which, at least, wouldn't make my skin look like sallow putty. I poured over the colours available in Aran weight, Jamieson & Smith 'Soft Spun Yarn'. Some of the balls of the bluey palette which I chose made the trip from Lerwick to Adelaide twice, but those details belong later in the story. Suffice to say, I bought my balls of yarn online and had them sent out.

For me, Olly's Allover was not a sociable knitting project. My experience with hand knitted Fair Isle was not extensive. I preferred knitting patterns with texture or holes and yarn overs in continuous threads of yarn. I found Fair Isle fiddly in a way that undercut knitting's soothing rhythms.

I had knitted many Fair Isle garments by machine at the Jam Factory. I had hand knitted two pullovers with just a band of Fair Isle in my teens. A hand knitted Norwegian Pullover called 'Carpathian Black Roses', begun after my trip to Norway, was stalled because I'd misunderstood the instructions and neglected to include extra stitches for the 'steek' where the garment needed to be cut to insert the sleeves. I had completed a number of hats, scarves and pullovers with Aran or three dimensional stitches and felt more comfortable with this part of my project.

Every stitch would need full focus. How would I manage as I made my way through my itinerary? Could I see myself tucked up in a B&B for the night, working the stitches to record place? Or would I limp in travel weary and lie prone to rest nagging back pain so that I could manage yet another day? What was the most likely scenario? I couldn't know. I could only hope.



To England

It seems as though I have always loved the roar, glint, speed of airplanes. Still, just once, I have a hankering to fly long-distance, first class. My legs are long. The seat spaces in Economy are cramped. And so my very impossible back disagrees with me about flying; it hates it. It aches, stings, cramps and whines incessantly.

A year after my discussion with Liam, the flight from Adelaide to London via Singapore was no exception. I said, 'Feel that magical instant when the forward speed reaches peak and the wheels leave the tarmac. Bring on the backward thrust of body into seat as the engines power us into the sky.'

My back said, just like a woman in labour after transition, 'Let me out of here. I want to go home.'

'Hush,' I encouraged, 'you can do it.' This set the pattern for the following weeks. My spirit was willing but my body was fighting the PC label of alternatively-abled.

My knitting was in the luggage hold. This was, of course, less than sensible. I'd paid considerable postage for the yarn and book to travel all the way from the Shetland Islands to Adelaide. And now they were in my baggage headed back to Scotland. But I had wanted to make a swatch—that is knit a sample square—of the colours I'd chosen to see if they worked together.

My choice of heathery blues, purples and greens seemed more fitting as a memory garment of Northern lands of rain, rocks, and peat than the desert palette Jean Moss had chosen. Her colours were an anomaly that tugged at my thoughts. It was a mystery I hoped to solve.

I tapped my fingers against the armrest. I wasn't nervous. It was annoyance that my fingers had to sit idle. Since 9/11, my knitting was forbidden on the flight in case my needles were subverted as a weapon of terror. Ironically, I was allowed a biro with a fixed point. I calmed my mind and settled back in my chair.

Despite the cramping, the flight to London was mainly enjoyable. I relished people watching on the planes and in airports—the well-groomed, alert start, the tousled, yawning end. I was amused by the antics in Security despite its serious intent; even the lady with the knock-you-out diamond and the man who looked like a thug had to strip to basics or throw away their bottle of water. Parents who were beyond tired themselves trying to keep pace with overstimulated offspring—crying babies and wriggling toddlers, bored pre-teens with electronic whiz bang toys—had my sympathy. I glared with them at critical audiences who had lost some humanity, or never had it, along the way.

It always appealed to me esoterically that my body was moving thousands of kilometres around the globe but, it didn't matter how far or long I roamed, I was still this insignificant little dot, with the same mind accumulating memories as I moved through time and space, and did laps of the cabin to ward off deep vein thrombosis.

Lived experience is like lying on your back staring at the stars in a clear sky away from any settlement's lights. It freaks you out

after a while if you dwell on it too deeply. I swear I feel the universe expanding and the earth moving towards an unforeseen black hole only to be retained, if you believe the latest science, as a holographic memory because information is never lost. Spooky, don't you think? Hand knitting is way safer.

I watched movies and the progress of the plane on the screen at the back of the seat in front of me that was given to erratic ups and downs just after the flight attendant had delivered coffee, or as I was juggling a cup of water and a sachet of Flight Recovery powder. I dozed while my neighbour shone the wrong personal light in my eyes, and I finally unfolded myself creak by creak at one of Heathrow airport's interminable concourses. If I tried hard, I could remember that I loved flying.

It was 5.30am London time, thirty hours after I left my front door. My B&B was at Marble Arch, just around the corner from Tony Blair's new place where I didn't know yet that four guards armed with automatic weapons were positioned at each corner of the property.

I fell on the bed, stretched luxuriously and slept and slept and slept 'til I woke. I took a shower and washed the flight out of my hair.



Wooden Drawers

Despite London's numerous attractions, I had been prepared to use The Parkwood Hotel, Marble Arch, as a long sleepover, forsaking sightseeing for five days before heading to Scotland. There were two marked exceptions planned, though: one local, and one a day train tour for later in the week. I hadn't known how long my body would need to recover from the over-long door-to-door trip.

When I surfaced and pulled the long thick brown and gold curtains back, revealing a small balcony beyond French doors and a traditional mews with dormer windows across the way, bright sunlight flooded the room. The warmth was lucky for a family of traditionally dressed Arabic people who were being moved on, full-sized mattresses and all, from the mews entrance by a London bobby. Evicted? Job-less? I hoped the weather would stay clear until they found rooms.

It was mid-August, late winter back in Australia, and my skin answered the sun's call to come out and play. The sunshine and

gentle breeze teased my reluctant back to join the party. It was a gentler sun and quality of light than that to which I was accustomed. Hyde Park was only a stone's throw away and a leisurely walk seemed just the thing for aligning my body's precarious architecture.

To the observer, I was walking alone. However, Liam was with me through my memory of our shared experience. In 1980, we had taken accumulated long service leave from work and toured around Western Europe for three months. Then, too, we had begun in London in late summer but it had been cold and mostly wet. Our coats were only shower-proof and we had been sodden to the skin. It hadn't dampened our enthusiasm for a visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A).

I had always regretted that I'd not had more time to explore the old, brown, wooden cabinets full of shallow drawers that housed literally thousands of textile samples: lace, weaving, knitting, embroidery and many other examples of fibre art. How I coveted them that collection: every scrap of frayed calico, every centimetre of embroidery floss, and every fibre of knitting yarn.

It was a ball of textile lust deep in my belly. The memory of the sensation had stayed with me over the years as I'd acquired my own modest collection. Now I was primed for my second experience. I could almost hear the slide of the wood as I pulled open that first drawer. It didn't matter what the first sample was. Any would satisfy.

I was in no hurry. I strolled along the outer perimeter of Hyde Park along North Carriage Drive. I passed under trees I didn't recognise but assumed were anything but the Dutch Elms that were still alive last time we visited. As I wandered anti-clockwise in the vague direction of Kensington, I shared the afternoon with what seemed like half of London. I don't know how many times during my travels I was to be told that it had been a particularly cold, wet summer. That afternoon was proof of a will by Londoners and tourists alike to soak up sun before the earth tilted on its axis towards autumn and winter, nipping most of the now luxurious green from trees and shrubberies.

Horse riders, joggers, cyclists on blue rented bikes, prams and scooters, other walkers, and supine bodies shiny with oils attempting tans clogged the outer trails, pathways and stretches of grass. Hats were conspicuous through their scarcity. Burnt noses, at the very least, tomorrow I thought.

I asked several council workers resting under a market umbrella where I could get water. One called, 'Here, love,' and tossed me a bottle. Soon I found less generous vendors along the path selling all the usual overpriced drinks and snacks with labels which asked to be properly placed in a bin.

Below West Carriage Drive, at the base of the bridge over the Serpentine, a woman was in conversation with two police officers. Her two dogs sat beside her: brown big leadless and very wet. This new take on skinny-dipping tickled my funny bone. Surely they weren't dangerous? Would she be fined? They were all still there when the path took me beyond view.

Rules and regulations were a tightening collar on simple things. I know I'm ageing when I compare current times adversely with the freedoms I had as a child. I know you can't hop into the back of a milkie's tray-top and zoom down a main arterial road from a caravan park to a dairy depot to get more milk for the churn, but was it really necessary, though, to put up so many signs that the visual pollution meant that the words were invisible?

I had wanted to establish a small permaculture farm many years ago away from the dictates of city life but, after the car accidents, my back made dreams which needed hard physical work for an idealistic grass-roots venture impossible.

However, Liam, Anita and I with our three cats do have the best of both worlds. We live on the top of a hill at the edge of the scrub which marks the Adelaide hills from the hotter, city plains below. Our son Joel and his very pregnant wife, Speckie, live an hour away by car in a quiet, country town with their two black labs and a Russian blue cat.

We can enjoy the absence of heavy traffic and visits by koalas, echidnas, parrots and various species of lizards or, alternatively, drive down to shop at the local up-market Mall with its tasteful designer signs or buy fruit and veg at the Central Market in the CBD fifteen minutes away.

I do concede some signs are handy. Especially the notice boards that say, 'you are here', and make it possible to diverge from the perimeter of Hyde Park and find the V&A in plenty of time to browse leisurely.

I wandered the exhibitions rather than rushing straight to the brown drawers because, once there, time would cease to exist. A marble, by an artist whose name eludes me, of a peasant woman and baby spoke to my soul more deeply than other more prestigious works. I wondered at drape, movement, smooth flesh and captured expression of tenderness in such a hard medium.

The historic fashion vignettes behind glass frustrated me. I couldn't get close enough. I knew about the importance of conservation measures: lighting, heating, humidity and control of oil from the skin. Still, brocades, silks, lace, wool demanded to be felt, viewed without reflection, rustled at the ear, even smelled for dye, dust and sizing. Of course, if everyone did that all that would remain would be piles of tatty, dirty threads.

The special exhibition of ball-gowns was a stunning display of what some people took great pains to make and others wore infrequently. For Instance, Princess Diana's slim white floor-length gown with matching high-revere short-waisted jacket was covered in densely-spaced, hand-sewn pearls that still glowed despite the subdued lighting.

My first evening gown was a yellow Grecian affair of draped, sheer polyester. It cost me twenty Australian pounds. I was fifteen and I earned the money to buy it by standing out in the sun, day after day, painting white the weatherboarding and asbestos sheets and wooden trims of the family home.

So many objects and experiences at the V&A! I rushed through galleries, absorbed millennia of culture, sat by the quadrangle pool, ate lunch in the high-ceilinged, painted, panelled room while the piano played through an arch way, then I looked for my wooden drawers.

I couldn't find them! I needed to know where my drawers were, the ones I'd lusted after for thirty-one years! The sign I found told of relocation to a venue under construction.

Now I am back half-way round the globe and it is too late, I put my pathetic responses down to jet-lag. I didn't think to enquire further; I accepted the sign at face value. Some researcher I am. I should have emailed ahead, asked questions, found my drawers. Liam has said since that the drawers were probably long gone to some antique shop. Philistine, he is.

I resorted to retail therapy. Three trips through the checkout in the shop saw me laden with pressies for everyone at home. If the parcel was posted before I left London, it would arrive in time for Liam's birthday on the first day of the Australian spring. They could all get together for a family pressie opening ritual.

For myself, I had decided to collect earrings as both beautiful and practical souvenirs. The V&A patronised so many fine jewellers that it was initially hard to choose. True to my fibre art leanings, I was drawn to the work of Judith Brown. Her stunning hand crocheted jewellery is inspired by an obvious love of lace and textiles.

I first bought a pair of her black fan shaped earrings made up of hooks and eyes with intricate crochet wire work. It was impossible to walk away from a second pair in her collection that featured a white mother of pearl button surrounded by silver wire crochet stitches and suspended from a very elongated, single, silver wire hook. I coveted matching necklaces but was worried about my budget which needed to last the whole trip.

Consoled but drawer-less, I walked back to my B&B through Hyde Park. Back pain and a miasma-like tiredness had settled in. All I could think of was stretching out in bed with the curtains shut to

block out the over cheerful sun. At least I'd broken in my new purple leather lace-up La Natura boots before I'd left home. I had no blisters.

I am sure the cheeky little squirrel along the way was put there just to lift my spirits. We don't have them at home. I was delighted by his antics as he dashed to and from the low fence that divided us, across the warm grass, and up and down a slender tree trunk. I could hear some passers-by say 'vermin' while others stopped and enjoyed, especially some children.

Newly enthused, I checked my dual dial watch to see the time in Australia. Two o'clock in the morning: perfect time to wake Liam for Skype so I could share my gloom about my drawers. The earrings were another matter. If I bought more—they were such appealing souvenirs—I would unveil them gradually once I got home.



Beatrix Potter

I wish Beatrix Potter was still among the living. Imagination says she would have been such a delightful friend. I would have liked to be able to visit her at her home, Castle Cottage, in the village of Near Sawrey where she lived with her husband, William Heelis, in her beloved Lakes District.

Perhaps we could have sat by the fire with a cup of herbal tea and talked about the nature and uses of Herdwick wool. Rather, she would have talked and I would have listened; she was the prize winning breeder after all.¹ The long skirted suit of Herdwick wool that she habitually wore would have brushed the floor and teased my fingers to test the texture.²

¹ Susan Denyer, *At Home with Beatrix Potter: The Creator of Petter Rabbit* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited Publishers published in association with The National Trust (Enterprises) Limited, 2000), 122.

² *Ibid.*, 45, 118-9.

Were the wooden country clogs she used to wear from choice comfortable? The very thought presses on my toes. Wood seems such an unyielding material. Perhaps discomfort was more acceptable to a person raised under the strictures of Late Victorian Society. A corset I once saw in an exhibition of clothing at Eyre House, the home of an early prominent Adelaide family, had blood stains where the metal ribs had parted tender flesh.

Not wanting to be a predictable follower, I would have hesitated to tell her how much I admired her artwork especially her botanical drawings, and her children's books or that *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* was my favourite despite the obvious appeal of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Eventually, I would have told her that once I had wanted to leave the city behind, to leave Adelaide as she had left London, to live on a small mixed farm where I could have had fruit trees, a large herb and vegetable garden, and a few animals—definitely egg laying hens, perhaps a sheep or two and an alpaca for fleeces to spin.

Beatrix would have understood my yearning for a more basic life. I suspect we would have been kindred spirits. I had an affinity for earth and nature rather than the drawing room. I often offended the sensitivities of my paternal grandmother, Little Nan, who found me too boisterous by far. She wasn't alone in her censure.

'Who does that dirty little girl belong to?' asked Mrs Bond, the wife of Dad's boss. There is a photograph of that day. Liam scanned and enlarged it and gave it to me last Christmas in a wooden frame with a trail of fabric roses and green leaves. I look about three and, as she had said, I was very grubby. My shoulder length curls are mussed. Cake is squashed in my fist and the gathered waist of my dress is torn away from the bodice from when I straightened while standing on the hem. How old was I when I first noticed and resented the fact that my brothers enjoyed the freedom of shorts, while I had to struggle with skirts?

Liam points at the photo and laughs. He knows that little girl lives on inside me. I can dress a part when I have to, but, at heart, I

am earthy and a little bit grubby. I walk barefoot after it rains from our front veranda to the biggest olive tree in the yard and enjoy the squish of wet soil and damp eucalyptus leaves between my toes.

As a child I roamed free. We lived on the outskirts of the city, with the vineyards of the Barbari family, our Greek next-door neighbours, to our back. Penfold's vineyards overlooked by the Adelaide foothills covered the land across the road to the east. They were bordered by ditches overhung with massive cacti and scrub olives, and choked with purple-topped Salvation Jane.

Some of our neighbours had outdoor cellars topped by beams, corrugated iron and mounded earth. Beneath, homemade pork sausages, vino and tomato sauce waited. They would harvest wild olives, artichokes and prickly pears for preserves, plus what we thought of as weeds for bitter salad. I often failed to eat my tea of lamb chop, mashed potato and boiled peas because I was full of *spanakopita* or sausage and garlic bread from *Thea Maria* or *Thea Tassia*.

Our immediate kingdom was the five blocks of land owned between Dad and his father. Their two houses bracketed the vacant, unruly land where we scratched ourselves climbing in the almond orchard, collected chicken and duck eggs, gorged on figs from behind the corrugated iron shed or grapes from the trellis over Pop's driveway. I was alone in my taste for the raw, golden quinces that grew on the tree next to the outdoor copper where Little Nan boiled the clothes on washday. I bought a single quince at the supermarket the other day; it cost four dollars: expensive nostalgia.

At home, we all sat around the kitchen table and made tomato sauce, jam, pickles and bottled our own fruit and vegetables. We kept bulk sugar and flour in two metal milk churns in the laundry. When the budget was skinny our chickens provided eggs and wild spinach or nasturtium leaves were our greens.

Now, I live on the edge of the city where the suburbs meet the bush. Our front boundary is marked by prickly pears growing below olive branches and the rows of vines green the hillside above

Stonyfell Winery. When my doctorate is finished, I'm going to whisper in Liam's ear about raised vegetable beds and some miniature fruit trees in pots. I eye the patio outside Anita's room and envisage a trellis and grape vines.

But I was half-way round the globe from my own garden at present and Beatrix was long dead. There would be no cosy fireside chats. Instead, I had to settle for the pale alternative of making a day rail tour from London to Hilltop Farm, a stone's throw from Near Sawrey which was the first of the many Lakes District farms she bought over a period spanning four decades.

Tickets to view the cottage of Hilltop Farm were timed; a handful of people admitted for a set interval. No photographs were allowed. I could pretend I have a concise memory of all that I saw but this isn't true. The visit was too rushed. Too many other images have overlaid them in my mind since. Though I know to my cost that memories can be inordinately strong like the anchor strands of an orb spider's web which entangle your face in the dark, they can also be like the daddy long leg's fine silk and disintegrate at the casual swipe of a duster.

In frustration at memory as a will-o-wisp, I have since looked at images on the web and read *At Home with Beatrix Potter: The Creator of Peter Rabbit* by Susan Denyer. It was written in conjunction with the National Trust and has the advantages of photographs of the cottage's interior.

Despite memory's fragility, some things are fixed in mental images by that alchemy which exists when objects relate to a personal investment; textiles were the key.

The first thing I saw in the downstairs hall was a spinning wheel and built-in wooden window seat where I could imagine knitting or reading on a sunny day. It was a large room with fireplace, table and chairs. In some parts of the Lakes District it was traditionally the only room that was heated, hence its old name of 'fire house'.

Upstairs, in the bedroom, the robust four poster bed—inherited from her grandmother with its patchwork spread, and with hangings that came with the bed but were embroidered by Beatrix—was framed against walls of William Morris ‘daisy’ wall paper. Her embroidery frame sat in front of a fireplace in the small sitting room. There was no evidence that she knitted: pity.

I tried to imagine Beatrix inhabiting the space but I largely failed. For just an instant, I felt her ghost at her writing desk and again at her embroidery frame, but the presence of attendants and other tourists broke the moment. Then, too, it felt like a carefully contrived setting. Everything was placed with care.

Beatrix had left detailed instructions about placement of furniture and possessions when her many farms and houses passed to the National Trust on her death in December 1943.³ Hers had been the controlling mind, but others had placed the pieces, interrupting the sense of home with memorialised artifice.

Susan Denyer’s book helps me understand my reactions to Hilltop Cottage. For many years, Beatrix was governed by her parents’ wishes and aspirations in the stifling atmosphere of Victorian English society. She drew interiors that she admired from the many old places where she stayed on holidays or visited with her family in Scotland or England. She was attracted to ‘focal fires, the grandfather clock, oak furniture, narrow passages, changes of level, and shafts of light.’⁴

When she was eighteen, after visiting an antiques shop where she saw an old chest she particularly admired, she writes that: ‘If ever I had a house I would have old furniture, oak in the dining room,

³ Anne Carroll Moore, "An Appreciation," in *The Art of Beatrix Potter: With Introductory Notes to Each Section by Enid and Leslie Linder* (London New York: Frederick Warne and Co Ltd 1955), xii.

⁴ Denyer, 22.

and Chippendale in the drawing room.⁵ Evidence of these passions are manifest in the drawings in her children's books.

Perhaps she would have approved of our black-wood wall unit. We were broke when we found it. It cost as much as a car at the time. We took a loan. It had come from a mansion demolished when families couldn't afford the rates in the expanding Adelaide CBD.

It is the entire end section of a panelled room including a cast metal fire place. It has carved doors, little brass acorn knobs, and a central feature cupboard with inserted handmade, bottle glass circles—gleams of sapphire, amethyst and emeralds—framed by lead.

Liam and I bought it in 1972, the day after we were married in ceremony with 28 guests: close family, close friends. Liam's caftan was purple and black. Mine was a pearly white satin-back-crepe with a hood. I made it myself: cut it out on the kitchen floor. It cost me five dollars. I also made Liam's old brocade mandarin coat from a bedspread. A leather headband over long hair finished his garb. Anne, my sister, was eleven and my only attendant in her own caftan of golden satin-back-crepe.

A pair of antique gold earrings from Mum and a corsage of red-purple pansy-like orchids and maidenhair fern from Liam completed my outfit. We used a white car—with purple ribbon—loaned by my brother who was down from jackaroo work at Wilpena Pound.

Kimberly, the daughter of our oldest friends, asked us what we were thinking as she looked at old wedding photos that also featured her newly engaged parents in trendy attire. What could I say? It was the Seventies and Liam and I, like many, were impatient of rote social norms.

⁵ Beatrix Potter, *The Journal of Beatrix Potter: From 1881-1897*, trans. Transcribed from her Code Writing by Leslie Linder (London New York: Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd, 1966), 90 (from 10 June 1884).

Beatrix was forty-seven-years-old when she married and moved from her family's house to Castle Cottage. She had bought nearby Hilltop Farm roughly eight years before, but only occupied it for short intervals each year.

Susan Denyer speculates that Beatrix's infrequent visits and the fact that she never lived full-time at the house meant that 'her perception of Hilltop remained sharp and slightly dispassionate, and she was able to arrange and compose each room as a picture, her possessions positioned for dramatic effect.'⁶

It seems perfectly natural that Beatrix's eye for artistic composition would result in a composed interior, particularly given it has been 'frozen' for nearly seventy years. Some wallpaper had been replaced with facsimiles, but it was basically as she instructed. Inanimate objects can be made to stay still.

The garden of Hilltop Farm was another matter. It was here that I found my personal response to Beatrix. This shouldn't have been the case. Plants would have come and gone since her time, but I could see her leaning against the slate slab porch where it broke the plane of the grey pebbledash exterior, flanked on either side by wisteria, and was it a climbing rose bush? Such was the backdrop to the garden.

It was August and the early summer flowers were gone but some were still charmingly tousled against high dry-stone walling. The breeze on my face and the light rain shower beading on lush green leaves both spoke of her love of nature and the quintessential Lakes District small farm holding in particular. Beatrix is famous for her little books—equally important is her legacy to the nation of small farms that she rescued as going concerns.

On my way in to see the cottage I had walked past an orchard of apple trees that separated the home garden from the fields. I hadn't focused on the dark dots in the grass. Afterwards, I did when I saw one dot move. How fitting that Hilltop farm should have tame

⁶ Denyer, 29.

rabbits? Did they ever get into the vegetable garden as Beatrix's Peter Rabbit had? At Hilltop, did I find Beatrix or did I find myself? I suspect the answer is both.



Shetland Museum

London had been so frantic. Snuggled under the covers in my sole-use room in Isleburgh Hostel in Lerwick, Shetland, I relished the predawn hush. Yesterday, the train station sat under a backdrop of Edinburgh castle, darkened with grime. The sunlit waves of the North Sea surged against myriad rocky outcrops and cliffs beneath the plane's wings as it broke from the clouds in the descent to Sumburgh Airport.

Fat Shetland ponies, two black and two white, grazed in a green field bounded by dry-stone walls beyond the local bus's windows. Houses, some the traditional white stone under grey roof and others vernacular-defying variations in diverse materials with a contemporary and often Scandinavian flavour, sat on the treeless, green and brown, rolling landscape of peat and rock.

I shifted in bed and tried to ignore the pain which spiked from my lower back. My cheeks quivered; my stomach roiled. I'd known I was in trouble when I'd moved my suitcase between taxi, train, plane,

and lifted it into the luggage rack of an airport bus for another plane and bus transfer.

The spreadsheet at home had made it seem a doddle. A memory mocked me from childhood of bouncing out of bed at 5.30am onto the cold linoleum before the rest of the family woke; every muscle in my body sang and was ripe for mischief. A seductive memory but I would not swap my tempered mind for a pain free body. I reached for heavy duty pain relief.

Four hours later, the two-storied greyish-brown gable-roofed buildings with dual chimneys along King Harald's Road, and those of the town centre on a rise across a large park from them, reached into a grey, cold sky. I hadn't expected to find such stolid structures. They were at odds with the impressions of Lerwick, Shetland's main town, which I'd seen at home from a webcam situated at the quay. I'd expected low, white-washed buildings with second stories in attics. Some of the dressed stone facades were softened by trees and uplifted by the colours of brave, jaunty flowers which would be a memory come the next, inevitable storm.

In a book I'd read as a child, a giant was carrying a sack of houses up a hill. A crag tore a hole in the sack and the houses jumbled free down the slope to form a haphazard village. I imagine that same giant standing on the northernmost shore of Mainland Scotland with a hundred or so islands and hundreds of jagged *skerries*, tall stacks of rock left by erosion, in a gigantic net.

He bunches his arms and casts nearly 300 kilometres offshore. The islands and *skerries* fall into the sea and Britain's remotest archipelago of the Shetland Islands is formed. The Atlantic Ocean to the west and the North Sea to the east pelt salt spray, storms, gales and sleet at one another over the heads of Shetlanders, who still stubbornly cling to fifteen of the islands. The rest of the previously inhabited islands proved too impossible for human habitation and had been left to the birds and seals.

Before me the waves lapped Hay's dock. I watched a child playing with pebbles on a small beach beside a green upturned row

boat while his mother waited patiently. In the distance a huge, white passenger liner shrunk as it headed out to sea. It was quiet and peaceful—quite at odds with the distant, turbulent past when tectonic plates collided, ice and glaciers came and went, the land masses rose, fell and rose again, and then they were swept by a huge tsunami caused by three massive landslides deep under the sea off Norway.

I hesitated. Often, before I step forward into an anticipated treat there is the inclination to forestall the event, to put off that moment when reality and imagination collide. I pulled open the door of the new Shetland Museum and Archives' building, a grey and white abstraction derived from interpreting the soul of a seafaring community. It is the task of a museum to introduce the dead to the living.

In this case, I met Shetlanders and the evidence of lives led from Neolithic times until the present. My head buzzed with the press of too many artefacts, too much information, too many engagements with people who had lived, died and left their mark. I had come to see Shetland's knitting traditions and had ended by realising that the knitting didn't stand alone. It was integral to a way of life. The oppositions struck me: middleclass/subsistence, fisherman/crofter, plain/fine knitting.

For many centuries of occupation the Shetlanders didn't knit. Many Ages had to pass before knitting needles and knitting made their appearance. Around 3500BC, the experts said, Neolithic farmers worked the soil—unless, of course, as the dissenters said, there were prior Mesolithic hunter gatherers who were pushed from the land by the glaciation of the last Ice Age or swept into the sea by the tsunami.

There was The Bronze Age, The Iron Age and the centuries when Shetland was part of a widespread Pictish culture centred to the South in, what is now, the Scottish mainland. Then the Viking Age, conquest and settlement, heralded six hundred years of

Norwegian rule by firstly earls in the Orkneys, and then by the Norwegian Crown.

Each age was marked by objects in stone, bronze and iron, some with elaborate carving: jewellery, bowls, loom weights and boat nails. I was particularly taken by the reproduction of a Shetland crofter's home. The 'but' was the main living room; the 'ben' was the sleeping room. Both were small and dark with no windows, the only openings: the door and smoke hole. Liam and my home is a palace by comparison. It was nothing for a dozen people, young and old, to live crowded at such close quarters. I suppose the press of bodies helped with the cold. The air must have been close and ripe.

Dark as the rooms seemed in the museum, they were worse in reality: it must have been a pall on the spirit in mid-winter when the sun hid its face. I was reminded of an episode of the British sit-com *Hamish Macbeth* when an over-enthusiastic incomer wanted to save a Scottish 'black house' from demolition and the owner, rope attached to tractor, could see nothing but dark poverty and extreme discomfort.

The exhibit of Time Team's archaeological exploration on Fetlar—they were invited by the eight children from the local school—where they had excavated a Viking boat put me back by Liam's side; we had watched the episode on TV together. In another life, we would both like to sit at an archaeological dig, sift the dirt and look for evidence of past ages, or trawl through libraries looking for rare clues.

The replica of the treasure horde from St Ninian's Isle was evidence of the mark of Christianity, carried from Ireland, and then Rome. It replaced the old beliefs, which still simmer away below the surface in folk tales of changelings and mythology, where wondrous creatures like the *selkies* are likely to emerge from the sea as a seal, and shed their pelts to assume human form. Hide the pelt and they are trapped. They marry, have children, listen to sea song, pine for their kinfolk under the sea, find their pelts and disappear years later beneath the waves.

Sometimes graphics are simpler than words. I wanted to draw a time line, as they have done along the path up to the Skara Brae archaeological wheel house ruins on Orkney, except mine would be like an historical pageant with people in the clothing of their times. I would set the ordinary people—the weavers, the knitters, the fishermen and the crofters—on one side of my path; I would place the powerful—the titled, the rich, the Church, the lawmakers and the ruffians—on the other side.

If it were only that simple; the reality is that the two groups were interconnected and the little person at the bottom of the heap was squashed from above. He had more rights during the six hundred years of Norwegian rule when, as an *Udaller* under Scandinavian law, he owned land freehold. I try to picture Shetland as a Norwegian colony. Did it begin in bloodshed and transform into farming over time? Or was the advance more of a migration in trading eras before the Viking age?

Pre-history and cultural voids frustrate me. There are those annoying great gaps, time consumed by the lack of records. I can take pleasure in piecing together puzzles and clues, but, when too many pieces are missing, speculation is all that remains. Reading is my default when I lack knowledge, always has been, and I take the paucity of myth, legend, folklore, saga and historical parchment about the Vikings on Shetland personally. Especially as, from all I have read, the Vikings were Shetland's golden era and key to current Islander identity.

From 1468AD, when Norway was ruled by Denmark, there was a split in the identity of the people and it became a case of Islander versus incomers. Shetland was pledged in lieu of a dowry for the marriage of the Danish King's daughter, Margaret, to James the third of Scotland. The Islands became a Scottish Fief, prey to the self-interests and whims of a succession of Scottish Earls. Even the language began to shift from *Norn* (based on Old Norse) to a dialect which was an amalgamation of *Norn* and lowland Scots.

The Earls wore big boots. The status of the little person at the bottom of the heap was trampled. He was manipulated. She lost previous inheritance rights. He was reduced to crofter or beggar status if he raised any objections against the feudal system which suppressed their rights for three hundred years. The economy of the time centred on fish, farming and cloth, both woven *wadmal* and plain knitted socks, stockings, hats and mittens.

In the months before my trip, I had read about and researched Shetland. True: I had been drawn to Shetland by its knitting traditions. I was focussed on Fair Isle (colour stranded work) and Shetland lace knitting, especially the iconic shawls which were so fine that they could be drawn through a wedding ring. But, I hadn't counted on Shetland's wealth of other attractions. As a child, I had read books by Rosemary Sutcliffe and became enthralled by her stories of life in Roman and Saxon Briton.

Stories of Shetland's otters and puffins, wildflowers, cliffs and coves, centuries of human occupation excavated at Scatness and Jarlshof—Stone and Iron Age, Vikings, Norwegian and Medieval settlement—and the folktales, material artefacts and cultural history of ordinary people who made their living through herrings, sheep and crofter produce captured my imagination, just as Rosemary Sutcliffe's world of words had so long ago.

'I'm talking to you, Mumma. Got our nose in a book again, have we?' Anita had gently mocked as research on Shetland filled my days. Liam was more direct. He'd put up with my vagaries for more years. No sooner had Anita and Liam attracted my attention than the words snagged my eyes and I read even as they tried to speak.

'Listen!' Liam would raise his voice in exasperation.

I finished looking downstairs in the museum and asked at the desk about their textiles' collection. A woman named Cushla took me upstairs and gave me a mini tour of the glass protected display cabinets and drawers filled with fibre delights. I'd missed finding my coveted old brown drawers at the V&A Museum, London, but this

consolation prize was far from secondary in importance. Cushla told me about a knit group who met on Wednesday nights at The Böd of Gremista, a heritage building a little further down the shoreline. I was intrigued and said I'd love to knit with them.

I never know whether my visual or tactile responses are paramount. Perhaps my eyes see and discern desirable characteristics, and then my fingers twitch to assess the verdict. As always, I wanted to feel the textile treasures. I wanted to open the cabinets and stroke the fabrics across my cheek. It is always my cheek, my right cheek to be precise, which is my first gauge of softness, loft, and the degree of my lust for a fibre or textile. Perhaps it is the same instinct at work which finds cuddly, soft kittens and baby chicks engaging, and the hard carapace of the centipede or black shiny spider repellent.

Within the cases, the stories of Shetland plain, lace, and Fair Isle knitting paraded before my eyes: coarse stockings, diaphanous shawls, *haps* (workday shawls), and stranded coloured bands on caps, vests and pullovers. Shetland was a remote archipelago off the far reaches of Scotland. Her common people to the Victorian external gaze, were an 'exotic other' of barren hills, fish and sheep, poverty-stricken, work-worn, and rude dwellings, a stark contrast to prevailing European notions of mainstream domesticity. Worlds apart, it seems, but the connection was that the Shetlanders produced goods that those in neighbouring countries wanted. Therefore, the knitting stories themselves were not isolated, but intertwined, and played out within the broader, complex economic, social and cultural conditions which defined what it meant to be a Shetland Islander whose very survival depended on external markets.

My mind vibrated. The sensory and information flow was overwhelming. The more I tried to hold in memory, the more the images and related words and dates eluded me. I look at the photographs now. They reflect my turmoil: poor focus, lack of system, mismatched objects and their labels. I wish I could return with more time and fix the memories. An impossible dream; I haven't

the money, and memory is never fixed. It is fluid, and is only ever the latest re-interpretation of the latest visitation to a past event.

The first item I saw was an early Fair Isle *kep*, a pendant fisherman's cap, mid- to late-eighteenth century. In Sarah Laurenson's article 'Fair Isle Knitting' in *Shetland Textiles: 800BC to the Present* she says that the traditional colour scheme used local plant dyes for the red and gold, the black, white and *moorit* were natural wool colours, and the blue showed foreign connections as it was an imported indigo dye.⁷ There were other garments in the case in the same horizontal bandings of dark colour and *peerie* (little) motifs with alternate bands of light 'cross and lozenge' geometric patterning.

I know I saw the earliest lace shawl in the collection, 1837, a christening shawl of outstanding beauty but I cannot be sure of it in my photographs. It was a contemporary of the fine lace stockings presented to Queen Victoria. Advertising, exhibitions, and a desire by the emerging middle class to emulate the fashions of royalty, nobility and the famous ensured the burgeoning popularity of Shetland's fine knitting at a time when the plain knitting markets were on the wane.

When I was nineteen, I first attempted knitting lace. The pattern came from *Golden Hands*, a weekly handcraft series, published by Cavendish during the 1970s love affair with the handmade. It was a coat: theirs was white, mine in black 4ply yarn, fine and challenging.

It featured a full-length bodice and skirt, with alternating vertical panels of rib and cathedral-window lace. The panels started wide at the hem and became narrower as they moved towards the shoulders. The sleeves were a romantic leg-of-mutton style, with a pouf at the upper arms, straight out of an historical costume book.

⁷ Sarah Laurenson, "Fair Isle Knitting," in *Shetland Textiles 800bc to the Present*, ed. Sarah Laurenson (Garthspool, Lerwick: Shetland Heritage Publications, 2013), 100.

I got up at 4.00am to knit before work; I knitted on the bus to and from work, and in my lunch hours as well. When it was finished, assembled, and blocked, the right-hand front was ten centimetres longer than the left. My knitting tension had become more regular with practice, and I hadn't had the experience to recognise that likelihood. Now I can see fixes. Then I was filled with disappointment that it wasn't perfect. I never wore it. Perhaps, later today, I will unearth it from the Scandinavian blanket chest under the stairs and look at it with fresh eyes.

In the 1920s, Fair Isle knitting would move away from hosiery, caps, mittens and vests to a focus on jumpers instead. Lace knitting was overtaken by the emergence of a leisure class looking for fun, practical knitwear. Fair Isle jumpers fitted their lifestyle and soared in popularity. The uptake of Fair Isle knitting represented another instalment in Shetland's knitting history. Knitting had remained an important strand of the Island's economy for 350 years because of the knitters' responsiveness to market forces with their progressions from plain, to lace, and to Fair Isle knitting.

Outside the museum, it was like coming out of a picture theatre in the daytime, that momentary hang in time caused by flashing images on a big screen as opposed to a sunlit normality: gulls wheeled, taxis and buses hit brakes, and school children called one to the other across the road. Inside the museum, I had been in thrall to the physicality of history through its artefacts; as I walked along Commercial Road towards the town centre, I pondered the meaning of what I had seen.

The most prominent historical portrayal of the small remote fishing communities, on the plethora of islands scattered about British, Scottish and Irish shores, was of men and boys battling high seas in unbelievably small fishing boats, or on whalers, or press-ganged by the British navy. They carried sheep from impossible, uninhabited atolls to new pastures, and climbed rocks for birds and eggs. In town there were all manner of other trades and professions;

they bought, sold, and bartered for what they couldn't make or source locally.

Shetland was no exception with the added identification with their Viking ancestors. Today this is most visible in February each year with the Up-helly-ha festival. It was instigated in Victorian times. People in Viking costumes fill Lerwick's narrow streets. They are loud, laughing, shouting, and I have no doubt some are barely vertical from alcohol consumption. They are a raucous mass hell bent on reaching the harbour edge where they set fire to, and burn a Viking ship. Media coverage of North Sea oilmen has continued the impression of Viking inspired male dominance.⁸

Historians played down, or overlooked altogether, the role of women. On Shetland, many women and children were alone from June to September, while their men were absent at sea. Women vastly out-numbered the men; comparatively few enjoyed moderate means or affluence while the majority coped with subsistence, a small step away from destitution. Fishing accidents were commonplace, as were widows and those who never married. Often, they were the sole providers for other relatives and relied on knitting for survival.

Many more lived in crofts than in town. These women raised children, kept house, and cooked at peat fires, which meant frequent visits to peat banks to replenish the croft's supply. Outside, they worked small, rock-walled, seaweed and manure enriched fields of potatoes and barley, or managed sheep. They walked from hamlet to town to arrange the dressing or sale of knitted items, with hands busy with knitting, or drop spindle whorls. Rolags of carded wool were teased out and twisted by their flying fingers into finished yarn. Women and girls knitted, or wove, or sewed whenever there was an opportunity, often by poor light, after a day of back-breaking toil. And,

⁸ Lynn Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland 1800-2000* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 1.

except in very bad fishing years, there was employment for herring girls gutting fish.

The history of knitting, of how these women and girls went about the business of survival, within an informal, unorganised barter economy, was squirreled away in records, newspaper articles and advertisements, and books generally written by men: clerks, clergy, gentlemen travellers and historians. Mrs Eliza Edmondston's 1856 book, *Sketches and Tales of Shetland*, was a notable exception.

In the Anglophile world, from the 1800s, an extended female audience, scattered across the British Empire and the United States, were keen to embrace books and magazines that showed them how to knit Shetland plain, Fair Isle, and lace garments, or furnishings.

The rise in popularity of local history and traditional skills' recovery projects in the last quarter of the twentieth century saw the publication of books such as *A Shetland Knitter's Notebook: Knitting Patterns and Stories Selected and Edited by Mary Smith* (1991). It was an intriguing, intimate peek into knitting and knitting lives from knitters throughout the Shetland Islands.

Other modern books were specific to Fair Isle, or lace, while plain knitting—the mainstay of Shetland knitting economics for about two hundred and fifty years from the 1600s onwards—was little mentioned. Books such as *Fair Isle Knitting* by Sarah Don (1976), *Alice Starmore's Book of Fair Isle Knitting* (1990), and *The Art of Fair Isle Knitting: History, Technique, Color & Patterns* (1997) by Ann Feiteleson favoured knitting techniques and patterns. As a fan of history, I found that these accounts frustrated me because they often omitted history or used the same facts and quotes plus illustrations drawn from the same scarce sources.

Apart from the written records, there were all those wonderful old photographs: sepia, other-worldly. A most common image was of women with woven baskets, *kishies*, of peat on their backs often knitting as they walked along paths and narrow roads traversing a treeless landscape. The evidence showed that the women worked hard and well.

In 1814, Sir Walter Scott notes in his diary that: 'The women are rather slavishly employed, however, and I saw more than one carrying home the heavy sea-chests of their husbands, brothers, or lovers, discharged from on board the Greenlanders.'⁹

And 'The Third Report on Highland Destitution' in 1849 observes:

...the fisherman considers himself a privileged being, exempt from the ordinary lot of humanity, and nearly the whole labour of cultivating the farms is devolved upon the women, who as one of the Sappers remarked, with regard to their efforts in road-making, 'The women, Sir, are the best men in Shetland'.¹⁰

Male/female labour roles in Shetland Society were less simple than outside onlookers might acknowledge. Though their comments probably held part of the truth, they were seeing through the eyes of men used to European woman in an industrialised model with 'the ideology of separate spheres [public and private] and of domesticity, the centrality of marriage and motherhood, the gendered division of labour and the rise of organised feminism.'¹¹

In histories about Shetland, authors concentrated on the men, on the primary occupation of fishing; the women, the secondary occupation of knitting, failed to attract their attention. First, Linda G. Fryer redresses this omission in her book, *Knitting by the Fireside and on the Hillside: History of Shetland Hand Knitting C. 1600-1950*. Plain knitting, lace and Fair Isle all received her attention.

She writes that '(g)enerally speaking, the income from fishing paid the rent, whilst crofting provided food for subsistence, and the returns from knitting were used to clothe the family and help supplement the domestic economy.'¹²

⁹ Grierson, H.J.C. ed. Letters of Sir Walter Scott. (Edinburgh, 1932) quoted in Linda G. Fryer, *"Knitting by the Fireside and on the Hillside": A History of the Shetland Hand Knitting Industry C.1600 - 1950* (Lerwick, Shetland: The Shetland Times Ltd., 1995), 17.

¹⁰ 'A Scotsman', A Trip to Shetland (1872) 28 quoted in *ibid*.

¹¹ Abrams, viii.

¹² Fryer, preface xiii.

In the absence of the men, it was the women who were responsible for the work of the croft, and decisions which ensured the continuity of their way of life; and, when the fishing and the crops faltered, knitting assumed a critical role.

Much later, at home, I read Lynn Abram's book *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World 1800-2000*. It was not only her exciting perspective on the past lives of Shetland women, but also the way she connects the meaning of the past to the present through narratives of living women that appealed to me. She writes:

This book...shifts attention from the European geo-political centre to Shetland and it subverts the narrative by disturbing the story of 'progress' from peasant oppression to women's liberation via domestic ideology and first- and second-wave feminism, and replacing it with an alternative narrative of a rural society of European women whose vision and experience was of female agency and of power.¹³

I suppress an urge to quote her whole book. It is a fascinating study. How does a reader feel about gender history theory in a Knit Lit memoir? Positive I hope.

Always, it is the stories that seduce me. In a section on the 'performance' of storytelling, Lynn Abrams analyses personal testimony of three local women: Mary Manson was quoted from a 1982 local history interview, and two others were interviewed for the book.¹⁴ The immediacy of their stories brings history alive for me. It was no longer the words of academics, outside commentators, but the women themselves who told stories about the life that *was* and the life that *is*. The cadence of the folktale is unmistakable to my ear, and I am hooked.

The storyteller Mary Manson tells of waiting for a wise woman to concoct a cure:

I mind mammy saying it was a fine bed at she had, she had a tatted rug and a feather bed and of course, then a days it was likely supposed tae be a wonderful bed, onwye they got

¹³ Abrams, ix.

¹⁴ Ibid., 38-47.

aff o dem and they got intae this bed and she drew the door
across the front.¹⁵

The stories, some told in the unique Shetland dialect with its roots in *Norn* from Old Norse, reminded me—yet again—that my first love before knitting was reading. Foremost were folktales, a legacy of the words and worlds of storytellers captured in print. It was in part due to that attraction I was walking along a street, about as far from home as I could be, chasing the echo and living traces of Shetland's knitting traditions.

Those traditions have almost mythic connotations for knitters like me, who admire and emulate the techniques. We nod in recognition, even as we embrace innovation in pattern and design. I suspect the old Shetland knitters would approve. Once upon a time, they'd spun yarn, picked up knitting *pins* and coaxed Shetland knitting into being. I'm positive they would wear the perplexed, possibly proud, faces of the parents of genius offspring.



¹⁵ Shetland Archives SA, 3/1/77/2: Mary Manson quoted in *ibid.*, 41.

Jamieson & Smith

The headquarters of Jamieson & Smith Shetland Wool Brokers Ltd. was an unpretentious building on North Road. Two shopfront windows, set in corrugated cladding, rubbed shoulders with an industrial shed-like structure which carried the unmistakable smell of raw fleece. Bits of wool, caught on rough surfaces and weeds, were mini flags in the sea breeze. I later learnt that 82 percent of the wool clip on the Islands was handled there.

Inside the shop, I approached the counter and asked for Sarah, my contact. We'd exchanged emails about my research. There was silence and uncertainty. Sarah had left. They were not sure where she'd gone. I was flustered.

Sarah was the editor of the book *Knit Real Shetland: 15 Knitting Projects in Real Shetland Wool from Jamieson & Smith*. It was where I found the design of the pullover, Olly's Allover, which I had adopted as the embodiment of my travels to Shetland and Ireland. I had counted on an interview with Sarah. I had wanted to

know about the inclusion of Jean Moss's hybrid Aran/Fair Isle design in the collection.

A woman named Sandra came to my rescue. I told her I had permission to use the design. I told her I'd planned the interview with Sarah and hoped to talk to Oliver Henry, responsible for sorting and grading.

'I'll find Oliver,' she said.

'But: What about permission to use the design? Who can give me that?'

'Oliver is the managing director. He can say.'

My preconceptions shifted. Too much had happened since I'd walked in the door. Nothing was as I'd expected. I was the only person who seemed the least bit frazzled.

Oliver Henry was dynamic and personable. The outside 'store' was full of wool because it was the middle of the wool season. I began by asking him the usual questions.¹⁶

'How long have you been working with wool?'

'Forty-five year,' he said.

The local dialect sounded unusual to me—and I gained the impression it was his frequent reply. I was curious.

'And that's just since you've been paid for it I suppose. Before that you probably worked with it as a boy?'

'In 1967, I came here from agricultural college,' he answered.

I thought back to what I was doing then. I was in High School with no thought of what I might do with my life.

'For the summer to pack wool.' He was a man of few words.

'And you've been here ever since?'

'It's been a long summer.'

'It has been a long summer. I like that,' I laughed, probably far from the first to do so. 'Should I call you Oliver, or Mr Henry?'

'No, Oliver. Mr Henry's angry. It's scary.'

¹⁶ Video-taped interview with Oliver Henry by author August 2012.

We wove our way in and out of several small rooms, all loaded with wool, and headed deeper into the building. As we walked, Oliver told me more about the business.

‘The wool comes from about 700 plus crofters and farmers. A crofter can have 20 up to 1000 sheep, on the bigger farms slightly more. We grade into five grades of white—I’ll show you that through by the small room—and three grades coloured. The wool is all graded and packed up here. The shipment is ready to go to Bradford. We send it to our *bairn* company, and, as you can see, F is fine, G is good. We keep a certain amount of wool back, and then we hand sort it.’ As we moved between rooms, Oliver handed me samples of white, grey and black wool. I sniffed the lanoline on my fingers.

‘This is just typical stuff. I’ll see if I can find a bit of good. This is our best grade. You can feel the handle of that.’

‘Oh, that’s exquisite.’ I’d been neglecting my knitting because of the pressure of my travel schedule. Immersed in the raw wool, my fingers moved of their own accord as though knitting. I knew that soon I would cast on Olly’s Allover—‘named for Oliver,’ Sandra later told me—and begin that knitting journey.

‘It’s not as fine as merino in microns, but it’s still alive.’ There was pleasure on Oliver’s face as he handled the wool. I envied him the tactile nuances available only to someone who had made wool classing their life’s work.

‘I know what you mean; it bounces back.’ My fingers were those of an amateur by comparison.

‘Yes. It’s got elasticity and you can see it’s springy.’

I could feel what he meant.

‘That’s very strong,’ he added and turned down stairs to what I expected would be a cellar with more wool. I could feel the chill as we went down.

‘Well, I’ll tell you the main thing you look out for,’ Oliver’s voice led the way. ‘There’re two types of Shetland wool. There’s the kindly wool that’s very soft, that’s what you have in your hand. Then this is coarser. This is the guard hair that lets the water off, but it’s still very,

very soft. Most of the sheep in the first survey, most of the sheep in 1794, were coarse wool. But, not really fit for human skin because it's guard hair, but there was a small amount of kindly wool sheep—that was knitted into scarves and shawls.'

'What you had was the crofter, the hand spinner, the lady of the croft. And, remember, they were very small crofts with open boats for fishing, and so you didn't have much income. The croft had about twenty to thirty sheep. And the sheep were kept for the mutton for the crofts in winter. So, what provided the extra income was the knitting and the fine spinning. Coarser wool wasn't used. So, what we've done with our partners is what you see here for the coarser wool.'

We stood in a finished basement. On show, there was a huge bed with a mattress and blankets. The mattress was stuffed with coarse wool and the blankets woven with it. On the bed was a dead bumble-bee.

'We don't have them in Adelaide.' I carefully wrapped it in wool to take home so Anita could see their fluffy beauty. I thought Oliver was a tad bemused. He gave me time to look at the other yarns and knitted items placed about the showroom.

I was mindful that it was the busiest time of year for him. He led me back through the labyrinth to the shop, stopped to autograph my hard copy of *Knit Real Shetland*, and then hurried back to the wool store

Sandra and I chatted, as knitters do. I couldn't resist; I bought lace weight yarn in a neutral shade, and some jumper weight 2 ply, just because it was pretty. I already had the yarn for Olly's Allover, which I'd bought a year before from their on-line shop, but I wanted yarn I'd bought myself from them on Shetland

Oliver Henry had spoken of knitting as extra income. At the Museum, I had seen a replica of an early sock behind glass. It was a humble item, and, yet, very important in Island income for 200 years. In 'Stockings and Mittens 1580-1851', Brian Smith tells the following story of the plain knitwear trade He writes that there is no way of

telling when the women of Shetland began to knit, but it is possible to tell when they began to sell their knitting.¹⁷

It was in the 1580s that Dutch fishing vessels, hundreds of them, started to come ashore and buy stockings and mittens. This was at Bressay Sound, and the first early shacks which sprang up, a proto-Lerwick, were demolished to control unruly elements and suspected prostitution. But the knitwear production flourished and foreign merchants began coming to buy plain knitted goods.

The Shetlanders became dependent on the German merchants for the sale of fish and the Hollanders' purchase of coarse cloth, woollen stockings and mittens.

When the trade was disrupted by political embargos or the frequent wars between European powers, the impoverished Islanders were without money or goods to pay their rent. For instance, Brian Smith writes that in 1703 French warships burned and destroyed 400 Dutch *buses* (ships) in Lerwick harbour, which permanently reduced the number of ships coming to Shetland,¹⁸ with a direct result on plain knitting sales.

At the height of the trade, the number of vessels and sale of knitted goods involved was extraordinary, given the female population of Shetland, even with the women and girls knitting at every available opportunity. Brian Smith states observers' estimate that, variously, 1,600, and then 2,200 Dutch vessels used to arrive—thousands of fishermen—so many stockings.¹⁹

I thought about Bressay Sound, the natural harbour which tolerated Lerwick's presence, and tried to imagine the assault on the senses. If it was a film set, a movie director would be shouting and waving as he directed a cast to rival that of *Braveheart*.

¹⁷ Brian Smith, "Stockings and Mittens 1580 - 1851," in *Shetland Textiles 800bc to the Present*, ed. Sarah Laurensen (Garthspool, Lerwick: Shetland heritage Publications, 2013), 52-58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

How did the women strike their bargains? How did they overcome language barriers? Did they line up the barter goods, whisky and coin against fish, knitting, and produce, and move them like chess pieces with mime to reach agreement on the deal? The contrast between the quiet of the boy I'd seen playing on the beach and so many people in a commercial frenzy was too great and my imagination almost failed.

When the German and Dutch trade ceased or waned, when Bressay Sound quieted to a hush, local landowners filled the void and bought the fish and hosiery themselves. Throughout the eighteenth century, there is ample evidence that the knitted goods trade was alive and kicking. Merchants exported hundreds and thousands of pairs of stockings at a time.

A distinction was made between coarse and fine hosiery. The coarse cost around eight pence, the fine between ten and fifteen shillings. A huge difference in spinning and knitting time, but much more expensive, given there are twelve pence to the shilling. By the close of the eighteenth century, markets had developed in Scotland and England.

It is said that fame is fleeting. If just over 200 years of success can be called fleeting, so it was with the Shetland plain knitted goods trade. It was a casualty of The Agricultural Revolution in England as sheep husbandry there flourished. Evicted from demolished villages, cleared to make way for profitable sheep, displaced rural workers became cheap labour in the rapidly growing cities for mechanised factories that churned out woollen hosiery. Thousands of Shetlanders would be forced to emigrate to the Americas, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand before the nineteenth century was over. For them, a time was coming when fishing, crofting and knitting would all fail.

Long before this era came to a close, when trade had flourished on Shetland, the whole history was permeated by women's stories. What did they say to one another about how the infamous Truck System squeezed the life out of them? Murmurs must have risen to a roar as, none-too-soon in the 1870s, a Royal Commission

convened to investigate it. Much of what is known about it comes from their proceedings and records.

Brian Smith writes that from the 1840s to the 1940s, '...Shetland knitters usually didn't get a monetary reward for their work: they had to accept goods from the merchant's shop, at a valuation chosen by the merchant.'²⁰ This was a succinct description of the relationship, a pattern familiar to the Shetlanders from the centuries when they were given advances of money and goods by German traders in exchange for their fish or knitting.

Under the Truck System though, all the power rested with the merchants. They set the price of both the work and the store goods, and limited the goods available in exchange. Evidence in 1871 of John Walker, a Shetland businessman, testifies that:

Those [females] are employed by hosiery merchants...for they are a distinct class in the town, who give out the worsted to them, and have certain fixed rates of remuneration for the different classes of goods...When they bring it back in [he went on] it is understood that although there is a nominal price in cash they get no cash for their work. That is the rule. There are exceptions, but the rule is that they are paid in fancy goods, which is the proper expression for it. It is very rare even that they will give them tea or sugar or soap...They will give them fancy goods such as clothing, dresses, flowers, ribbons, and such things as that.²¹

When William Guthrie for the Commission asked more than 17000 questions in Shetland itself,²² the consequences of the system on the lives of the Shetlanders contained re-occurring themes. Women dressed beyond their general means and swapped items like tea for oil or food, sometimes walking for half a day to get it, while they and their family members were destitute of food and other necessities.

The Truck Amendment Act of 1887 was passed but many of the merchants ignored its intent, and lowered the price given for the

²⁰ "The Truck System," in *Shetland Textiles 800bc to the Present* ed. Sarah Laurenson (Garthspool, Lerwick: Shetland Heritage Publications, 2013), 70.

²¹ John Walker quoted in, *ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 72.

knitting by ten to thirty percent without lowering the prices charged for goods. The situation simmered until another Truck Committee was set up in 1906.

The knitters themselves seemed resigned to the situation, with a factory inspector noting, 'They have known no other style of business...especially those in rural areas.'²³

If it had been me, I think, I would have had smoke coming out of my ears. Of course, I wouldn't. Isn't it so easy to judge other cultures and societies by one's own era and rules? Too easy to forget that there are sweatshops in even developed cities, fuelled by an underclass that mainstream culture benefits from, but overlooks.

Despite the occasional prosecution against the merchants—and some knitter's taking advantage of favourable postage and sending knitting down South—the system continued until changes set in motion by the Second World War.

During the war, thousands of servicemen were sent to Shetland and paid cash for goods. The Shetland Hand Knitters Association (SHKA), possibly encouraged by these positive experiences, was coaxed into life as a co-operative.

A key supporter, Labour politician Prophet Smith explains: 'The whole plan...was to cripple the financial position of the merchants, to prove that they were not indispensable and so undermine their influence in every aspect, not forgetting the political one.'²⁴ Brian Smith writes that (after the War): 'The merchants could not withstand the modern way of looking at the world.'²⁵

In *Knitting by the Fireside and on the Hillside*, Linda Fryer defines the micro-factors that caused the overturn of the Truck System. There was better communication after the non-contributory Old Age Pension in 1908, an increase (slow but steady) of the standard of living, the evolution of a cash economy, and alternative

²³ Ibid., 74.

²⁴ Ibid., 76.

²⁵ Ibid.

employment opportunities.²⁶ However, she credited it with preventing ‘widespread destitution and hardship, rural depopulation, and emigration.’²⁷

I thought about the difference between what we in the West currently consider indispensable and what the crofter or the Shetland housewife accepted as her lot. She either knitted, and sold her work through the Truck System, or ended up in the poor house, or dependent on the charity of parishioners who shunted her from croft to croft, a night, or a week a piece. If young, she found herself working in a factory overseas, or in domestic service down South. As Linda Fryer concludes: ‘By present day standards, life for many was at a grim subsistence level...knitting offered an alternative’²⁸—flawed as it was by the truck barter system’s inequalities.

The example of these intrepid women caused me to question the meaning of adversity or trauma. For me it was mental and physical challenges played out in a First World country where there was the possibility that vulnerabilities could be acknowledged and treated. Day to day, these women and their families fought the grind of abject poverty, like those people trapped by the siege of Leningrad by the German army in World War II, their focus reduced to the next scrap of bread.

Did their knitting sustain them as it does me? Did they lose their consciousness of self, of misery, of the external world, in that still zone called flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—that place where I retreated through knitting’s rhythmic, soothing meditative state when my world shattered and I had to rebuild my life stitch by stitch? Tears of empathy were of no use to women who were long turned to dust and beyond comfort. Continued support of organisations such as ‘Community Aid Abroad’ in its quest to facilitate craft enterprises to

²⁶ Fryer, 63.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 64.



improve resilience, by which I mean growth after adverse life experiences, seems infinitely more useful than tears.

The Böd of Gremista

Two Fair Isle pullovers on traditional woolly boards propped against the rendered, grey-painted exterior marked the entrance to The Böd of Gremista and Shetland Textile Working Museum. One was dark with vertical patterning, the other a light blue on white in a design of horizontal banded lozenges and crosses.

I tried to visualise how the pullovers were placed on the wooden frame. There must be hinges down the centre front to allow the frame to be slipped into the wet jumper to dress it into its correct size and shape. The jumpers before me were decorative, not wet, except for a drop or two from the pregnant clouds. The sea breeze blew my hair across my eyes giving a momentary sense of the pullovers moving.

The Böd was lean with flat planes, devoid of embellishment. It was built in 1780 and had been the birthplace of Arthur Anderson, the founder of P & O Ferries. I had expected something more grandiose, more in the Victorian tradition in evidence back in town,

not this modest rectangular footprint. But, I hadn't known that a Shetland *böd* was the name for a small building used by fisherman in the fishing season; nor that this was the only one returned to its original condition.

Inside, I paused to assess the layout. A woman with upswept blond hair and welcoming smile stepped from behind a screen at the far end of the room, a cup of coffee in her hand. We introduced ourselves. She was Brigitte and she later told me she came most summers from Sweden.

'Would you like to look around? The display pieces are upstairs. Down here in the shop we feature the work of local textile artists. Please enjoy.' She moved to a small table and took up a piece of knitting.

'Cushla from the museum directed me here. She said there was a knitting group.'

'Yes, that is next Wednesday night. I can't come but Cushla, and some others will be here.' She appeared regretful.

'I'm headed to Fair Isle for the weekend but I should be back in plenty of time. I certainly hope so,' I replied as I crossed my fingers for luck. I was enchanted by the idea of knitting and nattering with other knitters on Shetland. It was the possibility of such experiences that had drawn me halfway round the world, as far to the North as my home was to the South. I crossed the rather small room and climbed a set of narrow, wooden stairs to the upper level. Step by step, I tried to ignore my whining back, which said I'd been pushing too hard. I was disinclined to listen. I'd had it with the dictates of disability.

I was curious about why this exhibition co-existed with the Shetland Museum and Archives, which was just a short walk away, or taxi trip, as my body was protesting from excess, physical exertion. Working Museum implied a work in progress, and I made a mental note to find out more. A mix of historical and contemporary knitting was on display. Plain, Fair Isle and lace were all represented: a potted history of Shetland knitting.

When I returned downstairs, a second woman with short dark hair and a friendly smile that made her eyes sparkle had joined Brigitte. Her name was Barbara, and she was another of the volunteers who ran The Böd.

It occurred to me that we were all three older women who had reached that point in life when it was possible to make time and space for our passions.

In the global community it is no small thing to be assured of having basics such as water, food, shelter, and doctors within easy reach. Maslow's diagram, a pyramid of his 'Hierarchy of Needs', places essentials at the base and the factors necessary to indulge full self-actualization at the highest point—rarefied heights that elude too many.

An intense perception of privilege and abundance pierced me and created a serene, suspended moment, perfect in its intensity and focus. I have a collection of these virtual, faceted crystals of delight suspended in my mind: the first time I met Liam, the moment when Joel and, then Anita were placed in my arms, and sitting on a stump in the garden stroking Rumpel as a newly arrived kitten. It is akin to total balance, no tension, in the eye of the storm called life.

I watched as Barbara, unaware of my philosophical digression, strapped on a black leather knitting belt. The central feature of the belt was an elongated, thickened oval. Its surface was interrupted by well-worn, punched holes.

'You'd want to be careful with those,' I said, when she sat and took out a pair of long, thin, *pins* with sharp points on either end. She was intent on her hands and held the right *pin* in front of her, ready to knit, and rested the bottom end in a hole on the padded belt. In the Shetland manner, her right fingers began to throw the yarn, a different colour on each of her two fingers. How she kept them separated and moving smoothly was beyond my powers of observation.

It took me long enough to learn to knit with different colours on my left and right hands. I thought her technique was too hard, but

who knows? I am pushing new boundaries every day in my quest for mastery.

I stared, frankly intrigued.

'Heavens, you're fast, Barbara,' I said, an inadequate comment given her flying fingers. 'Do you mind if I video you?'

'You had to be when it was your living,' she said, and nodded an okay.

I had interrupted her rhythm, breaking that all important flow and she'd dropped a stitch.

'You're going to curse me tonight if you have to undo that.'

'It will be fine by the by.' She smiled.

I panned the room, pausing on items of particular interest, and then settled beside Barbara to watch. She didn't slavishly follow the pattern but read the work as one would recognise signs on a road map. Once a knitter has memorised a pattern the stitches speak: here a purl bump, there a knit stitch's distinctive 'v' shape. In Barbara's case, she was reading the colours: three blue, one white, four blue, and watching that the geometric design built properly. Here a vertical sequence, there a diagonal 'stack'.

I was training myself to do the same thing. I felt proficient when the pattern before me was Aran (texture, cables and bobbles), or when it was lace (increasing and decreasing to form holes), but when it was a row of coloured squares on a chart I had to concentrate more. Perhaps I would have more success if I visualised a row as a map and didn't let the name of the colour form in my mind.

They call it sub-vocalisation when you say the word in your mind instead of recognising it as a symbol. At school, they teach children to read aloud. When I was little it was *Dick and Dora* books with *Spot the Dog*. You got a stamp in red, green, or blue ink for each page read. Of course, this made it difficult to recycle the book for younger siblings.

This was all very different to the speed reading course I did in The States when I was a Rotary exchange student living in El Paso,

Texas for a year. It was at a YMCA summer camp. I was seventeen and having a rough time.

I had stayed for the first five months in a teenage household and had graduated from High School. My bedroom with a walk-in closet was huge after the shoebox I shared with my eight-year-old sister at home. Soiled clothes from the corner basket reappeared washed and ironed without me sighting the Mexican daily maid. At home, I washed and ironed once a week for seven people. I revelled in the trappings of a material affluence unfamiliar to me.

I became too settled for a temporary visitor: believed I could stay all year. Then I had been told, without warning that I was to be moved to a new family. It was so out of the blue that I thought I'd done something wrong. I packed a bag and bolted on a Greyhound bus to Carlsbad, New Mexico, where The Rotary Area Co-ordinator and his wife lived.

The phone lines between El Paso and Carlsbad must have burned hot. I don't recall when I was told that my hostess from the first family was a closet alcoholic who had been stopped by police for driving the wrong way on the freeway with a glass of Scotch in her hand. They were a family in crisis and Rotary couldn't allow me to stay on once they knew.

After a fortnight, I went back to my new family in El Paso. Although I shared a bedroom at home with my eight-year-old sister, living in a family with a nine-year-old girl, and seven-year-old twin boy and girl, without a single visit all summer from the teenagers I'd felt close to for five months was painful. I ran into one of them in the Mall one day.

'You just disappeared,' she said. 'We thought you'd gone back to Australia'.

I took refuge in my age-old comfort, reading, and I watched late night movies, and saw Neil Armstrong walk on the moon in black and white on TV. I read until three or four in the morning, and got up very late. One morning, my host, a YMCA director put me on notice that I was coming to summer camp with him. Had they suggested

this before and I'd refused, too bound up in my miseries to be comforted?

They were lovely, caring people and had deserved better than a sulky teenager for the summer. They took me by campervan from Texas to Vancouver Island, and down the east coast of British Columbia, Canada, as a special treat

Back in Australia, I'd started to tell this story to a cousin. My father had interrupted me. He didn't like anything other than glowing commentary about my year away.

He said, 'Makes you look spoiled, ungrateful.' I am the first to admit that overall it was a life changing experience with huge rewards and benefits, but there was homesickness too and situations that were very challenging for a parochial seventeen-year-old.

Despite precocious knowledge caused by childhood abuse, I was naïve in other ways with my father influencing me to see the world through rosy coloured glasses. It didn't occur to me to discuss my negative thoughts and feelings with anyone.

To admit negative sentiments wasn't the 'done' thing in my family of origin. Instead, the imperative was a stiff upper lip. Perhaps this attitude represented a prevailing cultural one. Maybe I'm judging the society of the time, along with my father. A culture and habit of silence protects the perverse and the paedophile, harms and protracts the suffering of innocents. It seems as though I have spent my whole life breaking free of someone else's imposition of silences. It was okay with my father if I described innocuous topics such as learning to speed read.

I admired all the exhibits in The Böd. Whether they were historical or contemporary ones for sale, examples of plain, lace or Fair Isle knitting, the common factor was pure wool as the material and Shetland sheep as the source.

I picture a crofter or her little daughter plucking wool, *rooing* they called it, from the softest fibre at a sheep's neck to begin the work intensive process needed to produce the finest shawl, the so-

called 'wedding ring shawl' because they were fine enough to pass through one. Alternatively, men clipped coarser wool from the body for weaving, plain knitting or Fair Isle. Of course, they first had to catch and pen the sheep: a social event in itself captured in many old sepia photographs in the Archive's collections.

Shawls were not all equal. Not all were made from the wool at the sheep's neck. For the less than finest lace shawls, the rest of the wool had to be sorted. After sorting, the wool was carded to remove grit, prickles and align the fibre. Teasing by hand rather than using a mechanical carder prevented the fine fibre from breaking.

Care was essential in all processes, but the spinning was particularly critical: the finer the thread, the finer the shawl, camisole, stole or bedspread. The best thread is so fine it is called gossamer or spider silk. The lace itself, more open work than true lace, is knitted to this day in the same way using 'yarn over' and 'knit-together' (Ktg) to form the characteristic holes.

I tried to learn to spin, even had a spinning wheel given to me by my cousin. However, I couldn't get it right, couldn't co-ordinate my wayward feet on the treadle. Anita has that challenge ahead of her with the inheritance of her paternal grandmother's spinning wheel. I hope she has better luck than I did.

In common with knitting traditions the world over, patterns with names such as 'print o da wave' and 'cat's paw' were handed down within families and taught inter-generationally. That was before they were co-opted by broader knitting audiences with the onslaught of nineteenth century literacy and 'work-table' instructional books and serial magazines.

I have seen such books advertised by Antiquarian dealers in French, Dutch and German. As I said before, speaking of the Anglophile world, these instructions proliferated in nineteenth century Victorian England and the USA; and by osmosis in Australia, Canada and New Zealand and probably among ex-patriot circles within British colonies.

How great the contrast between croft, gentlewoman's drawing room, and the contemporary interactive multi-cultural knitting community of sites like ravelry.com that I belong to along with millions of other members from all around the world engaging in collectives, craft-activism, knit-alongs and yarn bombing?

I think of how my own mother taught me to knit and crochet in basic stitches on rectangles or circles without benefit of written patterns. Later, she taught me to read patterns which were a direct legacy of those nineteenth century publications, dry and devoid of autobiographical commentary.

Today literacy dominates the online global knitting community: however there are still those who advocate for the more traditional ways. Authors such as Elizabeth Zimmerman,²⁹ and Anna Zilboorg of *Knitting for Anarchists*³⁰ fame encourage a return to more intuitive knitting where the knitter isn't a slave to the knitted chart or printed instructions, but, instead, listens to the rhythm of the stitches, patterns and finger memory. The Shetland Lace knitters were expert at this. I envy this heritage but I would not have welcomed the harsh living conditions that were the reverse side of this skill base.

A critical part of the process of making Shetland lace, as with any lace, was the washing and dressing. The shawl I knitted for Liam's grandmother was lace, but it wasn't fine gauge work. I blocked it by hand when I finished the knitting. It took ages to pin out before I covered it with a damp cloth and gently applied an iron.

The finishing process for the Shetland lace intrigued me. It seemed counter-intuitive that white should come from smoke. As the following lengthy but interesting quote from Sarah Laurenson shows, it was an involved, time consuming process with much room for error.

After washing and rinsing, a fine knitted article was placed in a smoking barrel for whitening and fumigating. In the bottom of the barrel red hot peat was placed and on top an iron pot.

²⁹ Zimmerman, *Knitting Around: Or Knitting without a License*.

³⁰ Anna Zilboorg, *Knitting for Anarchists* (Meadows of Dan: Feet on the Ground Press, 2002).

Across the top of the barrel two clean sticks were positioned, over which the article was hung, and then covered with a clean sheet and a heavier blanket to hold the garment in place and to keep the smoke inside the barrel. Once these steps were carried out rock sulphur (brimstone) was placed into the iron pot and the barrel sealed. The smoke produced by the heating of the rock sulphur whitened the article. After four hours the article was removed and shaken out and the process repeated. This was followed by rinsing in lukewarm water with a little 'blue' and starch. Once the cleaning was completed the article was dressed by carefully stretching and pegging it over a wooden frame or pegged on the grass to dry. A good dressing technique would ensure that the patterns were stretched to show the intricate nature of the fine stitching and ensure symmetry of pattern. Nevertheless, the process of dressing could at times damage the article and as such it would be necessary to make repairs.³¹

How did this process evolve? It's not as though they just decided to assemble all the 'ingredients' on the off chance it would whiten the natural sheep colour. I imagine it was a heuristic process, perhaps already in use elsewhere, that was extended to fine lace shawls and other articles. Not for the first time, I find the silence of old records on common processes such as knitting itself very frustrating.

The word 'silence' always sends me off on tangents. For too many years I used knitting as a silence about traumatic memories. I knitted so I wouldn't remember. What I couldn't say, The Big Silence, I performed through my knitting rather than with speech. Adrienne Martini's narrator in *Sweater Quest: My Year of Knitting Dangerously* could be said to have done the same thing.

She begins by saying that after the birth of her first child in 2002, 'I lost my mind...Two weeks into my maternity leave, I checked myself into my local psych ward because I'd become a danger to myself...what helped turn the tide was knitting.'³² This is all she says about that traumatic period of her life. She is silent about post-partum depression. Perhaps I am over-empathising but I hear trauma

³¹ Sarah Laurenson, 'Shetland Lace' in Laurenson, 122.

³² Martini, ix.

between the lines. I hear what she doesn't say. Her knitting stitches like mine speak of anguish and silence.

Lace knitting demands focused attention. But it didn't arrive on the Shetland scene fully hatched. *Zeitgeist* intrigues me. It is the cultural equivalent of eucalyptus oil spontaneously combusting ahead of a fire storm. Thoughts and ideas pervade the general consciousness. Then, at seemingly random points, a single notion comes to the fore among enough people and a trend is born. The evidence of contemporary historical sources indicates that this was how Shetland lace knitting evolved and spread.

In the early nineteenth century, the plain knitting industry in Shetland had radically declined, undercut by widespread industrialisation in Britain. At the same time the crops and fishing gave poor harvests. The thin line between self-sufficiency and poverty was breached. For many, fine knitting—a niche that escaped industrialisation's ambit—was the only thing between them and charity or destitution. This was true of both crofters and town dwellers, and in particular, of households where only women lived. Thousands immigrated down South to the overcrowded industrial towns, or took passage overseas.

Linda Fryer writes:

And it was during this prolonged period of extreme want and lack of alternative employment for knitters that Shetland lace emerged. This emergence was due to benevolently minded individuals who sought to help knitters fill the economic vacuum left by the stagnation in the stocking trade, by encouraging them to adapt their skills to produce this highly fashionable open work.³³

The earliest Shetland lace piece held in the Shetland Museum and Archives was reputedly worn by John Bruce of Sumburgh at his Christening on 4th June 1837. It is a beautiful three cornered shawl, a confection of fine white wool and open work stitches. Hard to believe the white was achieved in a barrel of brimstone.

³³ Fryer, 68.

In this same year, Arthur Anderson gifted the newly crowned Queen Victoria of England with a pair of fine stockings. It isn't known whether these were lace or not. She responded by ordering a dozen stockings at her cost.³⁴ This was the first of many instances of events such as royal patronage and exhibitions that created a demand for and marketed fine Shetland lace knitting. The finest knitting came from Unst and Lerwick—the transfer of skills between these locations happened as knitters moved back and forth.

Like much knitting history, the facts of how Shetland knitting evolved are often hidden in strange forms: plausible stories, even myth-like poems. My favourite version, the most far-fetched, is 'The First Shetland Shawl' dated Lerwick, August 1868 signed R.S.³⁵ It tells the tale of how the first Shetland lace shawl was knitted and found by a Shetlander.

...
See her sit wild cliffs between,
Image of an Ocean Queen,—
Brow of pearl and locks of green,
Radiant in the morning sheen.
See her take her finest ball
Spun in deep-sea *Coral-Hall*.
And with pearly fingers small
Knitting the *First Shetland Shawl*.

...
Swiftly now, and swifter still,
In the richest patterns fill—
With the "Wave", the "Pearl" and "Shell",
Weave the "Diamond," "Branch" and "Bell".³⁶

The mermaid stood on a rock to show her new garment and Sea Nymph snatched the shawl. The mermaid blew her '*Enchantress' Shell*' and paralysed the fleeing nymph from the sky: the shawl fell to the heather where it was picked up by a *Thulean*³⁷ maid.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., 74.

³⁵ Ibid., 69.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Thule was a name given to a land north of Britain and Scotia (Scotland) by the ancient Greek geographer Pytheas.

³⁸ Fryer, 69.

Other stories were prosaic by comparison. How could an undocumented story of Mrs Scanlan's lace (bobbin or needle) from a Grand Tour and the Hunter family of Unst's purported copying of it in knitting³⁹ compete with the magical fingers of a mermaid?

Fryer proposes that a christening cap dated 1833 still extant marked the probable start of the development of lace knitting in the Shetland Isles.⁴⁰ It was a complicated story told by one Dr Robert Cowie in *Shetland*, first published 1871. It involved a Shetland family called Ogilvy who have been continuous owners of the cap since it was gifted to them by the daughter of a visiting MP.⁴¹ It was admired and copied locally by a lady who subsequently knitted other items in a similar style. One of these items, a shawl came to the attention of a visiting Oxford merchant, Edward Standen, who suggested to his landlady that she get others knitting them thus "giving a fresh impetus to the fine knitting of Shetland."⁴²

In a small book by Jessie Saxby called *Shetland Knitting*, her mother, Mrs Eliza Edmondston, is credited for "being influential in encouraging and instructing knitters in fine lace work"... for her work in publicising the plight of Shetland knitters, and for making the public aware of the beautiful knitted products of these islands.⁴³

Mrs Eliza Edmondston was the author of *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* (1856) and *The Poor Knitters of Shetland* (1861). In *Sketches*, (as Mrs Eliza MacBrair) she writes:

...the open work knitting now so attractive to the poor artists, as to the public, is an invention for which the Shetland females themselves deserve all credit. From the simplest beginnings, led on and encouraged by some ladies as a pastime, it has progressed from one thing to another, till it has attained its present celebrity, without the aid either of

³⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 69-70.

⁴¹ At the time of her writing, Fryer said it was in South Africa as the possession of an Ogilvy heir.

⁴² Fryer, 70.

⁴³ Ibid., 71.

pattern book, or of other instruction than the diligence and taste of the natives themselves.⁴⁴

From the time of the gift of stockings to Queen Victoria, the titled, the rich, the famous and the burgeoning middle classes adopted and set a fashion for fine knitted articles. The philanthropic temper of Victorian Society spasmodically championed support for destitute Shetland Islanders and for the knitters oppressed by the Truck System. Later in the century, The Arts and Crafts Movement focussed attention on fine handcraft and the new steamers (ships) made the Islands and its products more accessible.

Throughout its history, Shetland lace has risen and fallen in popularity. Between the wars, the dainty was overtaken by Fair Isle, which was very practical for sports and leisure. The newly liberated female no longer wore outfits which needed the accommodation of shawls over bulk. Shetland lace has never died out completely. Today, older knitters and those they mentor, publications about Shetland lace, events such as 'Wool Week' and the Internet keep the traditions alive and 'clicking'.

Upstairs in the library, I have a large Chinese wedding basket. It is about the size of a two-drawer filing cabinet. Imagine three boxes atop one another with fine woven mesh over dark brown lacquered wood. Attached to the bottom basket is a wooden 'handle', a rectangular flat strap that is tall enough to surround all three. A brass decoration sits on the apex.

Inside are all of my textile treasures and knitting and sewing accessories. There is a lace *mantilla*, heavy clotted cream in colour. It was given to me by Meredith, a woman I befriended during my time in Texas. Her only son Josh had been killed in a motorbike accident and she treated me as a surrogate child. The *mantilla* carries the hint of her perfume and reminds me of knitting with her as she struggled to push through her grief. Often we didn't speak. We sat in

⁴⁴ Ibid.

companionship and channelled our troubles, her grief, my trauma,
through our needles, yarn and stitches.



Fair Isle

Mosquito is a fitting description of the plane that was wrapped around us. It wasn't about the noise of the motor: not high pitched enough, more a burr. The issue was the size of the plane and the vastness of the North Sea below. I hadn't expected to fly so close to the swell of the waves nor see the floats of fish farms so clearly.

Forty kilometres after take-off from Mainland, the plane circumnavigated Fair Isle in the descent to land. 'I'd like a penny'—one of many expressions handed down to me from my mother—for everyone who has used the terms 'remote' and 'isolated' as a first descriptor of Fair Isle and its way of life. It was barely five kilometres long and three kilometres wide, with 70 or so inhabitants. The island was owned by the Scottish National Trust. It bought it in 1954.

The coastline was not golden beaches. It was dotted with the eroded stacks called *skerries*. Cliffs stood proud on the western edge; jagged rocks and inlets were pounded by white breaking waves around almost the entire perimeter where land and sea

collided. I shuddered to think of what it had meant to be shipwrecked in fog and bone-penetrating cold.

The land mass gleamed green and brown, mainly treeless, bathed in benign sunlight. Grey and white houses, a few people and cars, sheep, and a light-house at both the North and South extremities were clearly visible. Mixed impressions spiked when I saw the red crash truck that sat to one side of the runway as we landed.

Tommy, my B&B host, was not at the airport. A friend of his collected me from the tiny hut masquerading as an airport terminal. Casual community spirit was to be my abiding impression of Fair Isle. I'm sure there was discord too but I never saw any.

At Auld Haa House, I met Liz, and her and Tommy's nine year-old son, Henry. Unpacked, over coffee, I heard the story of how an American family came to be tenants of The National Trust. Liz—a news and documentary camera-person—was stuck in a traffic commute on her way home from work in Saratoga, New York, when she heard on the radio that The National Trust wanted applications for a tenancy on Fair Isle. They were one family among hundreds who applied. I imagine they had to explain how they would pay the rent and support themselves, a task facing all tenants. The answer seemed timeless.

On Fair Isle, the tenants lived much as their forebears had done by multi-tasking. Tommy was an artist and avid bird watcher. Liz had a daily round of home visits to the sick or elderly. Together they ran the B&B. Henry was a lively, intelligent boy who was a walking advertisement for a healthy, happy child in close contact with nature and the freedom to roam.

Tommy, Liz and Henry were short listed for the tenancy and were among a few families flown to the Island for personal interviews. They didn't explain why they were successful, but all three were personable and dynamic. They arrived in Shetland to

begin their new life in November, 2006, amidst much press interest. On his blog,⁴⁵ Tommy tells how they couldn't get passage to Fair Isle initially, because the media had booked out the plane seats. One laughs, but it was ironic. There was talk of a chartered flight, and then the BBC team got called away on another story and Liz, Tommy and Henry were a 25 minute flight away from re-uniting with people they'd bonded with on the island during the interview process.

I wanted to explore. Henry offered to take me down to his favourite little cove. I walked; he bounced along, in the perpetual motion mode usually only seen in the young. I watched each footfall. He was as sure-footed as a mountain goat, while heart-warmingly keen to show me easier ways, as we climbed over a barbed-wire fence, and made the steep descent to a little beach of emu egg sized smooth stones surrounded by high rocks. An intriguing note was a design in stone on the sand. It was a symbol of curving lines, mosaic like in its arrangement of contrasting stones abraded smooth by millennia of sand and tide. I moved my head at different angles trying to decode the secret.

Henry must have realised I was puzzled. 'A German tourist does them but I don't know what they're supposed to be,' he told me. We climbed back up and went in search of lunch.

I was famished in the aftermath of an early start, much excitement, and the bracing air. Even so, lunch almost seemed an imposition as I was bursting with enthusiasm for the knitting treats ahead of me.

Fair Isle knitting shared techniques in common with colour stranded knitting found in the coastal areas of The Faroes, Iceland, Scandinavia, the Baltic Sea countries, England and Scotland. It was a distinct regional variety that, in its traditional form, followed fundamental principles in its colours and placement of patterns.

There is no possibility of confusing the iconic *Setesdal* from Norway with Fair Isle knitting. Having said this, it is also true that

⁴⁵ <http://fair-isle.blogspot.com.au> 27 November 2010 accessed 4/11/2014

there was interaction between the regions, given Shetland's key location as a trading centre on a well-used trade route, the only alternative at the time to the often troubled English Channel.

Romanticism drove widespread changes in social, cultural and political attitudes for England at the beginning of the early nineteenth century. Fair Isle knitting profited from Romanticism's construction of 'Scottishness', and impact on Nationalism. It was popular to endorse and patronise products from the naïve, rural 'other'.

At this time, Edward Charlton, a young medical student who travelled from Leith to Lerwick in 1832, writes the first mention of Fair Isle knitting: '...the long fair hair of the Shetlanders [fishermen] escaping in curls down upon their shoulders from beneath their large pendant caps of variegated worsted.'⁴⁶ Obviously the Islanders themselves knew about the colour stranded knitting, but it didn't make it into the historical record until then.

After this first mention, personal written accounts and published advertisements followed over the next four decades leading Sarah Laurensen to conclude:

These descriptions mark the moment when 'Fair Isle' became a brand in its own right...Words like 'curious' and 'peculiar' represented the goods in a way that roused the interest of potential customers. Since this time, histories of Fair Isle knitwear have, to a large extent, been shaped by marketing stories which do not necessarily fit with the ideas and identities of people in Fair Isle and throughout Shetland. However, these stories have driven the commercial success of the style. Without them, there would be no Fair Isle knitwear.⁴⁷

The role of 200 Spanish sailors shipwrecked from *El Gran Grifon*, blown north from the doomed Spanish Armada by a fierce storm, was one such story which permeated nineteenth century accounts of Fair Isle knitting history into the twentieth century. In *Alice Starmore's Book of Fair Isle Knitting*, she cites lack of evidence for those claims

⁴⁶ Laurensen, 102.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

that the Spanish taught the Islanders ‘painted-like’ knitting.⁴⁸ It was a story in the best Romantic tradition, good advertising copy, just not true.

Richard Rutt in *A History of Hand Knitting* makes the point that, as late as 1885, it was said of Fair Isle goods that only gloves, caps, stockings and vests were described as multi-coloured products, and interestingly jumpers are not clearly mentioned.⁴⁹

It was not until the 1920s that Fair Isle jumpers made an appearance as social wear for the well dressed as opposed to something likely found on a fisherman’s back. Again, I wonder about the influence of regional varieties of textured and stranded knitting which evolved in The Faroes, Iceland, Scandinavia and the Baltic countries. In these places, the tradition of knitted jumpers in the folk/workaday dress of rural and fishing populations predated the uptake of the Fair Isle variety of stranded knitting for jumpers/pullovers.

Demand for the new, trendy darling of the fashion conscious outstripped supply and the Shetlander knitters were hard pressed to fill the orders. The runaway popularity of Fair Isle knitting in the 1920s was attributed to the fashionable Prince Edward, Duke of Windsor (later King Edward VIII), who wore a Fair Isle pullover while golfing. Subsequent photographs were widely circulated. Then there is the photograph in the *Illustrated London News* (1925) of him wearing another allover in the painting ‘Royal Friends’—with his favourite dog—by John St. Helier Lander.⁵⁰

When I think of the 1920s handed down to me as a teenager, I have no recollection of seeing historical images of Fair Isle knitting. I think instead of illustrations I grew up with in a battered copy of *The Girl’s Own Annual* I used to read whenever I was sick.

⁴⁸ Eliza Edmonston quoted in, Alice Starmore, *Alice Starmore’s Book of Fair Isle Knitting*, Dover ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2009), 9.

⁴⁹ Rutt, 180.

⁵⁰ Starmore, 28.

Mum had few possessions from the first twenty years of her life in Melbourne. I used to wonder if she was so possessive because they moved house often and she was not allowed sole ownership of anything. She was always made to share her clothes with bigger framed or more rounded sisters who returned them stretched out of shape, with seams threatening to burst—she once joked she was Popeye’s Olive Oil.

Before she was finished with her ‘things’, she had to hand them down to younger siblings who, then, treated them roughly so they ended up rubbish. I know the feeling of forced separation from personal treasures. Dad was the dominant personality in our childhood home. He coerced me into giving a precious doll, hand-dressed by Mum for my birthday, to The Junior Red Cross. He also did lovely things like refurbish a second-hand, yellow, two-wheeler bike for my birthday. He did it over a period of weeks in a cold shed after each hard day’s work, but neither Mum, nor I, ever forgave him the seemingly minor transgression of parting me from my beloved doll.

A small group of books were among the things Mum had held back from her sisters. They were mainly school girl stories and lived in the top cupboard in the tiny hallway outside my room. *The Girl’s Own Annual*—Liam has since bought me several fine editions—was where I first read of the disappearance of Princess Anastasia of Russia, and began my fascination with the bibliographies of remarkable or intriguing women. Boudicca, Mary Queen of Scots, Flora MacDonald, Florence Nightingale, Grace Darling and others were added as my repertoire grew from access to school library books.

There were no Australian women among the selection available to me at the time. Since then, there have been too many recovered or current stories to list.

A favourite inspiration that helped in the dark times of latter years is *Blue Ribbons, Bitter Bread: The Life of Joice Nankivell Loch*. The author, Susanna de Vries shows how Joice Loch, a

Queenslander, became the most decorated woman in Australian history and modelled resilience during adversity. With her husband Sydney, she worked with Quakers in Poland to help thousands of dispossessed facing disease and starvation.

While the flappers were dancing to jazz, Joice Loch helped rebuild the lives of some of the 1.5 million Greeks fleeing Turkish persecution. She settled in Greece, in a tower at the base of Mt Athos (The Holy Mountain), where she worked to help victims of war, famine, and disease. I enjoyed a part in the story where Susanna De Vries tells about the rug-making co-operative Joice established. The weaving engaged village women in a project which provided them with sustenance, and, no doubt, had a self-actualising impact.

During World War II, she saved and escorted a thousand Jewish Poles to Palestine. It strikes me as beyond belief that her story went untold for so long, or that Australian girls had been denied her as a role model until second wave feminism's aims drove recovery projects of women's histories.

Male stories dominated our home and the Australian imagination. Now, when I think of the 1920s, several themes come to mind: Joice Loch's life and refugees through the ages, the diaphanous dresses, short bobs, beads and headbands worn to escape war's traumas in a frantic celebration of life, and now Fair Isle pullovers from the Shetland Museum and Archives collection supported by the books I have collected on Fair Isle knitting.

I do remember the craze which began in the 1950s and continued into the '60s. My pullover was mid-blue with the iconic circular Fair Isle patterned yoke in motifs with darker blue, yellow and pinks against a white background. I doubt it came from Shetland. I wish I still had it, so I could check the label, but that would not necessarily be definitive. There was much design poaching, long before the contemporary fashion cycle which is measured in hours from *haute couture* showings to cheap knock-offs.

I'd expected my Sunday on Fair Isle to be slow and sleepy. When I'd joined Tommy by his bird feeder, I thought he would be

focused on his bird-watching; however, a passenger liner was anchored offshore from South Haven. I watched, in fascination, a performance which had been enacted since the first foreign ships visited Fair Isle and bartered food, whisky, and resources scarce to the Islanders in exchange for fish and woollen goods.

The ship's tenders carried passengers ashore. They were a rash on the surface skin of the island.

Even as I thought this I was aware of my own intrusion, a summer flit, so that the Islanders could survive the winter when storms prevented ferry or plane from landing: for days sometimes, even weeks in a bad year.

'Do you want to go up to the Community Hall?' Tommy seemed excited about potential sales. 'That's where the most people will be. I'm driving up in a minute. I've already set up my table.' Tommy sold paintings, sculptures and hats based on puffins, orcs and other wildlife.

I hopped into the car and we drove along the one main road that traversed Fair Isle from North to South, with arterial offshoots. The houses were scattered about the southern end of the island where the soil was more arable. The Bird Observatory—key to eco-tourism, a main strand of the island's economy, North Harbour where the ferry Good Shepherd IV docked, and sheep—lots of sheep—dominated the bare northern sweep of land. It was fitting that a particular lump was called Sheep's Rock. I couldn't see a likeness myself. Its nomenclature was just another of life's little mysteries.

Inside the Community Hall, I found Henry just inside the door at the School's table. I bought a white tea-towel printed with students' black drawings of birds. It touched me the way each drawing was signed by the artist. Henry's was sophisticated and witness to the many hours he and Tommy spent together watching, recording, photographing the plethora of migrating birds which passed through Fair Isle.

The island was a wilderness haven for all the imprint of human occupation. I'm surprised no-one was selling bottled Fair Isle air. It was so pure and invigorating as it passed from nostrils to lungs.

The commercial dance of Islanders and passengers stepped before my eyes as I took afternoon tea. It would be fascinating to see a global map and mark where the home-produce, Tommy's fabric hats, the knitters' headbands and hats went to rest.

As always memory lets me down. It seems important to know if there were mittens. It is so frustrating. If only memory was an omniscient recording. I want to capture all the senses in a form I can take out and re-experience. Instead, we are confronted with the past filtered through the present.

Jenefer Robinson says in *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* that emotion is driven by what is important to me and mine.⁵¹ By extension, our sensitivities select what matters and further apply weightings to memories. When we visit memory we edit anew: we reform what was a self-interested, chemical reaction in the first place. Even so, it doesn't tell me if there were mittens.

American accents dominated with a couple of Australians and Canadians, but I heard other tongues: Spanish, French, Italian, and indecipherable Slavic.

Fair Isle patterns by Mati Ventrillon had been on one of the banners flown for the Queen's Golden Jubilee. I introduced myself to her and we arranged to meet up at her house later.

I bought a black on white head-band; the name of the artisan escapes me. It was sad that The Bird Observatory fleece puffins were made in China. I still bought one in purse form for Anita to support their work.

'It's about cost,' the ranger's wife explained. A child peered shyly from behind her back, a baby in a carry-basket at her side.

⁵¹ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press), 14.

Economics is a hard fact of life when you are one of seventy-plus people surviving on a remote rural island.

When I met up with Mati later, I learned that she and her family came to live on Fair Isle about the same time as Liz, Tommy and Henry. Of French and Venezuelan ancestry, she could hardly find a greater contrast than between the Island and her native Venezuela if she tried. Mati, David (an artist) and their two children were among the few shortlisted families who flew to Fair Isle for final interviews for Auld Haa House in 2007. When offered the alternate tenancy of South Lighthouse, they made the move, and later again to Nedder Taft. The names of the houses intrigue me. Are they original or a trend since Fair Isle and its fixtures were bought by the Scottish National Trust in 1954?

Mati and I talked in her craft area, a hand knitting frame beside us with a few finished garments, and a mood board of worked pattern swatches and designs on view. It was a cosy scene, intimate, as opposed to her public exposure via her photo and Fair Isle jumper on a huge 'Craft is GREAT Britain' banner flown in Oxford Street, London when she was selected for the GREAT Campaign during the Queen's Golden Jubilee Celebrations in June, 2012.

Her flashing eyes, enthusiastic body language and words compelled attention. She was passionate about Fair Isle knitting and protection of its branding; her long term plans centred on expanding local production. When The Fair Isle Crafts Co-operative, which had lifted the profile and quality of the island's handmade goods, ceased operations in 2011 after thirty years, she pushed on. Her main interests were in original, bespoke pieces. At the hall, her display had shown Fair Isle jumpers, dark on light and the reverse, a gentle blue comes to mind, and there were watch caps like the white on black I had just bought from her.

'I learnt about the knitting from the knitters on Fair Isle. Now I design my own garments using inspiration from Shetland Museum and Archive pieces and traditional Fair Isle patterns,' she said as she showed me a gorgeous, highly original piece. I can't describe it,

tempted as I am, because it is a prototype and she isn't ready to go public with it yet. The hand knitting machine was the key as it had been in previous eras when hand knitting couldn't keep pace with demand.

In the 1960s, Twiggy and Linda McCartney were spotted and photographed wearing circular yoke-style Fair Isle's jumpers. The demands of the style's popularity saw the bodies of the garments knitted by machine while the yokes were hand knitted. Hazel Tindall tells what this meant for the knitters.

We were supplied with bodies of garments—cardigans or jumpers—and could knit the yoke in any pattern and colours we chose...This was an invaluable learning experience as I learned to blend colours, and learned whether some patterns look better on dark or light backgrounds...When I got bored with traditional patterns I started to graph my own, many of which I still use today. Eventually in the early 1970s buyers started dictating which patterns to knit and colours to knit in each row—no scope for creativity then.⁵²

Talk of creativity and Mati's knitting machine reminded me of my own past aspirations. I had just had two original Fair Isle inspired pieces in an exhibition and been featured in a newspaper article as an emerging craftsperson, when that first idiot ran into the back of my car. Eleven months later I was still recovering from that first car crash—I refuse to call them accidents—when I was rear-ended again

'It's not so bad,' said the old man who had hit me. I had my head on my arms on the steering wheel. I sobbed as though there were no tomorrow.

'If you only knew,' I told him. Only that day the doctor had told me to sell my knitting machines.

He'd said, 'Your back can't take the sideways sweep. Get rid of them.'

When I first went back to hand knitting, it felt so slow. Only a dozen rows knitted in the same time it would take to machine half an

⁵² Hazel Tindall, "Knitting Fair Isle," in *Shetland Textiles 800bc to the Present*, ed. Sarah Laursen (Garthspool, Lerwick: Shetland Heritage Publications, 2013), 114-15.

adult garment. Gradually, I regained pleasure in the soothing rhythm of the slower hand knitting process. I suppressed dreams of life as a textile artisan, I couldn't produce enough by hand and the market for expensive, limited editions had collapsed. I went back to work with not-for-profit organisations.

Despite the ever present back pain, nearly thirty years later my knitting machines still sit upstairs: the electronic for fine and medium, and the most basic hand machine with robust needles for chunky weight. I live in hope of a miracle.

Mati's machines and vision made me twitchy, made me relive my textile glory days. Perhaps when my doctorate is finished I could re-engage with some form of textile based cottage industry. Just a little one: maybe. I walked away from Mati's with thoughts of start-up costs and designs colouring my thoughts.

My feet dragged. The plane was due soon and I didn't want to leave Fair Isle. I could imagine living out my days there quite easily. My small rucksack was packed. It really was a tiny plane—time to go:

'Bye Henry, Bye Liz.' I couldn't bear the thought that I would never see them again. Amid the emotion, my senses were telling me something was wrong. The airport was empty, no crash cart in sight. The wind was rising.

'This doesn't feel right,' we agreed. Then Liz's phone rang. She nodded and turned to me.

'The plane is cancelled. The wind and storm coming are too big a risk.'

I felt both let down and relieved. Anticlimaxes do that. I'd had a reprieve. How fitting that Fair Isle was telling me the story of what it was like to live at the mercy of the weather. I thought of my tidy Excel schedule and wondered if I would see more of Mainland as planned before I had to return to Edinburgh.

We made a detour on the way back. Tommy had spotted the car of the ranger from The Bird Observatory. The ranger was opening the door to a small hut.

‘I’m just about to log three birds from the traps,’ he explained. One by one he took the birds from bags. He blew apart their fine belly down with gentle breath to note condition, and then weighed and measured them. Two had already been banded with detail of previous locations. One, a rock pipit, was a new catch. The final step was to release the birds. The rock pipit flew straight to a low dry rock wall. I blinked and it was invisible, perfectly camouflaged, streaked grey on grey.

Rain had blown in while we were in the hut.

‘How long will it last?’

‘Could be days,’ was Tommy’s laconic answer. I had a day tour booked for the next day from Lerwick. Cross that off the list. But, I hadn’t come so far to miss out on St Ninian’s Tombola, Jarlshof, and Scatness: I’d worry later.

At Auld Haa House, Liz took the change of plans in her stride. She proposed fish for dinner that night. The general store and post office reminded me of shopping experiences during my childhood and early teens. Where I grew up, what is now just part of Adelaide’s urban sprawl, used to be the fringes with infrequent buses. Supermarkets hadn’t yet come to town.

We had a corner store with loose produce sold in paper bags. As I said before, Mr Waldron, the draper, called in once a quarter with everything in his large van from ribbons to shoes. The milkie filled our tin billy from a metal milk churn and the Tip Top van brought our bread.

‘One tank loaf please,’ one of us said every week day. Each work and school morning, Dad turned it into slices on a hand turned rotary bread cutter. Mum spread endless sandwiches, silent, and sullen. She couldn’t wait to see the back of us all. Once, I’d said that I’d liked the cheese and mustard pickles. She gave me the cheese and pickle for the next five years of high school. I used to eat the cheese and bin the rest. I was always ravenous when I got home.

‘Have a carrot or parsnip,’ she said. Tea was always at 5.30.

‘Will you do the first half or the sweets?’ she’d say, the depression on her bed still warm from where she had been reading, or her baby Fiat’s engine still warm after the return trip from her sister’s place. The meat was often frozen. I’d choose to do the spuds, and then the golden syrup puffs, or roly-poly, or bread and butter pudding. She would fight the mince into a state, semi-fit for cooking, with hot water and a knife.

At the shop Henry met a friend. We bought fish, bread and cheese. Liz already had fruit. The storm had gathered weight, heavy cloud cover, sheets of rain. Back at Auld Haa House, in the room I thought I’d left forever, I pulled the yarn, pattern and needles for Olly’s Allover from my bag.

I hadn’t knitted since I left home. There never seemed to be the time. The problem for Australians abroad in Europe was thirty hour plane trips and absurd distances from home. People felt an overwhelming impulse to pack in as much into each day as possible.

A crowded schedule was challenge for anyone, certainly, not an ideal situation for someone with chronic medical and mobility issues. Frequent rests, naps even, were essential. What would it be like to travel without heed to body, time or money? The Beatles sang, ‘Money can’t buy you love’. Just once I’d like to find out for myself.

‘Jeeves, bring around the car. I’ll phone for collection after I’ve finished.’

There was no Jeeves, but nature had come to my rescue. I had a bonus day on Fair Isle. I was off the grid. The stage was set. Wind and rain beat at the squared window glass and heightened my sense of refuge inside. I was warm and cosy and knitting. Could it get any better? Yesterday, the island had been a sunny lass, golden, blue and green, sparkly. Now, she was a stormy lady, painted in grey and wet.

The yarn moved over my fingers, mid blue stitches in long tail cast on. The waist band was a pleasing combination of raised tree of life motifs atop rib. Slowly the rows grew through my stitches. I paused from time to time and captured my thoughts through words in

my visual diary. I actually pinched my arm to test if it was real: me on Fair Isle, knitting in a storm. My goal a year ago had been a visit to the island. The shape and texture of that visit had been unknown.

I was a glutton at a feast. I wanted it all. I set aside the knitting and dressed in wet weather gear. My marron and ochre cabled scarf and hat knitted a few months ago at home, my storm-proof, drawstring-hooded, outer coat, and my purple lace-up boots transformed me into a self-conscious Yeti. Outside, straight from the refuge of a heated room, I was glad of the protective layers. The outfit ceased to be costume and became a sensible barrier between me and Fair Isle having a hissy fit.

The wind buffeted me as I walked. The waves rose in a frenzy of plumes against the rocks surrounding Henry's little cove. The German Tourist's artwork had been obliterated, no obstacle to the manic sea.

My walk struck me as perverse. I could be back in my room with my knitting, dry and warm. In that moment I understood the Romantic fascination with the Sublime's transcendence over mere Beauty. A riverbank, or the human form, is beautiful. A brooding crag under a black sky punctuated by fearsome rain and wind, set in a deserted landscape, reaches to the heavens and is sublime in its conjuring of awe.

Then I came down from lofty thought to earth. There was a Shetland sheepdog, and a man on a tractor. What on earth was he doing in the rain? He showed no sign of discomfort and raised his hand, a laconic gesture, as he passed by me. I thought of hardy crofters and fishermen, of floundered sheep in rain drenched gullies, and of shipwrecks at sea, and desperate attempts to save crew.

My back to the rain like a horse or cow in a field, I saw how far I had come from Auld Haa House. I watched a lone bird beat against the wind. It surrendered and landed on the roof of South Lighthouse. Dags of old wool were too sodden to fly, captured instead on the tips of grass spikes bent to ground beneath the wind.

I stumbled across a walled cemetery. Its vertical grey, mossed and lichened stone provided respite from the endless wind. I set aside thoughts of coffee, of warmth, and stepped around headstones, robbed of identification by centuries of storm blasting. A few of the epitaphs were legible if I wiped rain from my glasses.

Then, enough: mission accomplished. With Fair Isle in a storm lodged in memory, it was back to base. Arctic explorers must have been insane, and Sir Edmund Hilary too. What is it that compels sentient animals to seek extreme danger with all its attendant discomforts? Dumb animals wait in dens.

I could have been home with my family and my cat instead of trudging around a distant, treeless, tiny island in the middle of the bloody North Sea in a cheek numbing storm in pursuit of fodder for a creative doctorate. Not even a remarkable storm, I was later told, 'just a little un'. For that matter, why spend the better part of eight years chasing a part-time PhD when I could be knitting and reading with no pressure.

Coffee and knitting won. I retraced my footsteps in half the time with a back wind making my coat a sail, to the back door. Inside, I shed my Yeti garb, and hung my sodden hat and scarf to dry. My fingers were stiff and frozen; I didn't expect to need gloves. They were back on Mainland in my big case. The scent of fresh baking drew me to Liz, busy in the kitchen.

'Do you mind?' I said, pointing to the private sign. She smiled, waved me in. For just a while, I promised myself, and then it's back to my yarn and needles—to Olly's Allover and that tree of life waistband.

There was no last minute reprieve the following morning. The only lasting evidence of my storm was a hint of moisture in the air and the occasional puddle. Henry and I walked down to say goodbye to the little cove, freshly scoured by the storm.

My final act at Auld Haa House was the purchase of one of Tommy's sculptures. It wasn't merely a response to previous

conversations in which Tommy talked of the need of the Islanders to make a living.

‘So many people want something from the Islanders. There are only seventy-three of them and there are hundreds who visit. They come for the bird watching, the history, and for the knitting. The questions take up time. People need to recognise that and put something back by buying the Island work from us,’ he said as he stacked a pile of his hats.

I wondered if he was conscious that sometimes in his speech he referred to the Islanders as ‘us’ and sometimes ‘them’. He was an incomer and I was curious if he spoke for himself or expressed a more general island sentiment.

There was a sculpture he’d made of a rock pipit which had attracted my eye. It was a simple thing. A yellow, weathered, sea float, from a net, formed the base. The shape of a bird was hinted through: wire outline, only a profile view. However, it was also the ranger gently blowing belly down in the hut, it was the bird in the storm, and it was the people of Fair Isle. I would leave with a much more complex view of it than when I arrived in search of its knitting tradition.

Today, it is impossible to imagine knitting without Fair Isle’s influence. Since the mid-late twentieth century into the twenty-first, increased tourism, translations from regional authors, and interest by foreigners brought the knitting traditions of Iceland, the Baltic countries and Scandinavia to the notice of the global knitting community. But, it was Fair Isle—that runaway child from a tiny dot of land halfway between Shetland and Orkney—which intrigued and inspired legions of knitters around the world to pick up knitting needles and coloured yarn.

Arguments abound about who owns the brand ‘Fair Isle’ and whether the rest of us should use lower-case ‘fair isle’ or the long-winded ‘colour stranded work’ out of respect for that ownership. Is the place of origin the issue, or should only people of original Fair Isle

descent make the claim? Until I visited Fair Isle and spoke with Mati Ventrillon, I hadn't realised there was an issue.

I took for granted Fair Isle as part of my own heritage because it had been a part of my life for as long as I could remember. My mother and her friends knitted Fair Isle, and so did I. I suspect I don't understand all the nuances and dimensions of the issue, of Fair Isle knitting as a style rather than as a unique inheritance or commodity.

It feels as though it has been 'Fair Isle' to knitters globally for so long that it is impossible to turn back the clock. At the same time, I understand why Mati Ventrillon believes 'Fair Isle' as a label should not be tainted by shoddy knock-offs. It is no different than 'Champagne' to the French or 'dot-painting' to Indigenous Australians.

Co-option of another's culture incites arguments about taboos and definitions in the current era. Who should police the question of traditional ownership: individual conscience or legal trademarks?

I shall just have to reserve judgement, and decide whether to standardise my usage of 'Fair Isle', or 'fair isle', or 'colour stranded work'. Whatever I decide, I am conscious of faces peering over my shoulder as my fingers engage in the well-worn Fair Isle knitting dance.



'Moose Wifey'

By the time my plane, back from Fair Isle, landed at Tingwall, I had resolved to find a way to see Jarlshof and Old Scatness. In flight, I had been distracted by the aerial view of a recent mudslide that had left a huge scar in the peat bank on a hill. Two houses were perilously close to where the slide ended. Drama over, I had gone back to gnawing about the missed tour. I couldn't let it be.

Where to begin? How to fit what should be months into the few days I had left on Shetland? It was already impossible to stay for all the knitting treats on offer during Wool Week, and I was far from reconciled to missing the tour with Sarah McBurnie of Shetland's most important archaeological sites at Jarlshof and Old Scatness. The tour was happening as I flew overhead, pipped by a couple of hours.

The extra forced day on Fair Isle had been a valued unexpected bonus, but I wanted the forfeited tour, especially as I had no real expectation of ever returning. The whole Shetland experience

had been thanks to Liam saying I shouldn't go all the way to Ireland and miss seeing Scotland. I decided to spend the day sightseeing in Lerwick. Perhaps the Tourist Office could suggest a remedy.

As I walked into the centre of town from the hostel, where I'd reclaimed my stored bags and resettled into my sole use room, I tried to picture Lerwick as first rude shacks, and then as a thriving Victorian port before the advent of motor cars. A group of teenage girls giggled behind their hands, as I stood fixed to one spot gawping into space. They broke the spell and the forming pictures dissipated. I was left with a street of tall narrow Victorian houses sloping steeply down to Commercial road where shops faced a road with bollards marking the seafront.

Down an alley, there was a shop called Spider's Web. A diminutive figure titled a 'Moose Wifey' designed and knitted by Mary Kay caught my eye. The mouse—yes it is a mouse not a moose—knitted in fine wool, was about fifteen centimetres tall. A knitted lace Shetland shawl sat over her head and shoulders. Beneath, she wore a long fabric skirt and striped apron. She was so charming, and, despite having dismissed practical items of equal price because of my budget, I couldn't walk away. She still delights me, looking down from her perch, as I knit.

At the tourist office I checked out buses to Jarlshof and Old Scatness for my departure day. The airport was near to them but it was a mini logistic nightmare with luggage and walking. I wasn't prepared to risk the rest of my itinerary by trying to drive. I put it all in the 'how desperate are you?' box and went into Anderson's to look at knitwear.

Several shops later, I had added a brooch of a Shetland pony in a light-coloured wood and earrings with wrapped black, purple and pink cotton imitating the vanes of a peacock feather to my jewellery collection, which had grown considerably since my initial purchases at the V&A Museum, London. I would have to unveil them all to Liam quite slowly.

I stopped for potato and leek soup and crusty bread at an eatery to give my back a rest. But, it wasn't to be placated. I gave in and took a taxi back to the hostel via the The Broch of Clickimin. The town had grown up around this ancient tower which was not as well preserved as the one on Moussa but much more accessible.

I crossed the road while the taxi waited and walked down a path towards the large stone tower. I didn't get there. My body had reached its limit. My back could make it there but not the return steps. I've learnt to listen to these imperatives: otherwise I would be looking at the inside of an ambulance and my travel insurance didn't cover a pre-existing condition. I was disappointed but philosophical.

My damaged back has cost me more important things since that first car accident. As in the theme song for the *Swamp Fox*, a TV series of the American Revolution from my teenage years, it was important to run away, too, so that I could fight another day.

My back had settled overnight and I was ready for Sarah McBurnie when she called for me the next morning. We talked for a while before she switched on the engine. I explained my dilemma about Jarlshof and Old Scatness.

'There's someone I need to call first, but I can think of a couple of possibilities,' she replied.

We drove out of the gateway and she stopped abruptly. A taxi stopped alongside.

'Graham. I was just talking about calling you.' She explained what I wanted from him. By the time we drove to the centre of town to collect nine Japanese women tourists it was agreed that Graham would take me wherever I wanted to go ending at the airport for 100GBP (British Pounds)—double it to get Australian dollars. I thought it good value for something I would never get a second chance at; something that would always niggle.



Mary Queen of Scots

The Palace of Holyroodhouse punctuated the lower end of the Royal Mile in Scotland's capital, Edinburgh. As was often the way when I stood in front of a long awaited treat, the pathway that led me there played out in my mind. It was a delicious pause, a time to savour, before the inevitable happened and I reacted to whether or not the attraction lived up to expectations, up to often unrealistic dreams.

There was always a tug-of-war because I inhabited two vastly different worlds. There was my inner world, the domain of my imagination where the characters were completely accessible and all senses were heightened. It was one where hovering images and dialogues were constructed from memories of stories heard, books read and films seen. It was a world that was an amalgam of remembered emotion, projected nostalgia, and wishful thinking.

I preferred this to the other, outer world: a reality where other tourists usually intruded with coughs, cameras, and comments. An untimely laugh and the overlay of my inner world on the outer one

collapsed and left me with the feeling that I had been cheated. I was disappointed often.

I visited Holyroodhouse three times before I was satisfied. I envied Queen Elizabeth II her Scottish Residence in one regard only: her right to private viewings.

My fascination with the Palace began with the story of Mary Queen of Scots and was revived in recent years when as the site of Prince Charlie's court in Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series. It didn't matter that I no longer thought of him, a womanising sot, as bonny. The Palace by association was imbued with the romance and pageantry of the past. I know history is often bloody and merciless, but I have a child's wide-eyed attraction to stories and their exotic settings.

Whenever I was sick in bed in my childhood, I would put the high stool with the round red seat from the kitchen on my bedside table, and use its rungs to support 'shelves' made from books. On them I would stack my knitting or crochet and other smaller books. There was, also, a cardboard box full of old greeting cards that I liked to look through and sort when I was not well enough for more demanding pastimes. It always used to sit on the seat of the stool.

There is no accounting for the whims of children. Why does one person capture their imaginations and another one fails to excite? So it was for me. Mary Stewart—Mary, Queen of Scots—offered endless delights, while others caused barely a ripple.

With the advantage of mature hindsight I can speculate that my first meeting with Mary when she was only young caused me to empathize easily with her. A working class girl in Australia could safely day-dream about life as a crowned queen half a globe away; it might as well have been light years. Did she take her status and privileges for granted? Did she ever yearn to be ordinary, invisible like me?

Mary was only six days old when she became Queen of Scotland after the death of the King James V, her father. At the age of six, she was sent with a large retinue of Scots' attendants,

including her four contemporaries known as The Maries, to the much grander French Renaissance Court where she was deferred to as a reigning queen and the future wife of the boy Dauphin, Francis.

I was glad that she had her nurse, governess and young friends to help her get used to life away from her mother, Mary of Guise, in a foreign country, and sad when her friends were sent to a convent and the governess expelled.

As a child I remember being stunned that a girl so young would be engaged, and then married at fifteen, become the Queen of France as well, only to be widowed at seventeen. At the time, I had no reason to appreciate the political intrigues and actual battles that centred on Mary's identity as a queen, female, and Catholic.

I didn't understand the dangers when she claimed to be Queen of France, Scotland and England. I didn't understand that the men surrounding her saw her eligibility as a means to personal power, national pre-eminence, or a threat as rival and heir to her cousin the illegitimate, unmarried, Protestant Queen Elizabeth I of England. I didn't see beyond her privileges and sumptuous clothes.

Retha Warnicke's description of Mary at her French wedding resonates with my memories.

She was clothed in a robe of white satin with a mantel of blue velvet that complimented her hazel eyes, her fair complexion, and her reddish brown hair, which seems to have lightened as she grew older. It hung loose down her back, the usual bridal hairstyle. On her head sat a golden crown, adorned with rubies, diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, and pearls of great value; around her neck hung diamonds and rich gemstones.⁵³

Now, I would value family, health, and happiness over clothes and baubles. I wouldn't swap my current peace of mind for a younger body adorned with jewels. I am glad to be wiser and generally done with the uncertainties and traumatic memories which beset my earlier years.

⁵³ Retha M Warnicke, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 49-50.

Funny the way a train of thought leads to further memories. In my mid-teens I ended up tall like my mother and her sister Merle, and was embarrassed when I had shorter dance partners. I felt like a giraffe towering over them. I took comfort in Mary's six foot frame and tried for regal posture instead of stooping. How much more noticeable was a tall woman in that early modern era? When, I wanted to know, did Mary reach her finished height: did her legs ache like mine, and did her status as a queen make being tall more desirable?

Mary's life once she returned to Scotland was scarily adult. Warnicke writes a succinct potted history.

During her seven years in Scotland from 1561 to 1568, she faced four armed rebellions, two unrelated abduction scares, had an intruder secrete himself in her bedchamber twice, witnessed a murderous assault on her French secretary, lost her husband to foul play, underwent abduction, rape, and a forced marriage that led her to threaten suicide, faced a public attack on her honour in which she was called a whore, was imprisoned at Lochleven, and was compelled to abdicate. In the midst of these adversities, she managed to give birth to a son, who succeeded her. She also suffered from a chronic illness that left her crippled by the time she was 40 years old.⁵⁴

Her problems didn't end there. When she escaped Scotland and appealed to her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I of England, for sanctuary, she was imprisoned while her role in the death of her second husband Darnley was investigated. Her imprisonment lasted nearly nineteen years, and only ended when she was executed for conspiring to assassinate Elizabeth.

Many popular writers and scholarly biographers have worked with these facts, but, much like Goldilocks and the three bears, some were too romantic,⁵⁵ some too critical⁵⁶ and few just right. I have read

⁵⁴ Ibid., viii.

⁵⁵ Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (New York: Delta, 2001). John Guy, *My Heart Is My Own: The Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London and New York: Fourth Estate 2004).

⁵⁶ Jenny Wormald, *Mary, Queen of Scots: Politics, Passion and a Kingdom Lost* (London and New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2001).

many of these and I admire the balanced assessment that Retha Warnicke has managed in her *Mary Queen of Scots*.

She broadens the usual biographical focus beyond the three marriages to take into account, for example, what was revealed as the crippled queen was assisted to her beheading. In a brief conversation that Mary had with Andrew Melville, the master of her large household, she asked that he testify to the world that she died a true woman to her religion and a true woman of Scotland and France.⁵⁷

Although her English succession rights were important to her, she clearly identified herself, in those last critical moments, as a Catholic of Scotland and France. Mary's final thoughts focused on her lineage and faith, not her alleged romantic marriages in Scotland that culminated in her long English imprisonment and ultimately her violent, tragic death.⁵⁸

On my final visit to Mary's apartment in the James V tower in Holyroodhouse Palace, the intimate scale of the rooms appealed to me.

There was the bedchamber with its tall, four-poster bed dressed in floral curtains and valances. I remember them as yellow with coloured embroidery. The bed seemed curiously short for the height of the Queen, but it was an optical illusion. The high coffered ceiling in the bedchamber made the corner supper room seem tiny. The doorway to the private, narrow, stone stairs that the very young Lord Darnley climbed to reach his wife's rooms was adjacent to the supper room.

Beyond the inner rooms was a sizeable antechamber where I imagined Mary sitting with her ladies, needlework to hand. It now functions as a small museum with glass display cases of artefacts of the time. I was most interested in small embroidered panels that carried Mary's own cipher to identify it as the work of her own hands.

⁵⁷ Warnicke.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 154.

A guide pointed out a gruesome spot where Darnley's henchmen had dragged David Rizzio, Mary's French secretary, from the supper room. Mary was six months pregnant with Darnley's son at the time. The assailants, supposedly avenging Darnley's honour, fatally stabbed Rizzio fifty-six times. Some claim still to be able to see the blood stains. It looked like an ordinary wooden floor to me.

This murder marked the end of the first half of Mary's life. Through the years since, Mary's part in Darnley's subsequent murder and her marriage to Bothwell have been repeatedly scrutinised. It was hard to view events of more than four hundred years ago and form an accurate impression of a person's motivations. There was the temptation to ascribe present values and judgements on people who lived under the sway of alternate rules and customs.

Because of my own experience of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, I imagined Mary's life after Rizzio's death as fraught with flash backs, nightmares and fears for her own safety, but she lived in a different age. Expectations were totally different. Sudden death, shorter life spans, and a widespread Christian belief in eternal life after death were commonplace.

During her early years in France, Mary was schooled in the use of court protocol to deflect intrigue, and ciphers to preserve the privacy of written communication. She was taught how to use misinformation to cause confusion about her opinions. These practices were in general use in the courts of Europe.

I wouldn't be the first to ask if anyone really knew who Mary was beneath the protective behaviours. I hid my own big secret for decades from close family, and she was more sophisticated with more resources than I ever had. She was a queen; I was a commoner. Her kingdom was at stake. Was she always self-contained?

I wondered about her relationship with her female attendants. She had learnt embroidery alongside statecraft during her early years in France. What did they talk about as they pursued the gentlewomanly arts with needles and thread through long

afternoons? Did she give in to that close pull of intimacy and share any of her fears, hopes and aspirations?

In *The Needlework of Mary Queen of Scots*, Margaret Swain writes about an inventory of Mary's belongings made during the year before her execution.

Inevitably, given the nearly nineteen years' imprisonment, during which her chief solace was embroidery, Mary is credited with many pieces which she may or may not have worked. The panels bearing her cipher or initials may be accepted as authentic. It is ingenuous to believe that all the pieces attributed to her were worked by her, just as it is unnecessarily sceptical to reject everything that is not signed...Like the bed described by William Drummond, much of the output of these years has disappeared; some may still be preserved, its origin forgotten or hidden. We ought perhaps to be touched that, four hundred years after Mary chose the designs, selected the silks, and stitched the pieces bearing her monogram, we are still able to enjoy the liveliness and the subtlety of her skill.⁵⁹

Once upon a time, my attitude to Mary was that of an awestruck girl. I now see the pathos of her situation. She was separated from her son James the sixth when he was a baby. He was raised Protestant by Scottish power brokers, crowned after her forced abdication and made heir to Elizabeth I—he refused any overtures from his mother. Throughout her long imprisonment, she was constantly petitioning and seeking release. By the time of her death, she was an ailing forty-year-old. Her once glorious wardrobe was dominated by warm, sombre clothes, mainly in black. Her hair was thinned and faded under her wigs.

Inside I still feel about twenty-one-years old. It is always a bit of a shock to realise that the older face in the mirror, the grey hair belongs to me. How did Mary reconcile the glory of her youth with her altered circumstances? For all our differences, Mary and I were two middle-aged women who had suffered their reverses and used hand work with threads as solace during dark days.

⁵⁹ Margaret Swaine, *The Needlework of Mary Queen of Scots* (Marlsborough, Wiltshire: Ruth Bean Publishers, 2013), 94.

However, I had my life still stretching ahead of me. I could still hope to find peace and contentment. Maybe it was enough for Mary to cling to her faith and believe in eternal life after a violent death. Still, was her last conscious thought of her son?



Ashgrove House B&B

Flat on my back, fully clothed, on yet another bed that wasn't my own, I stared at the ceiling, too bone weary to unpack. I had reached the Republic of Ireland. How on earth was I going to find the energy to care or take advantage of my research itinerary? I wished I could go home for a few months and come back later.

The birth of Joel and Speckie's baby, our first grandchild, was imminent and anticipation kept whispering to me that the birth was more important than my being a tourist and going on British designer, Jean Moss's, knitting tour of the Emerald Isle. The pregnancy had been a surprise, and my itinerary was already booked and paid for when the baby's due date was announced.

'Mum, we want you to still go,' Joel had insisted.

I'd let myself be swayed, but harboured doubts, and was having serious second thoughts.

Had I over-reached by trying to visit Scotland as well as Ireland? As things stood, I had filled my stomach with the entrée and

had no room for the main course. My hopes of reviving my life and doctoral studies were invested in this trip, and I felt as though I couldn't cope with yet another set-back.

I had booked into Ashgrove House B&B, County Clare, to rest up before the knitting tour. The full day of transfers between Glasgow, London, and Shannon were expected to be tiring but I'd failed to anticipate the full weight of fog, delayed flights, and long airport concourses.

The soft sunlight shone through the bedroom window, onto the garden that fell away to the road and the green fields opposite. I'd been too tired to pull the curtains, and had settled for undressing in the dark. Forgoing breakfast was a small price to pay for a sleep in. Anyway, I'd brought food with me: I wouldn't starve. I turned over, away from the day light, and went back to sleep.

I was cosy in the smallest of several guest rooms. All but mine had an ensuite. Perhaps, because I shared a bathroom with my very friendly hosts, Sheila and Graham, by the end of a leisurely day, it felt more like a homestay than a B&B as I got to know them.

A creamy, rich, Irish coffee that night with other knitters who had begun to arrive, and a full Irish breakfast of bacon, eggs, sausage, blood pudding with tomato, mushrooms and potato cake all fried in creamy butter had reminded me of the treats I'd planned to enjoy. Perhaps a deep sleep and rest had been beneficial and altered my fears of failure. The owners were friendly and engaging ambassadors for Irish hospitality. All these factors colluded to get me out into the weak sunshine, and on my way to the village of Bunratty, complete with castle and folk park, a couple of kilometres down Lower Rd.

Sheep and horses watched from their iconic, green pastures, or continued grazing behind hedges of blackberries and possibly hawthorn. I was still having trouble distinguishing between hawthorn and rowan. When they were both together it was simple, a bit like trying to identify identical twins. Viewed separately comparison was difficult.

Sheila had already told me the road speeds were nonsense. I soon understood what she had meant. On Lower Road, the speed limit was 80kmph. The road wasn't quite a lane, but still very narrow. There were no footpaths and the vegetation crowded. When a car came hurtling toward me, I stepped back into the blackberries. After it whooshed past I untangled myself and moved on.

There were a lot of cars, some speeding, and I spent more time in the bushes than walking. The camber of the road was pronounced, causing me to walk unevenly. Normally, I loved walking because one saw more than from a vehicle, and had the time to absorb minutiae of the countryside, but the cadence of that walk was discordant.

By the time I reached the village I was limping with pain in the tendons of my right foot, and I still had the return walk ahead of me. I gave the castle and folk-park a necessary miss. My hopes that the problem was temporary were doomed. The pain and limp didn't go away with further rest. They disrupted my irritable back and the stage was set for a less than comfortable time for the rest of my stay in Ireland.



Jean Moss Knitting Tour

On the first day of the knitting tour, after Jean Moss and Philip, her husband, picked a handful of us up from the B&B, I knew that I'd have to nurse my foot to keep up.

At the Cliffs of Moher, our first attraction, I stopped at the nearest vantage point, instead of walking to the tower lookout, and tried to concentrate on the colours of the grass, the texture of the rocks, the bird calls, the sweep of the cliffs and the ferocity of the spuming waves at their base, but, the whip of the wind, the crowds of people and my foot intruded, so I limped back to the view from the restaurant window.

I was disgruntled and thought longingly of home. It was choice time: pack up and head home, or reset my state of mind and settle for what I could manage. I chose the latter. I'd done it before. I knew how to rein in my dreams, work with a disability, and look for satisfaction in alternate ways of viewing the world and its offerings.

The main problem was finding my own pace within an itinerary set by someone else.

Seated on the bus, I could mostly ignore my foot. I knitted, watched the scenery, and thought about Jean's work as a knitting designer. Around me, the other guests knitted sweaters, cardigans, cowls, scarves, and hats in a rainbow of colours, textures and gauges. There were two Canadians, another Australian and eighteen Americans, including a few non-knitters. Jean and Philip were both British.

Jean had agreed to be interviewed for my research and we talked against an aural backdrop of excited chatter as the bus made its way between points of interest.

We revisited her experiences with the sweater, Olly's Allover, that I had begun knitting on Fair Isle as the embodiment of my experiences in Scotland and Ireland through the sweater's use of both Fair Isle and Aran knitting. The Fair Isle called for stranded colour work while the Aran used twisted stitches, cables and bobbles to work its magic.

'Let's start with your inspiration for Olly's Allover in *Knit Real Shetland*, and with what you already told me about Ralph Lauren?' I suggested.

'Okay. The original idea came from Ralph Lauren. He wanted a sweater that combined both Aran stitches and Fair Isle. His brief said he wanted a Fair Isle yoke with some Fair Isle at the base of the sweater, but he didn't really know what the Fair Isle would be, what the colours would be—but, he did know he wanted the Aran stitches to be from Gladys Walker's book *Aran Stitches*.'

I thought for a moment but I couldn't recall having ever seen that book.

Jean flicked her hair back and resettled her scarf.

'So that was his input. I began to experiment with combining the two, the Aran and the Fair Isles stitches, and experiment on colour ways as well. I started to knit a swatch of Gladys Walker's pattern which is a very intricate diamond pattern with lots of twisted

stitches. I found that there were multiple errors in the pattern so it was a bit of a nightmare to sort it all out, but eventually I did, and we got a viable pattern together.'

I continued listening as I looked down to make sure the recording button was live.

'Then I started knitting colour way swatches for Ralph's approval. We eventually came up with about three different colour ways that seemed to work together well. They went into production, it was probably 1982.' Jean leant into her bag and pulled out the cowl she was knitting.

I fiddled with the settings of the camera I was using to film Jean.

'Can you remember what the colour ways were?' I asked.

'The main colour way for Ralph Lauren was a grey with blues, reds, and a bright yellow. The Fair Isle part was very Navajo inspired. I put the Fair Isle together and it was basically a development of a Fair Isle I'd used before in a different range that I did for him. There were a lot of elements in the sweater. There was the Fair Isle with Ralph's brief. He was using Native American design, translating those and looking to see how they would fit in the traditional English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh design.'

I told her that when I had first seen the book illustration of the garment, I had reacted to the South Western palette. It made me think of my time in Texas and visits I'd made to New Mexico and Arizona. It didn't conjure up images of The Shetlands and Fair Isle. I had discarded the reds and yellows and introduced purples, pinks and green to the blues which I kept.

Now, once Jean mentioned Navajo, I moved away from my attachment to the design. Perhaps a bit late to be questioning the globalisation of Fair Isle knitting, but interactions in Shetland had had an effect on my point of view. Doubts had been sewn about whether or not it was a best choice to represent my time there. I had overlooked the impact of fashion on craft.

‘So, very much a fashion fusion using a traditional starting point?’ I asked.

Jean’s eyes were slightly unfocused as happens when people are actively remembering ‘A fusion? Yes. So that’s how it all came together, one sweater that did actually gel. It was an incredibly difficult knit. We had a lot of trouble getting it produced, but it was so popular. We did it originally for Polo, then a women’s wear version.’ Her yarn rolled to between our feet and we nearly knocked heads bending to recover it.

‘Now that was different in yarn content because that had to be softer and it was also a different colour. For women’s wear we needed a deep, I was going to say fuchsia, but it was deeper than fuchsia, a sort of burgundy colourway, but with the same colours in the Fair Isle.’

‘That answers the Ralph Lauren question. So how did *Real Shetland Knit* get involved with that design?’

‘Well, it was twenty-nine years later, when they asked me to submit a design. They’d wanted their book to be about Jamieson and Smith since they’d started. It’s about how Jamieson and Smith have developed, and the designers who’ve been involved and used their yarns over the years.’

She tapped her lip as she thought back.

‘Ralph Lauren used to always use Jamieson and Smith. He knew that it was all spun—not at Jamieson and Smith—it’s spun at Jamieson’s mill, or used to be. I don’t know if it’s still there. He bought the tweeds from Jamieson’s mills and he knew the same yarns and colour ways would come together using Jamieson and Smith’s yarns because then the tweeds, the suiting fabric, would fit in with the yarns he was using for the sweaters.’ Jean stopped to count back her stitches, undid a few, and changed colours before continuing.

‘So, we used to buy a lot of yarn from Jamieson and Smith when we were doing production for Ralph Lauren. And over the years, I’ve continued—when I can—to use yarn from them although

they went through a period when the yarn was really very scratchy. I was surprised when I started designing for Ralph Lauren that he would use it because, certainly for the US market, I thought it would be frowned upon by people like him, especially for their luxury sweaters where the clients paid hundreds of dollars for them.'

I thought back to my visit while on Shetland, and to my conversation with Oliver Henry about yarn attributes. I saw again that wall of stunning yarn colours.

'Maybe the fact that it was British made appealed to them?' I mused.

'I think hand knitted in Britain; that was the thing,' she answered.

'But, anyway, as things progressed through the '80s and '90s things didn't go that well for Jamieson and Smith because the yarns were scratchy. Although they say it's the same yarn, it doesn't feel as scratchy now.' I was a little concerned about repeating the criticism in my memoir, but Jean knew she was being recorded.

'I think their marketing is better now. And so, I've started trying to use their yarns again. I didn't use it for years because I couldn't find a market for it. I couldn't find anyone who would buy my product if I used their yarn.'

Jean's story about how the book came together was interrupted when we stopped for a photo opportunity. The name eludes me but the scene stays in mind; a head-land, lonely stretch of shore, and silver swathes of Atlantic Ocean punctuated by hazy islands.

Back on board, the noise of chatter and activity as everyone resettled crested. Jean resumed her story.

'So then, there was a woman, I think she was an Australian, called Connie, who worked for Jamieson and Smith. It was her idea to write a book about how Jamieson and Smith developed over the years. She contacted me and asked, "Would you submit a sweater for the book?" ' And, obviously, she contacted many others who had used their yarns. I agreed.'

‘I did the sweater design, submitted it to her, and it was about two years before the book came out. By then, I thought they’d forgotten about it, and I’d forgotten about it too. All of a sudden I remembered and I rang them up to see what was happening.’

I hoped to publish my memoir, after the doctorate was complete, and wondered what lengthy process I might have ahead of me.

‘Apparently, Connie had gone back to Australia to get married and then she just left. She decided she wanted to be at home, I think, so then there was another woman in charge of it. She took the project over and from that time on, when there was someone to handle it and to organise everything, it seemed to accelerate and so, it was actually published maybe six months later.’

‘Jean, tell me: there wasn’t any issue with the fact that it was originally a Ralph Lauren design?’

‘No, because any design that I did for Ralph Lauren was my copyright.’

‘That’s interesting. I have to understand intellectual property and copyright for my work.’

‘We sold the production to him but he never had any rights over the pattern. Only the sweaters, once they were in his collection were his copyright, but not on the pattern.’

‘Oh, I see. Do you know how did it come to be called Olly’s Allover? Whose idea was that?’ I asked.

‘I had nothing to do with that. I was surprised when I saw it because I thought I must have given it a name, and I can’t even remember now what it was.’

‘But it wouldn’t have been that?’

‘No. I think it was something like Lerwick, or similar. But Olly is the director isn’t he?’

‘Yes. Oliver Henry is the managing director. I met him in Shetland.’

‘I don’t know where the word ‘Allover’ came from but that must be a Shetland word.’

‘We both know Oliver Henry is Olly. An email I had from them confirmed that, so I was just curious if you knew more than I did,’ I commented.

‘No. Not a clue,’ she said. ‘But, it’s the only pullover in the book isn’t it? Well if there is one other that’s not called an allover, is it? Maybe that’s not used on a short sleeve?’

‘I’ll have to check because I sent home my book that Oliver Henry signed. Anyway, I think we’ve covered everything that I wanted to know so thank you very much.’

I stopped the camera recording and returned to my seat and knitting.

Jean seemed pleased to return to the soothing rhythm of her knitting, before acting guide at our next stop.

Despite my doubts about the validity of Olly’s Allover as a representation of my travels, I felt reconnected to my work and hopeful that I could meet enough of my objectives so the trip allowed me to test my dreams against reality.

In my mind Ireland was a complicated montage. My first memories of it are from the film called *Darby O’Gill and the Little People*. It was my introduction to the antics of leprechauns. As an older child I read Irish folk tales. There was one in which a hag was seen washing bloodied garments at a ford before a battle, and the *Sidhe*, the fairy folk, were tall, beautiful and sometimes dangerous to foolish mortals. I knew nothing then of old women vilified by Christianity and the genesis of folk lore. They all enchanted me.

Later, there were historical and fantasy romances where spirited redheads had too-good-to-be-true, black Celt lovers. The six book *Keltiad* series by Patricia Kenneally-Morrison was my favourite of these. The story followed characters with Irish-Gaelic names, titles and customs. Aeron was *Ard-ríán* or High Queen, and she lived in a castle on the planet Tara named after the hill where kings were crowned back in Ireland. Three millennia after Keltians, the heirs of Atlantis, had fled Christian persecution for their use of magic, a probe

ship from Earth arrived and set off a long overdue war with Keltia's arch enemies in which magic and the *Sidhe* all played their part.

Stories are central to the popular imagination. It doesn't matter whether the narrative is told through books, music, songs, art or craft; the heart and mind of a people are revealed to an audience through them. It is impossible to be immune to the messages, even if you don't venerate Irish heritage.

It is said that Ireland's biggest export is their people. Around the globe, millions of people claim Irish ancestry. Each year, thousands of these make a pilgrimage to Ireland, many of them Americans. They meet family, or see the original cottage ruins from before their families were burned out on the orders of absentee British landlords. Whole villages were left empty when the tenants were starved out by the Great Famine. Now, there was an exodus as the Irish escaped the falling Euro, unemployment and the EU bailout

Tourists try to belong at the local village pub, as they drink their Guinness and listen to songs and stories told from the heart, or to birth laughter, and they celebrate their sense of Irish and nostalgic yearning for a lost past.

Whether writing as Nora Roberts or J D Robb, this author has sold many million books world-wide by keying in to such feelings. Love or hate her genres of romance, crime or romantic suspense, one must admit she delivers what aficionados want to read. Several series like *Born In* use Ireland as the setting in stories that harness nostalgia and human desire to belong; love and community (*comhair*) are paramount.

I didn't know whether or not I had Irish forebears; my maternal grandfather had 'father unknown' written on his birth certificate. There were many genetic possibilities for his red hair. It remains also uncertain for my children. Liam's great grandmother was named Fanny Kathleen Moran. We weren't able to trace her in Australia despite data base searches. We don't even know if Moran was the name of her family of origin. There was a hint of a possible first marriage. I was not immune from wanting an Irish connection.

Though it was not as strong as what I'd felt for Norway, it was there, primed by years of reading romantic interpretations of the past.

For so long, alienated by childhood trauma, I hadn't felt I belonged anywhere: not in my body, not in my family of origin, not in my community, nor even Australia. Dissociation was a familiar refuge. I would be looking down from above, watching my body manage without me. It took many years before I could stay in my body. It was hard to break the habit of fleeing from feelings, hard to reunite body and mind and stay present. Liam, Joel and Anita were my first anchors. With help I learnt to stay for myself.

I had become strong and no longer craved the worlds open to me from reading, but, along with my knitting and crochet, those imaginary worlds were pleasurable and took me to a still place that excluded the outside world. The settings, the characters, the situations and the ideas remained rich in my imagination and became a supplement to daily life rather than a mainstay born of desperation.

I wasn't looking to be Irish, just wanted to explore Ireland with all my senses alert and receptive. I had recovered from my mid-trip malaise. It always happens, where one is half way through a journey and thoughts turn to home. My foot still hurt, but I was particularly looking forward to crossing Galway Bay and visiting a place I thought I'd never happen to see.



Inis-óirr

Inisheer, *Inis-óirr* in the Irish, the smallest of the Atlantic Ocean battered Aran Islands, was only a ten minute flight in a small plane from Connemara Airport on the mainland across Galway Bay. It felt as though buckling into seat belts in the tiny cabin and taxiing down the runway took more time than when we were in the air.

I was in the first party taken across, and then bundled into a box-like carriage with a rear access, no door, pulled by a tractor for the trip up to the main village.

A *soft* rain fell from a sky blanketed by cloud; Ireland in autumn what did I expect? From where I was sitting on one of two benches running parallel to the long sides of the box, the view was limited to the rectangle framed by the rear opening that gave a surreal silent movie quality to the seemingly endless corridors of stone walls, formed by stacking stones from poor growing land.

Behind the walls, seaweed and sand had been gathered and mixed for generations to support crops of potatoes and grain as an

adjunct to their fishing crofter lifestyle. In that respect, similarities between Shetland and Aran cultures were marked. Still, there were major differences. One owed their heritage to a Norwegian past while the other looked to Celtic culture.

At one interval there was a rusty hulk: it was all that remained of the trawler, *MV Plassey*. The islanders were justifiably proud of their role in saving eleven sailors when a storm in the Atlantic drove the ship up onto rocks in 1960. Some weeks later, another storm drove it to shore. Later, we were to see photographs of a reunion between the rescued and the rescuers.

A horse lifted its head from feeding in a stone enclosed field. I wondered how old it was and whether it was born on the island or ferried across with the goods not produced or available locally. On Fair Isle, many of the household supplies came from Mainland and were sold in a small general store. I assumed they followed the same pattern here. Then, of course, Internet shopping had probably brought changes. I was conscious of regret that I would only be here for the day. I wanted months to explore on foot and experience the way of life. I wanted to see the other Aran Islands as well.

At the *Inis-óirr* Arts and Community Centre, we were greeted by Una McDonald for our Aran knitting workshop. I think I remember tea or coffee, scones and maybe a film on island life, or have I muddled the memories? It is so hard to keep the intricate details of a packed itinerary which spans Scotland and Ireland separate.

We moved from a meeting hall to a smaller room with tables and chairs. Una's mother and aunt showed us items of traditional clothing: a coarse worsted skirt and a hand knit shawl. Then balls of thick white yarn and needles were handed out. The project, a head-band, involved cables held at the back and front of the work, and thus twisted to the right, and then the left. There were also bobbles knitted into the flat fabric.

I enjoyed people watching as much as the knitting. A few were committed to intense concentration and a desire to finish. Others were happy to learn the stitches and progress at a leisurely rate. A

few seemed to be just along for the experience and unconcerned about how far they got. I fell somewhere in the middle and managed to fill one repeat, though not without having to undo a few misplaced stitches. Una circulated and guided our efforts.

At the end of the allotted time, we climbed back into the carriages. We visited Una's aunt's cottage. Her son was eating a latish lunch and didn't appear a whit disconcerted by a bunch of strange women filing past on the way to a room where knitted garments, and some books, and postcards were for sale. Perhaps, it was a common occurrence.

We made two more stops on our way to a pub on the seafront: a shop with a more expansive stock on offer, stacks and racks of Aran and plain knitting, and then a walled cemetery with a church ruin that was half inundated with sand. I was fascinated. Was the church built so long ago that the whole area had been built up by sand? It sat mostly below ground level, and, surely, only constant excavation kept the roof in view.

In my collection of knitting literature back home, there was a pamphlet from Patons for a cabled Aran jumper. In Australia, a jumper is a sweater not a tunic. It always feels foreign to write sweater even when that is what the designer uses. The photograph showed it in a mid-blue. When I was fifteen, I knitted it in a mid-pink with 8ply woollen yarn and wore it proudly to a gym camp. I teamed it with a trendy pair of stirrup stretch, black pants and faux-fur-trimmed, black, ankle boots. I was the bee's knees—not so flash the next day when I did a somersault off the horse and spring board only to land on my right knee on a hard, wooden, floor.

I don't remember actually knitting the jumper. I know I was intrepid and game to tackle any new technique in sewing, knitting and crochet. In those fields, I had an unerring confidence that I lacked in my emotional life. If I pulled a clanger, I would back up and have another go, until I got it as close to perfect as possible.

It was as though I was determined to master those things I could control when my inner life was constantly unsettled by flash

backs that jerked my strings. I owe the imagery to 'The Puppet Master' design that I worked on during that Barbara Hanrahan tapestry project, the catalyst for my nervous breakdown over a decade ago.

I shuddered when I first saw the print, predominantly black and white, and again when the co-ordinators had chosen to make that design. As I said earlier, 'The Puppet Master' struck me as sinister, a ghoulish caricature jerking disembodied heads from strings. It held, too close, a resonance with the demons I had fought with every day; they both distracted and exhausted me. I was so revolted by my visceral reaction that I seriously considered withdrawing from the project.

Now, I can see that it forced me to address what ailed me and the complete breakdown allowed me to begin to heal. It was a turning point, as marked as the original abuse. The healing is never complete, but these days my reaction to multi-media accounts of childhood abuse and trauma is more like dense smoke passing through my stream of consciousness than the comet it used to be. There is still anger and indignation at myriad young lives which end or are forever changed, but now it is for them not me.

With a rising wind driving clouds overhead and waves crashing against the dock, heading into a cosy dock-side pub in Ireland was the perfect, positive antidote to philosophising about traumatic memory.

We sat at dark wooden tables on matching chairs. After lunch, I spilt the first Irish coffee I ordered: knocked the glass over by misjudging the distance when I reached out, anticipating the warmth on my tongue, in my belly, of the hot coffee and whiskey sipped through the cold, rich cream topping.

As well as reliving my trip through writing and knitting, I can almost recapture the smooth, silky taste. There is an Irish Pub in Adelaide. Perhaps I could talk Liam into a repeat episode, although not the spilt drink of course.

Back then, I understood the attraction of the Irish to their local pub: a drink to warm the cockles of your heart, good company and the in-turns lively, and then sad sound of Irish songs mingled with music from guitar, fiddle and piano accordion.

Jean, our tour guide, brought out her spoons. She played them against each other, holding them together with one hand and tapping them with the other in time with the rhythm giving a pleasant, clicking punctuation. I videotaped a sequence so that I could share it with Liam, Joel, Speckie and Anita, which took me back to wondering how soon the baby would be born. All roads, it seemed, led to home.



Part 4: Home

Betty Mouat

A new yarn finds its way to my fingers; it is fondled and caressed before anything remotely practical ensues. I stroke it across my cheek and judge softness and loft. I hold it to the light and absorb all nuance of colour, and run it between forefinger and thumb to test spring and texture. Finally, the yarn is ready for the needles or hook that will make it mine. Each stitch captures part of me: the oil and detritus of my fingers, the imprint of the thoughts which flow through my mind while I'm working, are all embodied in the fabric of the artefact.

If the item is for someone else, I feel a pull as it leaves me; I am mildly bereft. The knitting or crochet I keep for myself is enriched by the threads of memory embedded in its fibre. I wear it. I throw it over my knees or shoulders. I remember. The memories pass through a personal filter: they shift and morph with each rendition until all that is left is the memory of a memory, captured in a web of stitches.

Whenever I travel, I usually plan ahead the knitted artefacts that will capture my memories of people, places, and events. The intentions are always pristine but the results are usually well-travelled balls of yarn and a paucity of knitting.

Perhaps the problem is mechanical: the competition between too-demanding stitches and too-enticing scenery, denying flow and an inward focus. Or is it merely that once the view is consumed, one view or event in an itinerary of many, it changes from anticipation—from the dream it represented—to an accomplished reality, subject to judgements of delight or disappointment? The shift between before-and-after mental snapshots of experience often leads to a change of heart.

Usually then, once home again, the original garment or artefact that I've chosen to knit will be pushed aside, as the memory insists an alternative to best represent its agenda.

'No,' it says. 'Not that one. This is a better fit.' It does no good to object. Memory has a knack for getting its own way. I surrender and agree that the coloured lace wrap, fair-isle socks and Aran shawl it wants to knit are a better choice than the pullover I'd originally intended—never mind that I'd already bought yarn, carted it around in my suitcase and knitted the rib band.

'Too bad,' memory says. So, I start over. I'm forced to admit, memory has the right of it. The yarn for the pullover was 12 ply, Aran weight: too heavy at home in South Australia despite the echo of chilly days and cold sea spray in the northernmost reaches of Scotland and Ireland.

The cool breeze that gently lifts the curtains is bliss. Last week, the eucalyptus trees and my body drooped as the week-long heatwave pushed temperatures as high as forty four degrees, centigrade. Liam shepherded two koalas that took refuge from the heat among the roots of our ancient olive tree. Anita hand fed them eucalyptus leaves dipped in water in an attempt to hydrate them, while Liam installed a mister to keep them cool. After the moisture-sucking, hot, north wind gave way to a fresh, cool breeze from the

south, they disappeared into the bush that abuts the back of our yard.

A parcel has just arrived from Shetland. I open it. The hues and heathery cast of the yarn, 100% Jamieson & Smith Shetland wool, enough for a lace wrap and pair of fair-isle socks, transports me back in time and I am standing alongside Oliver Henry in a shed in Lerwick, Shetland. The smell of unprocessed fleeces fills my nostrils. Another parcel arrives, this time from Alice Starmore. Inside are delicious balls of 3ply Hebridean yarn, her Selkie colour-way, redolent of a deep, dark sea and rocky inlets.

I think: Yes I was right to start over; these yarns will more than serve my purpose. Yes, a multi-coloured lace wrap, a pair of fair-isle socks will capture the memories and physicality of my journey to Shetland very well indeed. An Aran shawl will speak of Ireland.

The first project on my needles was BMC by Kate Davies, a writer and knitting designer based in Scotland, who is the author of *The Colours of Shetland*. BMC stands for Betty Mouat Cowl. I was knitting the larger version of a wrap.

I gently fondled the delicious heathery yarn in nine different hues. Was I stalling? The wrap was knitted in two pieces which are then grafted together. The cast on for each piece was a marathon of 504 stitches in 2ply, jumper weight yarn on a very long 3mm circular needle.

A marathon is a fitting testament to Betty Mouat. Until I bought The Jamieson & Smith Shetland kit of yarn and Kate Davies' pattern brochure, I'd never heard of her. Now, once one is sensitised to a new word, it has popped up in several places. Not surprisingly, the first time was in an article by Kate Davies in her electronic magazine *Textisles*.¹ The second was a shortened version of the story by

¹ Kate Davies, "The Making of Betty Mouat: A Shetland Tale That Took the World by Storm," *Textisles*, no. 2 (2012). Accessed 12 Jan 2014

Winnie Balfour² for *Shetland Textiles: 800BC to the Present*. Now, I have found the heroine of *The Columbine* in 'Stories' by Lynn Abrams.³ I owe my entire knowledge of Betty Mouat's adventure, recounted in the following précis, to them.

The story began when Betty was 60 years old on January 30th, 1886. Until then, she had lived the life of a spinster, crofter, spinner and knitter. Her winter's spinning and knitting, gossamer weight lace shawls, were exchanged for tea and other goods, which she could not grow, catch or make.

I wondered if the lanolin from the sheep's wool kept those hands, which cut peat or dug food, from roughening and catching the delicate yarn as she knitted. It was a model of self-sufficiency totally foreign to the developed world. The men were absent at sea, fishing for long stretches at a time; the women were used to making decisions independent of men. Many women were single as the women vastly outnumbered the men; and widows from sea tragedies were commonplace.

Betty had left her home in South Mainland on a small fishing smack called *The Columbine* headed for The Shetland's principal town of Lerwick on the east coast. On board with her were the skipper, the mate, a crewmen and her bundle of forty shawls. They were not all her own work; she was entrusted by her neighbours with negotiating the price of blocking and dressing the shawls and for their sale.

In a choppy wild January sea, the mainsail snapped. The skipper and mate were washed overboard. The mate climbed back up the sail onto deck, and, with the crewman, launched a small boat in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the skipper. The stormy sea took the two of them away to land where they raised the alarm. Betty was left adrift on her own in the North Sea.

² Winnie Balfour, "Betty Mouat," in *Shetland Textiles: 800bc to the Present*, ed. Sarah Laursen (Garthspool, Lerwick: Shetland Heritage Publications, 2013), 134.

³ Abrams, 28-29.

Kate Davies details how Betty remained upright by holding a rope from the ceiling in the little cabin, as the boat lurched around her, and how she wore the skipper's coat, kept time by his watch, and eked out meagre rations of milk and biscuits, while rescue attempts were launched, and an MP called on the Admiralty to send fishing vessels to join the search. For days, there was no news until February 7th when Betty washed up on the Norwegian shore on a little island near Bergen. This was the culmination of a three-hundred mile, zigzag journey across the North Sea in unbelievably stormy conditions.⁴

Accounts and representations of Betty Mouat's, supposedly, heroic survival rippled around the globe in the equivalent of a modern day media blitz. Stories, and even very bad poetry, distorted and wilfully embellished basic facts to the extent that Betty would not have recognised her own speech or appearance in the representations—much as Princess Diana had been transformed in death to the status of 'The Lady of the Lake' as in King Arthur's legend Avalon.

What happened to the shawls? Bar one of Betty's own shawls, left with Sheriff of Scotland, George Thomas, in Leith where she recuperated, the rest returned home with her to Scatness, despite, no doubt countless opportunities to cash in on their sensational status.

I think of quantum physics, and the way that butterfly wings beating in a forest are supposed to bring on large change elsewhere, and I wonder how much this publicity did for Shetland knitting. Was it coincidental that in the following year, the infamous Truck System, which tied knitters to exchange knitted garments for goods with a prescribed merchant, was formally abolished after years of exploitation of knitters and investigation into the practice? Did it provide the final push? Unhappily, there was little done to enforce the legislation and the actual practice continued into the mid-1900s. It is

⁴ Davies. 6.

hard to imagine being forced to take fancy clothing in exchange for one's knitting, while the belly growled with hunger.

George Thomas was impressed by the workmanship of the shawl Betty gave him. He also recognised a possibility for promoting Shetland knitting and invited her—she didn't go—and six craftswomen to participate at 'The International Exhibition of Science, Art and Industry', where publicity was given to the presence of a 'shawl which was in the charge of Elizabeth Mouat, the heroine of St Columbine, during her eventful voyage to Norway.'⁵ I agree with Kate Davies' hypothesis that this couldn't have hurt Shetland knitting.⁶ What was the ripple effect of The Prince of Wales' interest in the Shetland exhibit?

As previously stated, popularity of Fair Isle knitting in a later era was attributed to the fashionable HRH Edward Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII). Historian Richard Rutt quotes the King from his 1960 *A Family Album*: 'I suppose the most showy of all my garments was the multi-coloured Fair isle sweater, with its jigsaw patterns, which I wore for the first time while playing myself in as Captain of the Royal & Ancient Golf Club at St Andrews in 1922.'⁷

The photographs were widely circulated. Then there is the one already mentioned in the *Illustrated London News* (1925) of him wearing an allover in the painting 'Royal Friends'—with his favourite dog—by John St. Helier Lander.⁸ Would this have been a choice still available to him without the Betty Mouat saga? An answer is impossible of course, but, then, there are those butterfly wings beating in the forest. Call it ripple effect, *zeitgeist*, or spirit of our times, the workings of history turn on a fickle coin.

Little about the BMC wrap, with its beautiful Shetland cockleshell stitch lace, was within my previous experiences. To learn to knit it using Susan Stevens' no-purl garter stitch method in the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ Rutt, 181.

⁸ Laurenson, 106-07.

round, Kate Davies offers a video tutorial. Just as well. I wanted to use the Shetland traditional method of all garter stitch in rounds without purling.

The tutorial made it do-able, otherwise it would have been a confusing tangle of inadequate words and two alternating balls of identical yarn, turned work at the end of every round, and a gap bridged, somehow, by crossing the yarn. There is much to be said for people sitting shoulder to shoulder sharing knitting techniques, and maybe a cautionary tale or two. A fire and hot drink would have been a nice accompaniment.

The start for the BMC wrap was awkward, I'd never cast on over two circular needles to create a loose edge before. The first row needed 504 stitches in 2ply/fingering. I was surely mad. I kissed all chance of flow and blissful immersion goodbye.

There were 36 rounds in the piece giving 18 000 stitches. But; increases caused in different rows by the pattern meant that the pattern was 40 stitches wide in places. My maths was wrong. I must have been crazy. Who said knitting was simple?

Hadn't I said time was short? Surely it was enough to knit the much smaller cowl? Once the first piece was finished a second identical piece must be worked. Last chance: cowl or wrap? I wanted the wrap. I accepted that the two pieces must be painstakingly garter stitch grafted together using sewing needle and many short lengths of yarn to imitate a round of knitting and produce an invisible seam. They were joined so that the rounds of cockleshells of each piece faced in towards each other, mirrored towards the invisible join as though in conversation.

I reminded myself that I was knitting because it gives me pleasure and creates a harmony of flow between my thoughts and fingers. I knit to confound consumerism and cheap off-shore imports. I knit so that I can control at least a tiny slice of a life lived against a world full of poverty, violence, throw-away bling, and pre-teens fixated on virtual predators and celebrity culture. I knit because palm oil plantations are killing orangutans and pandas are kept in cages

for their bile. I knit hoping RSPCA research will outlaw the painful mulesing of Merino sheep, and that sustainable farming practices will grow green corridors for native fauna.

In essence, my knitting isn't really about time and too many stitches. That is a time issue created by my academic agenda. The yarn, every stitch, is a caress between my fingers, and the work growing on the needles is the conversion of intangible thought into knitted reality: impulse becomes artefact.



Cynthia

When I began my doctoral studies, I saw a picture of a rollercoaster on the cover of a PhD study guide. My journey has certainly had its share of ups and downs. The birth of our granddaughter, Lainey, while I was still in Ireland is a treasured memory. None of the past difficulties prepared me for what was ahead.

I remembered thinking, I am numb. During the early hours of the night there was a phone call. My mother had slipped from her final stroke into a coma and died. The long goodbye had stretched over four long difficult years, the last year after my return from overseas in a nursing home. The ache was dull. A thought surfaced inconsequential or maybe it said it all: I would never see her eyes light with her particular smile again.

I remember a day when Dad was at wood working club and I was looking after her.

'Cynthia,' I said, 'tell me the stories about your life.' She knew the ones I meant. She'd told them to me many times before. That

time I wrote them down. She was too shy for a video recording: it would have stopped the conversational flow.

Mum was born at the beginning of 1929 in Footscray, Melbourne. Vincent was her oldest brother. Siblings Billie, Lola, Merle and, much later Geoff, came after her.

Stella, her mother, was a housewife. She was cut off by her family when she married beneath their middle class sensibilities. Stella's mother would sneak around to see her with treats for the kids. Stella had a temper, and, in later years, Mum said she once threw a hot frying pan during an argument. She also had a glorious singing voice.

Ted, Mum's father, bore the stigma of illegitimacy and was raised by adoptive parents. He loved football, the dogs, and too many beers with his mates. He took what work he could get. Mum was born the year of the stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression, and the family moved very frequently to be near her father's work. The Second World War was less than a decade away.

In the midst of turmoil on the world stage, they were Aussie battlers trying to get by. If that meant eating suet on bread, tripe, brisket and wearing hand-me-downs, so be it. Years later, the ball of silver paper under the kitchen sink, the mended socks, and the rag bag in the laundry spoke of Mum's ingrained sense of the need for thrift.

In those early years, despite hardship, there were pockets of fun. Mum's first memory about age four was of sitting with Vin on a horse in front of her Ma and Pa Ladner's back-ender cottage. Later, in Bacchus Marsh, when her father was in the Army Reserve, there was what she described as a 'stinking drake which would bail people up in the backyard dunny'.

There was also illness among the children: the usual mumps, measles, and whooping cough. Around age six, Mum caught diphtheria and was hospitalised for about six weeks. They made her shower before they sent her home with wet hair.

'I'll never forget, as long as I live, being so cold,' she said. Over the years we all teased her about being a frog and sitting on top of the wood stove while every-one else melted. Perhaps the memory of the cold was in her bones.

Later again, Billie caught rheumatic fever. He was in one hospital when Mum's father took her to another hospital on the handlebars of his bike. She had caught it as well. Her mother visited one day and Mum asked her where the flowers from her hat had gone because they looked nice. Stella replied that she wanted a change. Mum was not well enough to be told that Billie had died.

In later years, if asked, people described Mum as quiet and private. Behind the public shyness was a woman with a girlish, somewhat earthy sense of humour. On occasions when she felt particularly comfortable, she would lapse into a cheeky, even defiant, persona that hinted at the woman she might have been without the burden of the disability which pervaded her life; she called it her *little* hand. It was her left hand, smaller than the right, with missing fingers and truncated thumb that made every new encounter agony for her.

She hated school with a vengeance, and it is not hard to imagine what she had to cope with. At the same time, she told us she used to get her own way, or brothers and sisters into trouble, by saying that they hit her *little* hand.

Despite this handicap, Mum was determined to conquer anything she set her mind to. She bought big needles and wool, and told her mother that when she came out of her room she would be able to knit. She bought georgette and a pattern, and, despite her mother trying to dissuade her and offering to pay for a dressmaker, made her first dance dress. Somewhere she saw crochet being done and taught herself that too. Nothing seemed beyond her abilities.

In Bacchus Marsh, she went head-to-head with her mother and refused to start high school. Her mother took her. She came home straight away. She won. It could be said that with Mum's great love of reading she educated herself.

After a lengthy hospital stay in Ballarat because of a relapse of rheumatic fever, she went to the Domestic Arts School for a while, before she got a job delivering mail on a bike for the Post Office, and then selling bread in a bakery. Her friend Ivy visited from Melbourne, and they tried to talk to American soldiers in the park who asked them where the big girls were.

The day peace was declared, the family was back in Melbourne living in a house they'd bought in Williamstown. Mum went to the Melbourne City centre where there were masses of very, very happy—very, very noisy—people celebrating. At this time she was working in a hosiery factory, and then one making handbags where she met Estaire, who would be her lifelong friend and pen pal. I have a black leather belt with studs that is a treasured relic of those years.

She loved to dance, even though dance partners who didn't know her held her left hand by the wrist. She went to the Williamstown Town Hall dance every Saturday night, and it was there that she met Dad. She thought that the disabilities he had acquired and refused to pander to, a leg stripped of muscle by polio and total deafness in the left ear, overlaid by the ringing of tinnitus from a botched mastoid operation, helped him to understand her.

They were married in a quiet ceremony in Williamstown on 18 March 1949, and boarded in a room on the beach front. She became pregnant straight away, and they moved to South Australia to live with Dad's parents, arriving in the middle of a terrible storm on 18 June.

Dad had bought from his aunt, two blocks of land a few doors down, and with his father's help built an austerity cottage. My oldest brother was born in December and the three of them moved into their little house on the 18 May 1950. Mum said that the old neighbourhood tabbies were counting out the nine months.

Is the recurrence of the 18, chance or deliberate? It didn't strike me, back then, as she was speaking. A trivial thing, but, now, it

brings it home to me that she is gone and I can never ask her about it, or anything else ever again.

She was delighted to have her own house for the first time in her life. After a life of constant upheavals, she dug in her roots and was never happy far from her own home.

The housework for a family of seven must have seemed endless: shopping, cooking, making, mending, and washing clothes, getting us off to school, and dealing with us when we broke a bone, knocked ourselves out falling off bikes, had eyes pecked by chickens, or ate unripe almonds. When we were older and she had time to breathe, Mum was commenting on some beautiful porcelain reproduction dolls. My oldest brother said to her, 'You could learn to do that.' The idea took hold and Mum started classes.

Eventually she met up with a small group of women at the house of a woman named Jo, and in no time was producing exquisite dolls of her own. Over several decades, she regularly took firsts in the category she had entered, and once the 'Best in the Show'. Someone suggested to her that she enter the disabled section. In all seriousness she asked them, 'Why?'

Her versatility seemed boundless: German or French and baby painted faces; composition, cloth or jointed bodies; hand or machine sewn clothes; knitted, crocheted, embroidered, and smocked garments. Simply put, her achievements were amazing in beauty, breadth and skill level. She surprised us all by going with a friend to a doll show on the east coast of the United States. Our homebody, a globe-trotter! Dad helped her with some woodwork as props for her dolls, and built her a lovely doll house.

As my brothers and sister married and we all had children of our own, Mum set herself the task of making a doll for each grandchild who wanted one, be they boy or girl. There were sixteen grandchildren between us, so this was quite an undertaking. Now, with the generous handing down of some of mum's dolls, this family's crop of great-grand-children has the pleasure of enjoying her legacy.

Mum never lost an early love of music and dancing. Like her mother, she had a lovely singing voice, and was light on her feet. It's hard to see where she found the time or energy, as she had taken a part-time job for a sense of independence, but she took up square dancing as well. She danced every week, and sometimes extra, if there was an exhibition dance booked. Dad went with her at first—not sure why he stopped going—and she made both of their exhibition costumes—dresses, net skirts, and shirts.

One convention in Perth led to a tour of Singapore. Over the years, with Dad, she did some bush and road trips in Australia and went to New Zealand, but it must be said she let it be known that she hated heat, camping, dust and flies.

Then, sadly and progressively, each of Mum's activities was taken from her: dancing by a damaged knee, her doll making by cruel and extreme rheumatoid arthritis in her hands and a broken shoulder from a car accident, and her ability to speak fluently or read by a series of strokes and mini-strokes. Over those very difficult years, Dad was her personal carer and constant companion. Highlights of Mum's later life were her eightieth birthday party and sixtieth wedding anniversary, when family and friends came together to celebrate those milestones.

In the early hours of Saturday, 2 November she was taken from us. The eulogy said that Dad lost his wife of sixty-four years; we lost our mother, grandmother and great grandmother. Despite the difficulty of those four years, we were grateful for having had time to say goodbye, often denied when the death is sudden. Our sense of great loss was tempered by the knowledge that she was free of earthly cares, illness and severe pain. Still, I was numb.



BMC Lace Wrap—1

Months later, the distress which followed the numbness at Mum's death slowly gave ground in favour of those memories which gently played across my mind. The four years of her illness were a long goodbye and the grief was not like that conjured by the sudden death of a young person. I had little unfinished business with my mother's ghost and I could enjoy her visits through my memories.

I had yarn in my hand and Shetland on my mind. I finished the first half of the BMC wrap. I showed it to Anita. She fingered a cockleshell and said it reminded her of the beach: good, mission accomplished. I looked over her shoulder and admired the colour sequence: all heathery and muted—bluey purple, purple, mauve, grass green, bluey green, light green, rusty red, pink and natural Shetland grey. I'd seen other colour ways on ravelry.com but I didn't think Kate Davies' original palette that spoke so eloquently of Shetland's natural world could be bettered. I must show it to Mum next time I visit is a frequent thought: but, of course, she is gone.

I had intended to cast on the second half of the BMC wrap. Instead I ended up in hospital with an oxygen mask over my nose and a drip in my arm; it was the prelude to two operations. I was bone weary.

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak belonged to a fellow patient. It helped pass the time. I had already finished *March* by Geraldine Brooks. My sister brought it in when she came to see me. As a fan of *Little Women*, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* as a child, I had been meaning to read about their imagined, absent father in *March* since it was published. Perhaps two books fixated on death were an unconscious selection after losing Mum and then heading soon after into a fight against acute pain. I found an old text on my phone from 18 months before, which I'd sent to Liam from Ireland, complaining of the same pain that had led to my hospitalisation. Hindsight was a fine thing.

Home from hospital, the peace was bliss. I hated the constant noise of the ward more than the pain. Clang, clatter, clash: too many voices, too many TVs. I yelled at the startled ward, 'Be quiet.' For pity's sake, what was wrong with these people? Hadn't they heard of a head-set?

I'd lost seven kilos while I was ill. It was week six after surgery, and I still couldn't find any energy or a skerrick of enthusiasm for any activity. It was different to the pervasive black cloud of depression that parked over my head, sometimes for no apparent reason. It was a muffled fog. So strange, the feeling that my shoulders pressed floor-wards: Dali's paintings of surreal molten objects, like clocks, came to mind. All oozed: distorted form. In a vague way I wanted to knit, but everything was too much trouble.

Then, Easter was only a few days away. Liam, Anita and I would go to Joel and Speckie's place. I was looking forward to the hour's drive with farmland along the way, and a small country town at the end. I have bought Lainey the book *Spot's First Easter* to balance the chocolate excess. She was only nineteen-months-old, but turned pages from the top corner with care and precision. I had cooked a

dish from my days in Texas, which our family called Mexican Lasagne. Layers of corn tortilla slices separated layers of a chicken, mushroom and jalapeno mixture.

Liam ate the lasagne. It never reached Joel and Speckie or Lainey. While I was waiting for Liam, I got the garden hose to wash the windscreen of the car. In memory, I didn't slip, stumble or trip. I just took a step. My ankle rolled under, failed to take my weight, and I fell backwards. Then the pain rushed in. I looked down and my right ankle was at a strange angle to my leg. The hose gushed beneath me.

I shouted for Anita in a front bedroom. She called Liam from his shower. The rest was about pain and the hospital. It was a Tri-malleolar fracture, doctor-speak for ankle broken in three places. 'A soccer player's injury,' I was later told. They did the first set that night using a back-slab of plaster with crepe bandage over soft padding. I was assigned a single room: great—no TVs.

Each day for a week the doctors peered at my ankle and the nurses prepped and had me fast for further surgery. Again, there were oxygen masks and IV drips and more needles than I care to remember. My veins were small and kept collapsing. Each day surgery was cancelled. 'Too swollen to close up' or 'there were more urgent cases.' After a week, they knocked me out again and any X-ray now shows a plate with seven screws and a pin on the outside and a long pin on the inside. I meant to ask about them showing up on airport security.

They moved me to a ward with clang, clatter, clash and TVs. I was there three weeks all told. They put me in a wheelchair, an access cab and sent me to a rehabilitation centre.

As I write, I need to acknowledge a woman, eighty-four-years-old, and a double-leg amputee from diabetes, who was the most courageous person I've ever met. She was tiny and determined to walk on her prosthesis and go beach fishing again. She was a retired

farmer and knew how to do it tough. Out of respect for her I will say no more.

As I write, I don't want to talk about a woman, aged eighty-nine, who was a rude, racist, offensive relic from colonial days, who believed she was better in every way than everyone else. But, I've learnt the hard way that angst is best purged. Why was I fated to encounter bullies in hospital? Years before it was Rik and Seraphina: this time it was a retired schoolteacher. I pity her past students.

She made it known that she considered the staff to be inferior servants, and told lies about them. Her son asked the nurse if his mother was as bossy there as she was at home. She nagged relentlessly about my need to keep the curtains around my bed closed. What business was it of hers? I had them open until she came.

Gut deep sobs shook my body.

'It's no use sitting behind there bawling,' she said. She thought I was crying because she'd said that I was the most selfish person she'd ever met. She was wrong. I didn't care what she thought. I was crying for all those times in the seven months since my mother's death that I had bit my lip and clamped down my emotions, and because I couldn't hold them in any longer. My ankle hurt. My back hurt. My hands were sprained from trying to pull myself up on parallel bars. I was homesick and wanted to be back with my family and I missed Rumble with all his naughty puss ways. I was crying because it had been a horrible year. She was the speck of dirt on the flea's behind that sank the boat.

Everyone there was equal. We were all doing battle with strong pain and discomfort from strokes, from missing, broken or replaced limbs or joints. Who knows what private fears followed each patient to bed at night? I didn't know with surety how I had hurt my ankle. How could I avoid doing it again? My back hurt, too, but would it stay functionally sound for the duration of rehab?

Despite hand pain, I knitted two identical scarves in an acrylic that looked like cream silk. My sister brought the yarn in. It was from

Mum's knitting yarn stash. She was close as I knitted. I used the knitting to self-soothe, to remind myself of all that I loved.

I used a simple pattern. Four rows of garter stitch followed by four rows of double moss stitch. I escaped into the Irish setting of *The Sevenwaters* fantasy series beginning with *Daughter of the Forest* by Juliet Marillier, where a sister had to rescue her brothers from an evil stepmother's curse that turned them into swans. She had to spin with nettles: pain, stinging pain. Ironically, this was the same fairy tale that I would meet in Kyoko Mori's *Yarn*, a Knit Lit book involved with my doctorate.

The spinal injuries and brain trauma people were in different wards to us, and in far worse shape than me. Heavy-footed drivers particularly take note that there are consequences to speeding and inattention. I saw those with spinal and brain injuries bound to wheelchairs, and nine ibis free to fly away, out through the window into the garden.

It was the warmest May in recorded history in South Australia. The ash tree was fully leafed when I arrived. The day I left all the leaves had fallen and been cleared away. Four more weeks had passed, seven since I broke my ankle.

I went home to Liam and Anita in a moonboot, with a single walking stick. I was glad to escape the colonial relic, the TV, and the blood-thinning needle in the belly each morning. It would take much longer for the images of humanity in all kinds of mortal distress to fade.



BMC Lace Wrap—2

For the first time since beginning my doctorate, I despair of finishing. It is not my desire or competence I doubt. It is Life. There have been just too many medical and family impediments since I began as a full-time candidate, and then was forced to convert to part-time. Is the next disaster lurking in wait, or can I breathe more easily?

I was drinking a mug of chai latte with my sister at Bracegirdles' chocolate cafe. She talked about her plans for courses for her degree and a possible stint as a volunteer overseas. The talk rekindled my enthusiasm for things academic. I felt guilty that I'd just spent the last two and a half wintery days in bed reading Diana Gabaldon's latest book *Written in my Own Heart's Blood*. I had always been an avid devourer of historical fiction. My sister challenged me to start the second piece of the BMC lace wrap on the next day. She drove me home and waited while I limped with my walking stick to the front door.

My sister's encouragement lingered. I woke fresh and eager. I was still on leave from university, but I had decided that I must work at home in short bursts when I could. To date, it hadn't worked that way.

After a fruitful rummage, all the paraphernalia was close at hand. When the cast on was finished, there were 504 stitches divided by two groups of pink then blue knitting markers into 24 repeats of 21 stitches. The colour coding helped keep track of the direction of the knitting. Round one and two were uneventful, I thought, and confirmed the round was all in the correct planes and not twisted into a Mobius strip. Oh bum. Didn't see the notation I'd made while knitting the first half to let the cast on row stand in lieu of round one in the first vertical repeat. I began to undo the last two rows of 1008 stitches, but suddenly deflated. I packed up and laid down for a nap.

Physiotherapy and medical appointments swallowed time and dug inconvenient holes in the weeks. Despite this, my reading took an academic turn with *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland 1800-2000* by Lynn Abrams.

The offending stitches of knitting were undone and the correct ones took their place. Rumble kept curling up on the balls of yarn and hissed when I moved him, showing the black splotches on the roof of his otherwise pink mouth. Behind my industry, I was nervous. I was so attuned to disaster; I was waiting for something to go wrong. I'd yet to regain my belief in the possibility of uneventful normality. Maybe when I had shed the moonboot as a reminder of disaster I would feel safer. I Skyped Joel, Speckie, and Lainey: nothing like a lively, chattering, wiggling toddler to regain balance.

All the photos of my Scottish and Irish trip are on my Netbook. It seemed fitting to revisit them with the second anniversary of my departure only a month away. Then, too, I have followed Facebook posts of Jean Moss's recent 'Knitting Tour of France'. The first week of the European summer in a château in the south of France: envy isn't a strong enough word. For now, arm chair traveller I must be.

‘It will be a year or two before you regain full function,’ the surgeon said of my still very swollen ankle. The bones have knitted. It was the slow healing of soft tissue damage that was holding me back. The ankle was very weak, easily tired. Limping threw out my already compromised back.

Luckily, wintry days of rain and bluster were conducive to reading, writing and knitting. *A History of Scotland* by Neil Oliver had my attention. It only took a moment to order the full set of DVDs from my local library to provide visual and audio reinforcement. I had put the book aside to go out for lunch with my cousin. How long before I would be able to drive again? My license was suspended until my doctor said otherwise. My university is nearly an hour away and my desk had been reassigned because I have been on leave for so long. Liam was taxiing me everywhere. It was not always silent martyrdom. I wanted my freedom back.

I watched *Pride and Prejudice* with Keira Knightley and Mathew MacFayden while I knitted. The dresses are incorrect, taken from a previous era, but it is still an enjoyable movie. Mothers and daughters made me think of Anita. When she was very young, she had a half birthday in July to offset the fact that her real birthday was so close on the heels of Christmas and New Year.

As an adult she has refused to surrender the tradition. I have a blanket crocheted for her. The main colour was natural with Catherine wheel rows in pastel pink, green, and blue. It was finished, bar the embroidered dedication which would be chain-stitched in nature’s favourite colour: green. It reminded me, the slugs and snails have stripped all the leaves from my mint. I refuse to put out bait, but attract slugs and snails with bran and catch them under orange half-shells. I forgot to renew the bran and lost my mint for my breakfast of liver-friendly smoothies.



Reading Knit Lit

I am either tenacious or don't know when to quit. I had to start the second half of Kate Davies' BMC wrap for a third time. I had twisted the join and had a Mobius strip instead of a two-sided tube. This time I asked Liam to follow the stitches around and check my work.

'But, then, it will be my fault if it's wrong,' he complained. I grinned. He worked his way around the circle and nodded as he handed it back. He returned to the electronic gadget he was building.

This time the join was correct—trebly checked—and the knitting grew quickly on the needles. I stopped often, obsessively counting lace repeats, and, just as frequently, admiring the yarn and pattern. I doubt that the Shetlanders of earlier centuries stopped as I do to caress the work, to connect with the stitches growing under my fingers. Their fingers would have flashed with years of constant practice, flicking the yarn over the tips of long, thin *pins*, the right one anchored in a horsehair stuffed belt or a sheath of feathers. They had a living to make. But, as one artisan to another, I believe that for

many there would have been pride in the skill and beauty manifest in their fine work. Others, no doubt, couldn't see past the plain knitting or Fair Isle yoke patterns in colours dictated by merchants as interminable work.

Not for the first time, I wish that I could sit for hours in the Shetland Museum and Archives' study area and read for myself all the old books and papers about Shetland knitting: plain, lace, and Fair Isle. There are hundreds of items and books all told. If the article bibliographies of authors represented in *Shetland Textiles: 800BC to the Present* are any indicator, apart from the governmental reports about the Truck System inquiries, the snippets about knitting are spread throughout general books on Shetland by outsiders with only passing interest in the knitting. It would take years. How much would I find of the very early knitters themselves? Given the history of women and their lack of recognition through publishing, I don't like the chances of the voices of many very early Shetlanders, and women at that, making it into print.

There is more than one way of leaving a mark. I remember two pattern books from the collections I had seen in Lerwick; inside were geometric designs for knitting stitches drawn by hand, the soft covered books themselves passed down in families. I think of oral traditions the world over—stories, myths, folk tales, songs and games—that passed cultural knowledge down through the generations, and contemporary attempts to capture the essence of their old-timers' language and manual skills before they pass from living memory. I think of my mother teaching me to knit.

My Godmother, Auntie Ruth, was never without knitting and I used to watch her too and learn. Unfortunately, there was no special book of knitting patterns handed down through the years, though I do have Mum's handwritten recipe book. Mum knitted from commercial patterns from a weekly magazine called *New Idea* or various wool companies' pattern brochures if they caught her eye. I remember her knitting grey school pullovers for me and my siblings. She didn't look

as though she was enjoying herself. She sighed repeatedly and the corners of her mouth drooped.

Grey days, grey yarn: she was often depressed. For days, sometimes weeks, she would fail to speak or smile. Everything seemed to be too much effort. It was as though she moved away from us as she listened to an inner rhythm we couldn't hear or understand. I remember with a shudder the soggy tomato sandwiches she sent for my Christmas school lunch. They were disgusting. No-one wanted to share or swap. Her emotional exhaustion permeated them. They ended their sorry existence in a bin.

I think: poor Mum. After a lifetime of doing battle with depression myself, and now I've been diagnosed with hyperparathyroidism which itself carries a sentence of overwhelming fatigue, I understand her viscerally in ways that eluded me as a naïve child.

In Real Shetland Yarns: A Collection of Woolly Tales and Memories, I enjoyed forty stories told about Shetland wool. They were selected from many entries to a local competition. Shetland dialect features strongly in some of the stories. Spell checker runs hot.

Whin I wis a peerie lass, da cru wis a source o' gret
intertainment. Dugs fechtin, men flightin, wimmen flaagin dir
haps an peenies, ta git da sheep in.⁹

There are stories of raising sheep, rearing milk-fed lambs, days shepherding and *rooing* (plucking wool by hand from sheep), and shearing and carding the wool. Favourite aunts, favourite *ganseys*, grandpas and grandmas, yarn, knitting needles and knitting machines are frequent story elements. A constant theme was selling the knitting, with an undercurrent of knitting as gifts. Nostalgia and wool link past, and present, theirs and mine.

⁹ Mary Brown, "Oo Bags and Hentilags," in *Real Shetland Yarns* (Garthspool, Lerwick: Shetland Amenity Trust, 2012), 56-57.

Generally, my yarn finds its way to my needles ready spun in ball or skein. I get a stronger hint of sheep when I remember the smell of sheep's wool and lanolin at the Royal Adelaide Show or the feel of raw fleece in my hands when I knitted a chunky square straight from unspun wool at the 2008, Evje Sheep Show in Norway. A feeling of distance from the raw product makes me want to re-join the SA Handspinners and Weavers Guild. Anita and I discussed it and agreed we would, but, then, I broke my ankle. It will need to wait until I can drive again.

I shake off the maudlin feeling that overcomes me whenever I dwell too long on the relative brevity of my family history in Australia. Before the nineteenth century my family history is tied to that of Scotland, Cornwall and Southern England. Perhaps it is a post-colonial malady to feel estranged from the land of one's birth in the face of Indigenous claims to custodianship, over many millennia, of the land. At a practical level, it ticks me off that the records and artefacts I want to access are so far away. Thirty hours to London: pity about the current state of supersonic flight. Concord from Australia would be fantastic.

At heart I know that contemporary knitting, my knitting, would not be what it is today without the historical influence of Shetland knitters of stranded colour work and lace knitting. The Fair Isle garments I knitted by machine at the Jam Factory can trace their heritage straight back to the patterns that flowed from Shetland, first as completed garments, and then as exported patterns. The stranded colour work patterns I designed myself carried on the Shetland tradition of innovation and adaption, which itself allowed the Shetland wool and knitting industry to hold such a dominant place, and then survive and remake itself an island economy for greater than 400 years.

We finally made it to Joel and Speckie's place. It was her birthday. The farmland on the way up showed promise of a good year. Most of the fields were planted and sewn, with lush new green shoots after

good winter rain. The drought years of nearly a decade ago, when brown and blackened crops covered the land despite much hard work, had reeked of despair.

The road was familiar and we marked off the landmarks, the stand of huge cacti, the alpacas in with the sheep, and the road cutting with ancient vertical striations of colour, the result of primordial upheaval on our ancient island continent.

While our evening meal cooked in the oven, Speckie and I knitted together. She was making a variegated purple and white garter stitch bag to match a scarf she had already knitted for Lainey. I managed a couple of rounds of my BMC wrap. Lainey stood in front of me watching. In the manner of toddlers, her often mysterious sentences have form, and they rose or fell in counterpoint of statement and questions—particularly, ‘What is?’

Lainey’s eyes were intent. She reached forward and gently felt a cockleshell between finger and thumb. Then she touched the tip of the circular needle. She looked at me and said, ‘Ooh,’ and then turned and pointed at her mother’s work. And so it went, perhaps a new knitter in the making, and all without many words.

A week of intensive knitting finished the second half of the BMC wrap. I knew I should hand-graft the two halves together without delay. Letting them rest in my Liberty knitting bag, a treasured souvenir from London, was a recipe for delay and procrastination. I ignored the inner voices of experience and fished out the wool and pattern to begin my Wool brokers Fair Isle Socks.

Inevitably, I thought of the waistband of the abandoned pullover Olly’s Allover, which I’d originally intended to knit. I have the swatch for it pinned to my mood-board in my craft room, and have come full circle in thinking I should complete it—not now, maybe later, cautioned the voice of reason.



Wool Brokers Socks

Wool Brokers Socks is a pattern by Lesley Smith, who grew up in a family of knitters on the island of Burra, Shetland. The pattern is in the book *Knit Real Shetland: 15 Projects in Real Shetland Wool from Jamieson & Smith*. The introduction to the book is by Kate Davies and it is where I originally found Olly's Allover.

I ignore the stirring of creative juices. I recognise the impulse to design and knit my own creations. Again, reason says not now, there isn't time. Stick to the plan; relive your travels through knitted artefacts. Do as you please once your doctorate is submitted. I acquiesce reluctantly.

Just as well, the socks were so engaging and were particularly beautiful. They were to be knitted in Jamieson & Smith's 2ply, Jumper Weight yarn, 100% Shetland wool. The original background was white. I found it too stark and substituted a natural sheep colour, beige. Against this ground, stylised, four-petal, flower motifs which put me in mind of a heraldic device ran down the leg onto the upper

foot. A castellated vertical border either side separated the decoration in front from that in the back. The ankle band was striped rib. The sole was striped. The heel, known as an afterthought heel, was knitted last from live stitches held temporarily in the work on waste yarn.

Four contrast yarns were used to knit the geometric patterning. They were beautiful to my eye. They were a subtle blend of many coloured heathery fibres which can be inadequately described as rusty pink, reddish purple, blue purple and purple blue. In reality, they morphed each into the other to produce a harmonious, but lively, palette. I was forced to peer intently at the pattern chart to discern where one colour ended and the next began, with colour changes every two to three rounds, except the rusty pink which was reserved for a single round of colour pop at the beginning and middle of each motif.

My first sock attempt on five double pointed 3mm bamboo needles was a failure. It looked beautiful, but I was off gauge and the sock was far too big. My second attempt on five short double-pointed 2.5mm steels produced the correct medium ladies size. The ankle band was striped rib: columns of two knit stitches in neutral chased two purl stitches in colour about each round. The layers of complexity appealed to me. I wasted time stroking the partial sock and imagining what the work would look like once it was dressed by washing in wool wash and coaxed into its final shape; it was only then that the fibres bloom and impart life to the stylised flowers.

I knitted the background natural stitches with my right hand—in the British manner—throwing the yarn around the needle with my right forefinger. This yarn sat above the contrast yarns I picked—in the Continental fashion—with my left forefinger. Whichever yarn was carried above would recede. The yarn carried below would sit forward on the design. Consistency was critical for the visual realisation of the design.

I was enjoying the process. After years of holding my bottom lip with my teeth in an excess of nervous concentration, my skill level

at Fair Isle had finally reached a stage where I could honestly say I could relax into the rhythm of the work. The colour sequence of each row was a cadence in my mind. The pattern of vertical and horizontal repeats read like a map. The back floats of resting colour stranded evenly in tidy array so that the public side of the work was smooth, devoid of corrugations caused by excess tension.

Anna Zilboorg in *Knitting for Anarchists* explains this release from tortuously following each line of pattern. I have never had trouble doing this in other forms of knitting. It has only been colour stranded work which has previously defeated my ability to read my work in advance. I had to unlearn following the coloured chart with ruler and pencil, and learn not to be like a trained Pavlovian pooch. Lucy Neatby's DVDs have been a huge help. Her notions of happy stitches have been of inordinate benefit, and I credit her with teaching me to fully utilise both hands.

I endorse the oft-repeated claim that knitting is therapeutic in the face of trauma and adversity. The 'new yoga' is only the current knitting wave's way of saying what makers since the dawn of time have known: a curious calm permeates the entire being when skill level and challenge in handwork are in perfect balance. Psychologists call this phenomenon 'Flow'.

In Ann Hood's book *Comfort: A Journey through Grief*, written after the tragic death of her five year old daughter, Grace, she writes:

Soon I became a voracious knitter. I bought more yarn, a crazy variegated self-striping ball of yellow, pink, and purple, and began to knit when-ever stress or my overactive grieving brain took over...There were many days when all I did was knit. Once, after nearly eight hours of knitting, I could not even open my cramped fingers. I knit scarves and hats and socks, and as I knit, every part of me calmed. The quiet click of the needles, the rhythm of the stitches, the warmth of the yarn and the blanket or scarf that spilled across my lap, made those hours tolerable.¹⁰

¹⁰ Hood, 47.

This same induction of calm is reflected time and time again when knitters describe the benefits of knitting.

Her words cause me to revisit my memories of my stays in hospital. That decade or so ago, when traumatic memory exploded and overwhelmed my ability to function normally, I knitted constantly. It wasn't pretty; it was desperation. I had a ball of maroon wool and two straight plastic needles. I walked around and around a ten metre partition in the hospital, or rocked on my bed at home knitting as I moved. I knitted a straight length of fabric, forty stitches per row.

I won't glorify it by calling it a scarf, as that tyrannical nurse, Rik sneeringly referred to it, nor any other tangible name. It was my lifeline to sanity. I knitted row after row in the most basic stitch. Knit forty stitches, turn, repeat over and over. When I reached the end of the yarn, I didn't undo it. I pulled the work from the needle, grabbed the loose end of yarn and knitted by unravelling the fabric. My parasitic twins grew from needle to needle for the best part of a year.

'Why don't you knit something worthwhile?' bewildered observers asked. They didn't understand that the knitting anchored my mind to my body, and re-knitted my sanity. I had no capacity for pleasure, beauty or creativity. At the end of the year, I rolled the frayed knitting in to a ball and threw it into a bin.

I was forever changed. I thought of myself—without a shred of originality—as that magical bird, the phoenix, which had risen from the ashes of its own death. I had entered the wondrous persona of 'Wise Crone'. In celebration, I knitted a dainty, dusty-pink cardigan with ruching at the scoop neck, hem, and cuffs, threaded through with a pretty bronze satin ribbon tied in a triumphant bow.

There comes a time, usually at the end of a long day, when I can write, read and knit no longer, but am not quite ready for bed. At such times, the 'just one more' addictive ease of [pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com) is akin to the card game, solitaire. The offerings skim past my eyes, interrupted as images of interest are pinned to my bulletin boards. What a person chooses to pin says much about their personality, or who they want to be, or even who they are pretending to be. As a

child, I loved making scrapbooks. Unfortunately, the proper paste I wanted was too expensive, and I made do with flour and water, which suited the silverfish just fine.

Late to a party that had been running for years, hand work on garments for the label Alabama Chanin was catching my eye, simple shapes, stencil on stencil, cut outs and applique, embroidery and beading. Liam gave me a book on houses built from wood as a welcoming present when I came home in that moonboot. Unfortunately, the book was a duplicate. A trade in was the answer. On Pinterest there were pins of three books by Natalie Chanin: *Alabama Stitch Book*, *Alabama Studio Style*, and *Alabama Studio Sewing + Design*. I took a calculated risk and ordered all three in lieu of the returned house book.

‘They can be your birthday present?’ Liam said. I had his measure. Any excuse avoiding shopping.

It is never technique and product alone that attracts me. It is the promise of immersion in an alternate reality that is the seduction. The books arrived. I ignored my writing. I didn’t touch my knitting. I read them from cover to cover and Liam made his own meals. My cheeks were flushed, my fingers trembled with excitement.

All the garments were sewn by hand using knit jersey, both recycled T-shirts and bought organic yardage. I remembered a blue and white checked gingham summer top and skirt I made by hand for my sister when she was four. I was in bed with a badly sprained ankle from a swallow dive off a springboard at Gym Camp gone wrong. Not the camp where I wore my new pink Aran, but another one in summer down at a beach.

I had the material to hand in a full-gathered skirt I no longer wanted and was bored. I sewed the outfit together with thicker than usual cotton thread to make it robust and outlined the edges with white chunky running stitches. Within Natalie Chanin’s books, I see this basic, timeless notion taken into vivacious, contemporary bloom.

The full titles of the books are apt summaries. *Alabama Stitch Book: Projects and Stories Celebrating Hand-Sewing, Quilting, and*

Embroidery for Contemporary Sustainable Style (2008). *Alabama Studio Style: Projects, Recipes & Stories Celebrating Sustainable Fashion & Living* (2010). *Alabama Studio Sewing + Design: A Guide to Hand-Sewing an Alabama Chanin Wardrobe* (2012).

An exciting old/new enthusiasm had me in its grip. The enterprise was half way around the globe, but tantalisingly present through the printed pages opened on my lap. I make the situation more immediate, more accessible. I browsed Alabama Chanin's website and drooled over yardages, colour charts, spools of thread, stencils and offerings for the DIY follower, who either can't or doesn't want to buy finished garments and household linens.

My wish list full of organic, Chanin-groupie goodies would bankrupt us if I had started pushing the 'add to cart' buttons. I stopped and thought about knitting my sock. Time to think, pull back, but, I was too wired by creative possibilities for rationality. My resources—textiles, texts and equipment—had degenerated into a disordered mess. Recent rummages, as I'd tried to pick up the threads of a fraught year, had made it worse. I started to tidy the space, was striving to turn an obsessive moment into a productive one.

It was four months since I'd broken my ankle and the relatively inflexible joint greatly hindered my tidying attempts. I still walked with a pronounced limp, which added to my chronic back pain. A screw and the end of the steel plate bulged just below the surface of skin over ankle bone and abraded when I sat in my favourite cross-legged position on the floor.

By the time I wore myself out and called a halt to physical exertion for the day, I was ready to think calmly about gorgeous contemporary handmade goods and their antecedents throughout a long human history of making and mending from locally available resources.

Not only local, I protested, archaeologists find trade goods from afar in seemingly remote, isolated places, which brought me full circle to Shetland. I saw many of the same principles driving the

designs and hand production in Chanin's work, as in the knitting of Shetland and Fair Isle.



Memory

My mind was unsettled by flashbacks. I had been relatively free of them for ages and I didn't want to return to the terror. I had paid my dues: it wasn't fair. I wanted my calm mind back. A loved one was in the grips of an acute episode of an otherwise chronic, mental illness. I had visited them in hospital.

Unfortunately, it was the same ward where I spent many long days fighting my traumatic demons. I thought the trauma was behind me. I am constantly caught unawares by triggers which catapult me into the dark places of my past. They taunt me, spurned incubi which refuse to return to the devil responsible for their birth.

It didn't help that Mum had died a full year ago. In general, it had been a horrible year, bar some pleasant episodes. My brothers, my sister and some of our families met up at the Robin Hood Hotel to toast her memory. Always, my favourite mental image is of her blue eyes twinkling with a half-smile on her lips. I am comforted by

memories of the skin to skin contact of her hand in mine the times she defied Dad and stood by me.

Inevitably there was much talk of him, ninety and very ill. He was a difficult man at best and was running true to form in the nursing home. It was always impossible to satisfy his demands and, like Jenny Diski writes of her mother in *Skating to Antarctica*, I have had no voluntary contact with him since her funeral, that was, other than what I heard through my siblings.

At home, the distant and near past segued. I pulled a half-crocheted blue and neutral grannie afghan from my craft cupboard. I worked the easy stitches. The process stilled my mind when the Fair Isle sock for my PhD research was too demanding. Rumples climbed into my lap, and I quieted as the sound of his purr and the rhythmic movement of my fingers harmonised.

I often think about the rheumatoid arthritis which crippled my mother's (and her father's) hands. My own finger joints are hot and swollen.

'Yes, it's rheumatoid arthritis,' the specialist said when my hands were assessed using a new ultrasound technique. 'You can see the joint erosions.'

In the end, Mum could neither manage sewing, nor knitting needles or crochet hooks, nor hold and turn the pages of a book. It scares me. I think of extreme alternatives. When I was quite young, after reading *Scott of the Antarctica*, I taught myself to write with my right toes in case I ever lost fingers to frostbite. I was so earnest about it. Children are unpredictable in their fears.

I've seen a documentary where a girl, with no arms or hands, put on boots and rode a horse, and a Spanish artist, in the same situation, painted with his mouth and swam after diving into a pool. Recently, a Queensland man lost all limbs to septicaemia. Specialists have fitted him with new arms and legs. Then there are all the communication innovations available to help those who are differently abled. I place my trust in the specialist's advice that their early intervention with my hands can save me from Mum and Big

Pop's fate of crippled hands. If not, I hope I have the stamina to embrace new alternatives.

I was immersed in research about Shetland. My mind forged a link between ideas about function, disability and the numberless stitches the Shetland woman and girls knitted. They were not dainty ladies with smooth skin. Now, Liam does most of the rough housework. I am spared the pain it causes me. The skin of my hands is smooth, like those of Victorian ladies in their parlours. I can remember a time when I scrubbed and gardened. I rarely wore gloves. The skin of my hands would roughen with torn quicks and the yarn would snag, flow less freely.

What then of the Shetland knitters: the crofters and the town-based housewives? The crofter women, in particular, did heavy physical work within and outside the home. They handled the spades which cut the peat, built rock walls (and roads), gardened, and gutted fish, and picked peat and heather from the wool for carding, spinning and washing.

In what state were their hands? Perhaps the snag of yarn on rough skin was the least of their worries. What did constant knitting, at high speed, courtesy of knitting *pins* rammed into a horsehair stuffed cloth or leather belt, do to their joints? I hadn't noted any mention of this until Sarah Laurensen highlights that a Shetland Museum and Archives catalogue entry for a 1930 pullover by Jeannie Jarmson had tiny stitches in rayon which gave her 'painful, calloused hands.'¹¹

Repetition Strain Injury is a modern concept. A decade ago, when I knitted my way back from the edge to sanity, knitted those parasitic twins day and night, I gave myself RSI. My arms were leaden; I couldn't lift them properly, nor knit at all for a year. The solution was total rest. I can't help but wonder at all the trades and crafts people in the past who have suffered from RSI or arthritis without the benefit of sophisticated treatment or the option of

¹¹ Laurensen, 108.

stopping what caused their problem in the first place. It was a painful choice between work, starvation, and the Poor House.

The anniversary of Mum's death, and talk of Dad's illnesses, had made me maudlin again: it was time to change tack. I took out my Fair Isle, Wool Broker's Sock. It only needed 20 more rounds and the foot would be finished. Then it was time for my first attempt at an after-thought heel. The morphing of colour-coded squares into stitches would demand concentration.

Now was not the time to get out old photos of Mum as I had intended. I was fragile. It was my birthday a week ago. I am not used to the awareness that what should be a happy day was only separated by seven days from my mother's demise. No doubt the shadow that knowledge casts would lessen with time. I thought, better soft music, better the feel of the yarn and the rhythm of the knitting. I selected a CD and picked up my knitting. They would reset my mood, sooth me. I always think of the process as the knitter's lullaby.

Each day, I think that it is essential for a knitting crone to have a cat. Not just any cat: a black cat. Rumple, my eternal kitten, was identified as a Burmese cross by the vet because of the white fur at the base of otherwise black hair—chocolate brown in full sun—and the surprise of almost masked Abyssinian markings.

He is no ordinary cat, though, together with Anita, I believe each cat has just as much personality as any dog. Talking of dogs, Rumple thinks he is one. There are electronic components on Liam's work bench. They look like mutated sperm. He grabs them by their tails, carries them through the house and dumps them at my feet.

If it were only the components I'd think 'cat catch rat', but there is more. He herds Anita, nips at her Achilles tendons, and drives her from my embrace. He hisses, and then chomps if she resists. I belong to him. He arrived home having ridden from the centre of town on a bus in a plaid pillowcase.

'I couldn't leave him in the pet shop,' Anita said. 'It was his eyes. They begged me to free him.'

'Take him back,' Liam and I chorused on and off for a week.

'You already have La Petite and Tabitha. He is one too many.' She was obdurate. Then unaccountably, Rumples attached himself to me, mistletoe to a gum tree. Anita won. She clinched the deal on my birthday. She gave me adoption papers that formalised him as 'my furry son.' For the first time in my life, I had sole custodianship of a pet.

Each day, I set aside a time when Rumples and I commune. I joke it is mindful parenting, a time when I focus on him and the moment. It is bitter sweet. I think of Mum and the moment when life's flame is snuffed out. There are many family pets buried in the grove of trees in our eastern garden. Sub-consciously, I am storing memories against the time when he joins them. Like Mum. Maudlin again: I can't help it...Oh, Mum!

He sits on my lap, head back, eyes sliding from mine. Or I lie on my left side. The right is out of the question since those long ago, back-deranging, car accidents. I wait for the acute pain in back and ankle to dull to a thrum. The ankle break is six months ago, but still swollen and very painful.

Rumples cosies up next to my body. Sphinx like, he extends, and then crosses his forearms, claws digging in to the flabby flesh of my upper arm crooked under my cheek. I release his claws umpteen times before he settles. A contented purr answers my hand; repeated strokes flatten his silky fur. Such is our ritual. Sometimes, I doze off, lulled, despite daily pressures, other times I bounce up and begin writing with my mind set on creativity.

There are adrenaline junkies who get high jumping out of planes, climbing the face of frozen waterfalls, and conquering other impossible odds. I felt that rush when I jumped off the shed roof into the honey suckle when I was a child. Now endorphins are my chemical of choice. Little pops of feel-good flood my system when I stroke Rumples, induce self-hypnosis and knit, crochet, or stitch.

Knitting, or crocheting, and stroking him work as my vehicles for writing. My hands flow through the movements in measured time. Diverse thoughts flit through my mind. Ideas are first glimmers, and then coalesce into words and sentences. I grab my current visual diary, the blank page offers no constraint—and scribble almost illegibly in my haste, lest uncut gems escape from memory—time enough to polish them later. On the page, the words assume a life of their own. Echoes of my thoughts stream through my fingers. Form and texture emerge. I am emptied. I put down the pen, pick up knitting needles and wait to mine the next glimmer.



Frida Kahlo

It is day ten of an episode of acute lower back pain. I try again and again to ignore the tight clench of bone on a protruding disc that is so intense it makes me nauseous. The slightest movement is agonising as nerves protest. Pain is one thing; I am used to that. Not being able to move freely is worse. I have tried every trick I know: heat, physio, exercise, rest. All fail to solve the problem. Just have to wait it out. But I have goals to meet, can't be lying around here for days on end. At least my spirits are high, and depression with its debilitating lock on my mind has failed to join the party, as it so often does.

At times like these as I balance a small clipboard and pad on my belly and try to write, I think of Frida Kahlo. Like many before me, I count her as one of my role models. All pain is relative—a cliché but true. Frida Kahlo, beautifully portrayed by Salma Hayek in the movie *Frida*, was a Mexican artist born in 1907. She died in 1954, a suspected suicide. If she did kill herself, it was truly a mercy killing

and it strikes me as more remarkable that she bore her pain for as long as she did.

When she was eighteen-years-old she was a victim of an accident between the bus she was riding and a streetcar. Her pelvis was pierced and broken by a steel rod, leaving her unable to carry a pregnancy to term. Her spine, shoulder and collarbone were broken. Her right leg—already damaged and shorter than the left because of childhood polio—was broken in multiple places and her right foot crushed. Frida was not expected to live, but survived to recuperate over long slow months in a full-body plaster cast. Throughout her lifetime she underwent some 35 operations including several therapeutic abortions.

She was tempestuously married twice to the philandering Mexican muralist Diego Riviera, her 'second accident'. During her lifetime she was better known as Diego's wife who wore exotic, Mexican costumes and flowers and painted confronting self-portraits, but, since the late 1970s—due in part to feminism, Chicano politics and multiculturalism—she emerged as a renowned artist and role model.¹²

Art was, for her, more than a discipline and a career; it was a language that allowed her to articulate a contradictory universe of narratives, a form of inquiry through which she excavated as well as fashioned her subjectivity. Painting herself and her worlds was a passport to mental sanity, a form of therapy that helped her deal with extreme pain and countless operations, and no doubt also served as a refuge from an everyday life dictated by illness.¹³

There are many biographical and art criticism books based on her life, diary and paintings. Often her life and work are conflated. A favourite volume is *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self*

¹² Hayden Herrera, "Frida Kahlo's Legacy: The Poetics of Self," in *Frida Kahlo*, ed. Elizabeth Carpenter (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 2007), 56.

¹³ Victor Zamudio-Taylor, "Frida Kahlo, Mexican Modernist," *ibid.*, 17.

*Portrait.*¹⁴ An analysis of this diary in a book chapter I enjoy and admire is 'Articulate Image, Painted Diary: Frida Kahlo's Autobiographical Interface'¹⁵ (2002) by Mimi Yang. It causes me to understand more of my own motivations when I write, read and knit. It is the process, the journey, not the product that is so valuable. I write to 'excavate' and 'articulate' my circumstances, to make an accommodation with pain and disability. I read and I knit as part of that unavoidable embrace, but also to escape it into alternate worlds.

On days like today, when I can't sit to write or knit, when I am tired from standing or lying down and cranky, I think of Frida Kahlo's mettle. She painted lying flat on her back. She held her arm upwards and painted on a canvas somehow attached to the canopy of her bed.

I try not to protest, not to whine, 'Why me?' Unlike Frida Kahlo, unlike the people with head and spinal injuries I saw in Hampstead Rehabilitation centre while convalescing after my triple ankle fracture, I will soon move from lying, through to sitting, and to standing. I am never pain free, but I am well off compared to many. But, I am human, and I resent the time that pain and disability steal from me—have stolen from me over many years.

I watch my granddaughter, Lainey, grow and note that she is now the same age Joel was when I was first injured. I am amazed when faced with her energy that I coped at all. I am amazed that he, and then Anita, coped with me.

I have learnt through many bouts with back pain since, that it will right itself when it is ready and not before. Like any laggard, it refuses to be hurried for my comfort or convenience. This time, all I did was rock my pelvis slightly forward and felt something in my back shift.

¹⁴ *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self Portrait*, (New York: Harry N Abrams Inc, La Vaca Independiente S.A. de C.V., 1995).

¹⁵ Mimi Y Yang, "Articulate Image, Painted Diary: Frida Kahlo's Autobiographical Interface," in *Interfaces: Women Image Autobiography Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).

How did I manage to avoid a major, acute episode as I travelled from Australia to Europe twice? All those kilometres, Australia to Europe—the unwieldy luggage—then, I rock my pelvis once and am confined to bed. I must have had a host of fairy godmothers looking after me.



The Flying Koala

Christmas is two weeks away. I am conscious of the ending of the old year and the promise of a new one. Not surprisingly, I now mark time from before/after my mother's death. The second of November is now a personal New Year's Eve. Superstition is a strange concept. I don't believe in it, black cats or ladders; why, then, does extreme misfortune run in threes? This past year has been a sod: my mother's death, my two operations, and then my broken ankle with two more operations, and finally the severe mental illness of a loved one. I am glad to see the back of the old year.

It is commonplace to take stock at the end of a year. I have heard it said that a person doesn't fully grow up until their parents die. My mother is dead and my father is lost to me. The burden of compliance to Dad's unreasonable, narcissistic demands has lifted from my shoulders and mind. Old issues with Mum rest unspoken because they were overtaken long before her death by her unconditional love for us all. Now, not before time, the guilt and

shame from childhood sexual abuse—why don't they call it rape?—which stymied my emotional growth are largely of the past. I stand free of the role of the dutiful child-daughter and finally know what it is to be my own woman.

My mind pleases me, it is the calmest and most peaceful I have ever known. For too long, I dragged the past around like a shadow sack on my back, or dreamed fruitlessly of a future free of mental pain. When the past was purged, I was lost. I literally didn't know how to live in the present. It took me two trips to Europe before I realised that the solution, the recipe for daily life, was accessible to me without leaving home.

In the distant and near past, I have attended multiple training courses and have read broadly on personal motivation and development. Time management was the Brazil nut which defied all attempts to crack it.

Lists and goals and schedules were begun and lost to episodic mood swings when the past intruded. I didn't realise the consequences of what was happening to me, and to others it must have seemed as though I was driven by 'when I feel like it', 'when the mood strikes', and 'when I'm inspired'. Achievements were haphazard, or in obsessive bursts, at the expense of all else.

Finally, I am in a position where my mental health and understanding concur. If I do the work, tick off goals met on daily, weekly, six monthly and three year lists or plans, I can move mountains, even the ones called Doctorate and Life.

Sometimes old responses to stress and physical disability will knock me off balance, but I have served a very long apprenticeship: I know how to pick up the pieces and start over.

Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns most recently gave me a metaphorical kick-start with their Thinkwell training courses 'Turbocharge Your Writing' and 'PhD Completions Master Class'. They unpick motivational factors and candidates' excuses and show a better path to frequent writing and related tasks.

Then, Julia Cameron appealed greatly in *Artist's Way* when she writes, 'Question: Do you know how old I'll be by the time I learn to play the piano? Answer: The same age you will be if you don't.'¹⁶ What a tidy way to say hogwash when someone is denying their own capacity for creative growth. *Artist's Way* is a twelve week guided course on unblocking creativity.

I am up to week five and have consigned those who followed negative personal agendas and sabotaged my earlier creative efforts to Douglas Adams's (*Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*) 'B' Ark of mediocrity, which had a captain who spent most of his time taking baths. The Ark was full of those who were 'bloody hopeless' and it was pre-programmed to crash into a planet. Once on the planet, the 'B' Ark's occupants held endless meetings, and obsessed about impractical topics, such as nasally-fitted fire, instead of gathering wood and keeping warm.

I have learnt the hard way how to keep warm. The process or journey through endeavours, dreams for the future and life are guided by attention to the littlest actions and enriched by a focus on the smallest details, such as the purple and yellow at the throat of a wild orchid.

Between 604BC-531BC in *The Way of Lao-tzu*, Lao-tzu (a Chinese Philosopher) famously wrote what has been predominantly translated as: 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' It has taken me forever to be at a point of balance where the voices of the past are sufficiently muted for me to hear this message and embrace his millennia old message.

Lately, Anita and I have begun to call those famous steps 'fairy steps' to include an element of compassion for when the self is vulnerable and struggling in the face of chronic pain and depression, and needs to tread lightly.

¹⁶ Julia Cameron, *The Complete Artist's Way: Creativity as Spiritual Practice* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007), 143.

I have trialed my new motivational enthusiasms through ten days intermittently in bed with acute back pain and through dark days of depression. They passed the test of adverse conditions. In the past, I tried to find my balance with a trip to Norway. I tried again with my trip to England, Shetland, Scotland and Ireland.

Each time, when I returned, illness and extended family crises knocked me off my perch and made me feel as though all the time, money and effort had been misspent. Now I have found my balance without leaving home, and, through my souvenirs, diaries, photos and memory knitting, I can refocus on my experiences overseas instead of seeing them as failed attempts to regain control of my life.

My enthusiasms have permeated my memory knits. I'm knitting every day now and the work is growing under my fingers. The first Wool broker's sock is finished. The sock is beautiful but it is a tad too snug on my foot. I am knitting the second one with less tension on the yarn to see if I can match the pattern's specified gauge.

I decided the design elements of the Aran Shawl I had chosen to knit, Alice Starmore's 'Maidenhair', would show better in her Hebridean 3ply yarn colour way called Pebble Beach. It is a neutral with subtle flecks of colour. Much easier on the eyes for night time knitting than the rich, dark-blue Selkie colourway which I will use for one of her less complicated designs, her 'Margaret Beaufort' cardigan jacket after my doctorate is finished. After all, my schedule is already challenging enough without squeezing in a whim. But how can I resist knitting? It has been the catalyst for posttraumatic growth.

In another strand of activity, I am losing a lot of weight for health reasons with a dose of vanity. I am reinventing myself. Past hesitation is gone. Last week, I had my hair cut short to show my newly, excavated cheekbones. I feel lighter in body and spirit.

Plans for future activities, just as my life is, are works in progress and ongoing. Am I travelling too fast? Expecting too much of the future? Time will provide the answer. My track record is cause for concern, but that was then and this is now. If I fall flat on my face,

or more likely my back, there is always the example of my friend the flying koala.

A scenario from last summer is etched in my mind. I was standing at the kitchen window. A movement caught my eye. I looked up in time to see a koala launch itself into thin air from the massive horizontal log which Joel and Anita had dubbed the 'pirate log' when they were youngsters. The window frame hid what happened next. Liam was outside. We met on the veranda. I told him about the koala just as he told me about the same koala: he'd spotted it mid-air before it had crashed into a eucalyptus tree's trunk. The koala had bounced to the ground, and then climbed back up again. Between us we'd seen the whole event. Ever since, I have pictured myself as that flying koala; constantly, it seems, I must be prepared to dust myself off and start over.



THE END

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Introduction

I begin this chapter, with explicit questions and answers about my project. It seems fitting to first address my contribution to original knowledge, summarise the research process and my aspirations, and, finally, to see how the hypothesis at the core of that contribution evolved.

Taking Stock

What is your original contribution to knowledge?

The definition and contextualisation of Knit Lit generally, and the placing in context and discussion of autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience in knitting literature (Knit Lit) is my original contribution to knowledge. It fills a gap in the literature about books that target millions of knitting enthusiasts world-wide, and contributes literary evidence to the interdisciplinary research, including clinical work, on knitting as therapeutic.

How do you define Knit Lit?

As explored in Chapter 1, I endorse an inclusive view of the term Knit Lit to cover all the literature of knitting, both fiction and nonfiction, including those commentaries and knitting patterns based on inspirational literature as reasonably Knit Lit.

I reject the argument that Knit Lit should be reserved as a descriptor of printed output from the contemporary knitting craze (1998-2017) given its association with online forms and networking is not present in earlier eras. I do this based on the intertextuality of historical and contemporary texts.

To do otherwise would lead to arbitrary distinctions that would see early editions excluded but reprints and facsimiles included because of publishing date. I believe this would run contrary to the

interests of the stakeholders in these publications, including those who reference these texts in knitting discourse.

What was your original hypothesis?

At the start of my project, I argue that these autobiographical, analogue texts in knitting literature (Knit Lit) position knitting as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events.

What are the products of your thesis?

There are three prominent products of this thesis. Firstly, there is the exegesis that is a critical exploration of my hypothesis. Secondly, there is a memoir that shows my experience of childhood sexual abuse, its consequences, and the interminable, circularity of my posttraumatic journey on the way to resilience. Lastly, there are knitted artefacts. Some are described in my memoir—these are not submitted for assessment—then there are all those blankets and shawls that were knitted purely so that I could use them in my methodology of knit, think, write, or not think at all. There are many UFOs—knitting speak for Unfinished Objects—fragments, swatches and mistakes that died of neglect during phases of my work when I was too incapacitated to function.

Are these products the tip of the doctoral iceberg?

In short...yes. Among others, Graeme Harper's reflections on creative writing as process not only product, causes me to think of all the actions and activities—both formal and informal—that have accompanied my candidature.

He writes of 'pre-working and pre-working evidence'¹ and I think of my workroom/study as a repository: notes taken, books read, quotes noted, mind-maps drawn, Endnote and Advanced Endnote

¹ Graeme Harper, *On Creative Writing*, ed. Graeme Harper, New Writing Viewpoints (Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2010), 28.

and a dozen other RHD courses documented, a dozen Masterclasses at Flinders and The SA Writer's Centre outlined, Excel spreadsheets constructed, day/week/month/year planners updated and administrative bench marks—ethics/funding/annual reviews/milestones—submitted. Stepping stones, all, lessons synthesised, to advance the processes of learning to write the creative work in an academic environment.

Is there '[c]omplementary working and complementary evidence'?² This conjures thoughts of my university³ sponsored research trip to Norway for three months. I attended the Oslo University International Summer School, Blindern Campus, taking courses in 'Norwegian Literature' and 'The Art and Architecture of Norway' before meeting knitting author/designers as interview contacts in a clockwise transit of Norway.

Later, after one of my activity/intermission catastrophes caused a major break in momentum, I self-funded a knitting research trip to England, Scotland and Ireland including the islands of Shetland, Fair Isles, Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Arran. My memoir is the repository of immersion research from those forays.

What of 'final works (works that may or may not be disseminated)'?⁴ Will all those chapters or paragraphs that reside in my computer archive after being cut from my memoir, especially those about Norway, ever be read? Does it even matter? It was all part of the journey of learning the writing craft, learning how to master the processes involved in writing a full length manuscript.

There can be '[p]ostworks and post-working (which may be pre-working for future Creative Writing)'.⁵ There is editing the memoir, this exegetical poetics, conferences as presenter or participant, a future exploration of immersion memoir/creative non-

² Ibid., 28-29.

³ Flinders Overseas Research Trip Grant and ETHL Faculty Research Grant, both 2008

⁴ Harper, 29.

⁵ Ibid.

fiction, and the intention to devise a community based curriculum that exploits the contemplative aspect of 'flow'⁶ to enter, through knitting practices, self-life writing. How can I say fully what the full impact of my original contribution to knowledge has been when all the ripples of my passage are unknowable?

What is your experience of practice-led research?

This project has cemented my understanding of practice-led research as one where the process is central to the activity. As the author writes, a sub-conscious barrage of choices shapes what words find their way onto the page: form, vocabulary, description of situation and place, trajectory of the story and so on.

Often an issue is not amenable to resolution from memory or inner knowledge alone, and then recourse to external research is warranted. In the vernacular, the writing calls the tune. The story asks, for instance, 'How is a Shetland, lace shawl traditionally dressed?' and the answer is found in a book, online or by seeking an expert opinion.

Were your aspirations for this project met?

In the beginning, I wrote of overcoming weaknesses, learning the skills to write a thesis, mastering theoretical dimensions and achieving reader engagement. With a nearly completed thesis on the verge of submission, it is possible to say that the things I hoped for have in the main been resolved.

At great emotional cost to myself and those around me, I have learnt to accommodate my personal nemeses and weaknesses. I have made it through a journey of reading, writing, researching and knitting that confronted traumatic memories head on. From first appearances, the primary goal was to complete a doctorate. But in

⁶Robert DiNizzi, *Flow: Psychology, Creativity & Optimal Experience with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*, podcast audio, Video, accessed 03/02/2017, 2003, [Http://flinders.kanopystreaming.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/video/flow-psychology-creativity-optimal-experience](http://flinders.kanopystreaming.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/video/flow-psychology-creativity-optimal-experience).accessed 3/2/2017

retrospect, it is fair to say that beyond academic aspirations my sanity was at stake.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now possible to see how—when a life had been lived in the past and all self-esteem was gone—the driving need was reinvention and proof to self and others that intelligence is not erased by adverse experience.

There was intensive psychotherapy and its encouragement of writing as therapeutic. I should have looked more closely at the caveats. The small print that said state of mind can be driven by reliving nightmares as part of working with memory in pursuit of memoir. Many were the times that I wished I had signed on for a traditional English rather than creative writing doctoral project. A more contained ‘Analysis of Knit Lit Nonfiction’ without trauma or self would have been so much safer.

Often writing was too hard, too high a cost. In knitting and knitting literature I found what Gaston Bachelard described in *A Poetics of Space* as shelter against storms;⁷ in this case, life’s storms. They were safe havens, quiet coves where I could rest my troubled head on soft sand and marshal my strength.

Has the process been therapeutic? Yes. It gave me back my self-esteem. Has it been cathartic? Yes. It has given a measure of relief. Healing is only ever approximated. I’ve already written that, I know, but it is still applicable. Despite all the work I have done through this project, I still can’t publicly admit childhood sexual abuse into the title that will be read out at my graduation ceremony. My nuclear family will be there. Shame and self-blame—the Big Silence—is too deeply embedded, an endemic weed I can’t erase despite the imperative to stand as witness. I did say the creative and critical bleed one into the other—by the intrusion here it is still applicable.

The exegesis and creative work both use the literature of knitting as a vehicle for reader engagement. They try to make sense

⁷ Bachelard, 38-48.

of the stories of my life, and make those personal experiences, external influences and guiding theories available to others to use as they will.

The memoir is not as seamless as I would have preferred where the research is concerned because of the need for intense citation to avoid plagiarism, but it is still within the realms of readability. Better to be safe, sacrifice a modicum of aesthetic, rather than fail because of the institutional context of the endeavour.

When I consider writing as critical thinking and the formal exegesis as after the fact, despite the actual handshaking between critical and creative throughout the manuscript, I want to hide the manuscript and rewrite *ad infinitum*. This is the peril of perfectionism, faced by some (or many?) candidates, as they seek to push creative writing as an academic agenda with time limits, word counts and a first audience of examiners.

Why the Autobiographical 'I'?

In the early phases of the work, I tried several third person voices. It would have placed the trauma back a step by using an alternate name for the protagonist. However, immediacy of effect would have been sacrificed.

When it came to non-problematic interactions and interviews with well-known people, it didn't seem authentic to identify them and not disclose my role in the interaction. Despite that, I have changed the names of other casual participants in the story as a gesture to their privacy because I promised them anonymity.

Another reason for the first person is that the third person didn't work for an exegesis that was contextualising and discussing autobiographical trauma narratives by other knitter/authors.

Have you proved that you have made an original contribution to knowledge?

Yes. As already stated my original contribution to knowledge is the definition and contextualisation of Knit Lit, plus the placing in context

and discussion of Knit Lit autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience.

In the Introduction, I have detailed the genesis of my project and the way the book *Poetry in Stitches* drew my attention to the autobiographical 'I' in Knit Lit. I followed a research progression by identifying those texts that were autobiographical from other Knit Lit nonfiction, traditionally published books. The focus tightened and separated those autobiographies that were about trauma.

At the same time as I researched books by other knitter/authors, I immersed myself in the world of knitting and wrote my own example of a Knit Lit autobiography of trauma, flow, and resilience. Both undertakings were driven by practice-led research. I am reminded of an experience in Norway. Imagine six pairs of huskies harnessed to a quad bike. The gearing is set to make the dogs train and work, not strain. At each Y junction the lead huskie decides which path to take. Practice-led research is a process that poses questions, reaches Y junctions, and causes the researcher to find solutions. 'In Immersion memoir, the writer writes about the world in order to examine the self.'⁸

In Chapter 1, I outlined the history of Knit Lit so that the reader unfamiliar with this literature had the opportunity to orient to the broader context. Importantly, printed publications referring to knitting history and patterns have been in existence since the 1600s at least. Knit Lit fiction is a product of the contemporary knitting era. At the start of my research I thought this was also true of Knit Lit autobiography.

Instead, in Chapter 2, with the example of books by the trail-blazer Elizabeth Zimmerman, I realised that Knit Lit autobiography wasn't new to the period 1998-present as I had initially thought. Further, In Knit Lit nonfiction, autobiographical content is expressed in a range of forms: a sentence, a paragraph or full introduction in an

⁸ Hemley, 9.

otherwise pragmatic text, a person essay/story in an edited anthology, or a full monograph.

In Chapter 3, I resisted the urge to include anthologies, despite rich support for my hypothesis. I concentrated on discussing monographs. I found that trauma in knitting literature varies in some respects from the medicalised paradigm that informed my original understandings of the term. In Knit Lit, knitter/authors have a broader interpretation of trauma. A major difference is that the traumatic event does not have to be life threatening, rather it is presented as extreme stress, as extreme hardship.

Indicators of flow are evident in the majority of trauma texts examined. The authors refer to soothing, meditative experiences, write of being in a still place, and speak of hours passing without thinking about their external lives. Flow is not the only reason that they find knitting therapeutic but it is a significant catalyst. *Two Sweaters for my Father* by Perri Klass refers to other aspects of knitting such as family bonding and is silent about the issue of flow.

In most of the examples discussed the authors indicate that their journeys have been transformational. In general, they lean towards a posttraumatic growth model of resilience. *Knit with Courage, Live with Hope* which recounts Annie Modesitt's experiences with her husband's terminal illness is an exception. She still has the ultimate test ahead of her and—within the limits of the book's timeframe of one year—her demonstration of resilience is a work in progress.

While most of the texts tend to support my hypothesis, either explicitly or implicitly, it is the complexity of the healing process and the complexity of the progression to posttraumatic growth that causes me to question how much flow can be separated from other therapeutic attributes of knitting.

I therefore reassess my position and suggest an amendment to the hypothesis. I find that these autobiographical, analogue texts in knitting literature (Knit Lit) from 1998-2017 position knitting, in part,

as a source of flow that acts as a positive catalyst for the growth of resilience after traumatic events.

Future Research

This thesis is only a start to the project of discussing other forms of Knit Lit nonfiction. Analysis of Knit Lit autobiographical anthologies—as distinct from the monographs covered above—would make an exciting research project, as would those pragmatic or hybrid texts discussed in Chapter 1. Knit Lit fiction has received minor scholarly attention and offers opportunity for further in depth analysis.

Conclusion—Original Contribution to Knowledge

My doctoral project—‘To be fully herself: Autobiographies of Trauma, Flow, and Resilience in Knitting Literature (Knit Lit)’—offers an original contribution to knowledge. Detailed practice-led immersion research throughout the exegesis and the creative artefact collectively define and contextualise Knit Lit, plus place in context and discuss autobiographies of trauma, flow, and resilience in Knit Lit as my original contribution to new knowledge.



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