

---

---

## Knitting

**Leslie Pickering Francis**  
*University of Utah*

My grandmother had long silver hair, high blood pressure, and congestive heart failure. She wore the silver hair in a bun during the day and in a braid at night. I remember her sitting in the day parlor of my grandparents' southern Illinois bungalow, telling the same stories of their small town, over and over again. She was the first person from her family to finish high school and the fact that she had studied Latin was a source of great pride to her. (Studying Latin and eventually reading Lucretius in the original was how I got into philosophy, but that's the subject for another essay.) And she taught me how to knit.

The earliest I remember knitting was about when I'd learned to read "big" books, the kind that had chapters. My father was an only child, and his room was the half-finished entire second floor of their bungalow. The eaves were full of bookshelves: the Radio Boys, the Hardy Boys, the Bobbsey Twins, Bunny Brown and his Sister Sue, the entire series of Oz books, and Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*. My parents and I and my little sister would visit my grandparents for two weeks at a time, every summer, when the humidity in the Little Egypt area of southern Illinois seemed higher than the temperature and chigger bites itched intensely. All there was for me to do was read or knit with my grandmother as I listened to her stories. First the knitting involved a small spool with a hook to pull loops over yarn on the spool—the result was a long, thin tube that I curled into rugs for my doll's house at home. Then, I got "real" needles and learned how to make "grown up" things. I think I'd finished my first sweater by the time I was eleven or twelve, and I've never stopped knitting since.

What does knitting mean to me? It means connections to the women in my family, like my grandmother who lived a life of such limited horizons but sent her only son onto a life of great ambition and success as a lawyer in Washington, D.C., or my mother who took out more of her frustrations on needlepoint than on knitting. It means connections to fictional women, like the subversive Madame DeFarge (although I always resent, just a bit, the inevitable comparison when I knit in public). It means connections to all the ways in which women's lives have been reflected in the patterns that can be created from needles and string: the different Channel Island gansey patterns said to have been used to identify sailors lost at sea,<sup>1</sup> the Fair Isle intricacies of color and design,<sup>2</sup> Scandinavian patterns of stars and diamonds and shields,<sup>3</sup> and even the Aran patterns created for modern tourists.<sup>4</sup> I love the stories of women working together, like the stories of American Victorian domesticity told in Anne McDonald's magisterial history of knitting in the United States.<sup>5</sup> And I love how traditional patterns have been incorporated into modern manifestations of Scandinavian folk socks,<sup>6</sup> traditional African cloths,<sup>7</sup> or Andean motifs.<sup>8</sup> I love cabling, intarsia, two-color knitting, and entrelac.

Over the years of my knitting, I've made countless sweaters, blankets, socks, caps, environmentally friendly shopping bags, and even dishrags (they scrub stuff off pots wonderfully well, go straight into the washing machine with any load, and save plastic). I give them to family, friends, family of friends, auctions, and even keep a few for myself. To be honest, I don't even fully

know how they fare. Some are far too elaborate, some are misshapen (yes, even now, some things just don't quite hang right), and some are just plain warm and comforting I hope.

Knitting also appeals to my egalitarianism. Knitted garments are tough, functional. Hand-knit socks, with reinforcement woven-in, last far longer than commercially purchased ones. I've always thought that everyone should have an "after the revolution" job; mine would be clothing people—with what I knit or sew. Many years ago, Perri Klass, a pediatrician, fiction writer, and journalist, wrote a piece in the *New York Times* about knitting as a woman professional. At the time, she was a relatively junior member of the faculty at the Harvard Medical School, and she said she always looked around the room to see if anyone senior to her was knitting, before she pulled out her own handwork.<sup>9</sup> I thought then, and still believe, that this way of thinking was profoundly wrong. I try never to knit when I believe that I will insult someone in the room, because they will believe I'm not paying attention to them. (Those who know me, however, know that I pay attention far better when I'm knitting than when I'm not. But appearances really matter.) I wrote a letter of protest to the *Times* after the article appeared; they didn't publish it, and I never saw a letter to the editor that remarked on Klass's sense that knitting branded her as inferior and that she needed the protection of status in order to feel safe doing it. Anyway, I try to let people know that I knit in all meetings, all papers—even often when I'm reading something, the more complicated the better.

On at least one account, "knitting" means "to tie together."<sup>10</sup> There's no better way than this for me to answer the question why I knit.

### Endnotes

1. See, e.g., The Guernsey Knit Company, "The Story of the Guernsey." Available at <http://www.guernseyknitwear.co.uk/story.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2008.
2. Ann Feitelson. *The Art of Fair Isle Knitting: History, Technique, Colors & Patterns* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1997).
3. Sheila McGregor. *Traditional Scandinavian Knitting* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004).
4. For a debunking of the history of Aran patterns, see Alice Starmore, *Aran Knitting* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1997). The last time I checked Amazon.com, this book was out of print and used editions sold for \$269!!! <http://www.amazon.com>. Accessed April 30, 2008.
5. Anne L. McDonald. *No Idle Hands: A Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Random House, 1990).
6. Nancy Bush. *Folk Socks* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1994).
7. Marianne Isager. *Knitting out of Africa* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 2005).
8. Helen Hamann. *Andean Inspired Knits: Designs in Luxurious Alpaca* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 2006); Marcia Lewandowski. *Andean Folk Knits: Great Designs from Peru, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, and Bolivia* (Asheville, NC: Lark Books, 2006).
9. Perri Klass. "Hers; A Stitch in Time." *New York Times*, sect. 6, p. 12, col. 3 (April 19, 1992). In this otherwise wonderful article, Klass captures perfectly the feeling and concentration knitting provides.
10. Richard Rutt. *A History of Hand Knitting* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1987).