

Evolution of a Knitter: A Year of Sweaters

By Holly Lisle

A Writing Allegory

✘ First there was the cheap sweater.

I needed a sweater in the autumn of 2005, so I made one. I didn't use a pattern, because I'd never used a pattern. I finished it the way you would sew together a shirt, because not only am I totally self-taught as a knitter, but I'd never actually seen anyone else knit, or watched anyone else put together the pieces of something knit. I did not know this was the wrong way to do it, and that the awful results it gave could be improved upon. I was, in all ways except the actual making of loops with string, an utter novice. And this was what I ended up with. ✘

It fits. That's about all I can say for it. It's made out of cheap Wal-Mart yarn, because that's what's available here, and in all the years I'd knit, it never occurred to me that there might be better yarn out there. Wool. Silk. Alpaca. Anything that might not make the wearer sweat, you know? I've never lived in a town with an actual yarn shop. I still don't.

There's nothing fancy about this sweater, because it was cold and I was in a hurry—I've known how to do cables since the first time I picked up needles, because the sweater I unravelled in order to learn how to knit was a badly moth-eaten cable-knit sweater. I didn't know about cable needles, though. I just pinched the cables I was moving between left thumb and index finger while knitting behind them, then slipped the stitches back on. I still tend to do cables this

way, because it's fast and doesn't require me to keep track of an extra needle, and I'm good at doing it this way. But cables take time, and I needed the sweater, and in about four days, I had it.

But. One year ago, this was the level of my knitting. I tied ends together with knots, I sewed the seams with a non-stretchy seamstress stitch, and I tucked ends into places and hoped they wouldn't pop out. But they always did. My work was good enough to wear around the house to keep warm in winter. It never, never, never went out in public.

Then I received two pairs of handknit socks from a woman in Norway, the mother of a friend and colleague. I sat and stared at them for about a month, I guess, in awe at the tiny stitches, the careful, clever shaping, the fact that they'd been knit in the round, the beautiful finishing, the absence of knots or loose ends anywhere, and I told myself, "I'm going to learn how to *really* knit." You know about the socks. I've shown you some of those—not the bad first tries, but some of the really good ones a whole helluva lot of socks later.

But at the same time I was knitting socks, I was knitting sweaters.

Before you think I must spend all day knitting, I don't. What I do is knit very quickly. I hold the needles funny, with the left one jammed into my ribs, I run the yarn through my left hand, and I pick up stitches in a fashion that I invented and that bears no resemblance to either English or Continental knitting. When I was getting started, back when I was fifteen, I sort of motion-studied my hands as they worked. I figured out the way to make knit and purl stitches that required the least effort from me, and that's how I still do it. My hands never get tired, my wrists never hurt, but people who learned how to knit from other people watch me and say, "What the hell are you *doing*? You're doing that wrong." Maybe. But my stitches are always even, and I never have to worry about

twisting them accidentally. The things I learn, I learn well.

But I had a very long way to go.

✘ I made the kid a sweater because he, too, was cold. It's about the same as the one above, but the collar is much better done (I had to do it twice to get it right). ✘ The stitches are tighter and more even, but the whole thing is still made out of 100% polyester yarn, and he can only wear it if he has something cotton underneath.

Anyway, the kid's sweater turned out better than my first one, but I decided to go looking for a book or two, to see if I could learn something from someone else. I found Sally Melville, and the following three books:

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I cannot recommend these highly enough. All three are wonderful. I read each one from cover to cover, looked over all the patterns, laughed at Sally's very funny essays (I think if I met her, I'd like her a lot) and I learned things I'd never imagined about finishing details, making up, adding yarns without knots, and a hundred other things.

✘ And then I knitted her Girlfriend Sweater, an asymmetrical project done in one piece and entirely in garter stitch. (Which was a study in developing meditative patience, let me tell you.) I chose a vibrant hot-pink chenille yarn of poly/cotton that reminded me (along with the garter stitch ribbing) of the ✘ cockscombs that were my favorite flowers when I was six years old. Wal-Mart yarn again, but of a slighter better, and massively more appealing, variety. The sweater turned out, and I learned a tremendous amount about knitting from making it, but I do not love it. It doesn't fit me the way I'd hoped it would, and the idea of ripping back and redoing sections of endless garter stitch to *make* it fit fills me with dread.

Then I ran across *Dazzling Knits*, by Patricia Werner.

And discovered something totally new to me—modular knitting. I loved all the projects in her book, and discovered fancy yarns. Noro, Meunch, Great Adirondack. Yarns I could not afford, but I could see the possibilities in them, and thought of family members asking me what I wanted for birthdays, Christmases, Mother's Days. *Ah ... good yarn.* That's what I would say, and show them websites. Specific yarns.

✘ In the meantime, however, I wanted to try some of her patterns. So I bought all sorts of interesting textural Wal-Mart yarns, and set to work. My first attempt was what I now call the 100-Lb. Coat. ✘ In the beginning, it felt light and warm, and I worked at it with glee, doing the entire body and the first sleeve. I then tried it on. It weighed a ton, and even holding the sleeveless shoulder in the proper place, it hung funny. I tried to imagine myself wearing it, and couldn't. (This is something you should actually be able to figure out when you're buying the yarn, but this was my first experiment with novelty yarns, and ... um ... well, anyway.) Here's a useful note, though: If the bags of yarn are too heavy to carry, you will not want to wear the sweater or coat you're making. The 100-Lb. Sweater was consigned to my office closet while I figure out what to do with it.

✘ Still enchanted by Patricia Werner's patterns, though, and with brand-new Hobby Lobby in town that stocked much better yarns than Wal-Mart, I figured yardages, marched in, and bought myself several beautiful yarns—a nice wool worsted, a gorgeous, very tight, very thin chenille, and an exquisite, vibrant, alternately shiny and velvety novelty yarn. I held the skeins in my hands, visualized them in the specific sweater shown on the front cover of the book, and nearly swooned. ✘

I got to work, and had knitted the entire body. All that

remained was the sleeves. And then—do NOT ask me how I managed to knit most of a sweater BEFORE realizing this—I realized that in the places where the so-rich-it-made-me-shiver chenille knitted into the vibrant, shimmery/velvety novelty yarn, the chenille ... wormed. It crawled out of the tight stitches into which I'd knitted it, and made long, twisting, travelling worms of purple yarn all over the sweater.

☒ I went back and tried to fix these. No dice. I tried washing and blocking. Nothing.

It damned near broke my heart, and I damned near gave up knitting. But no. I was having good success with socks, which are supposed to be hard, and I was not going to let the collision of incompatible yarns defeat me. I put the unfinished sweater in the closet with the previous failure. I forged onward.

I went looking for and found a free pattern for a simple cardigan on the internet, and I bought a couple of yarns I liked—a worsted poly/acrylic with a nice texture in two colors (heathered green and heathered blue), and a very thin, fuzzy, variegated novelty yarn. ☒ And I changed everything about the pattern. I added stripes, I added the asymmetrical checked pattern on the front, I changed the buttonholes to allow for two sizes of the same button and an odd symmetrical pattern, I changed the gauge, I changed the shoulder shape, I changed the overall button band, I changed the collar. I did math, and math, and more math, and when I had scribbled all over the pattern with my numbers, I started to knit.

☒ And this time, I got something good. The sweater fits well, it hangs correctly, it's nice and warm. The pattern is faint, sort of a "do I see that or don't I" thing. ☒ The finishing is right inside and out, the ends are woven in, the buttonholes are tight, and it looks nice on me.

But it's still made out of cheap yarn.

And I'd been reading the Yarn Harlot.

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And she is nothing if not a bad, bad influence. Yarn stashes, good wool, dying and spinning ...
I wanted good yarn, dammit. Wool. Silk.

And then my guy bought a cell phone, and spent a fair amount on it, and offered me the same amount to spend on yarn. And I'd been reading Yarn Harlot, so I'd discovered WEBS. There are no yarn stores here. Have I mentioned that? You can get a little bit of wool or wool/acrylic blends from the three places that carry yarn. These are Wal-Mart, Michael's, and Hobby Lobby. But WEBS has Noro. Webs has Great Adirondack. And WEBS gives serious, serious discounts if you buy in bulk.

I bought ten skeins of Noro Silk Garden, and mixed skeins of other stuff, because I thought I was going to do another shot at a Patricia Werner sweater, this time with good yarns like the ones she used. Only when I got the good yarns (50% wool, 50% silk in all of them), I swatched and discovered I didn't like modular with these yarns.

So I did my own design, in my head, on the needles. Yes. The best yarns I have ever held in my hands, and I was doing my own stuff again, just freakin' winging it. ☒ While I knitted, I thought *You're nuts. Go back! Knit somebody else's pattern! You'll screw up this amazing yarn.*

☒ I put pieces together, and looked at them, and my fingers were saying *Trust the force, Luke!*, and my brain was saying, *This stuff cost more money than you have ever spent on string—SCREW the Force.* But I liked what I was getting.

☒ So I kept going. And then I got there. And I discovered that in a year of knitting a hell of a lot of stuff, from

sweaters to socks to one afghan, I have learned to knit pretty well. To design on the needles something cool enough that I want to wear it, something finished beautifully enough that I won't mind other knitters looking at how I put it together, something that satisfies me that I have not been wasting my time doing this.

And what does this have to do with writing?

Everyone starts as a novice. They might have some talent, they might have a good ear, they might be able to string words together in a pleasing fashion. But there's a lot more to writing than just putting words on paper. There's a lot of detail and finishing work. A lot of figuring, and tinkering. A lot of making horrible screw-ups. A lot of trying things out that just don't work.

And then you do a few good things, and you start to understand how to do more good things. And then you realize that you can do beautiful things.

But if you quit because everything you do is ugly and crummy and doesn't work, you'll never see what you're really capable of.

Persist.

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