

My Grandmother's Knitting

A book proposal by
Larissa Brown

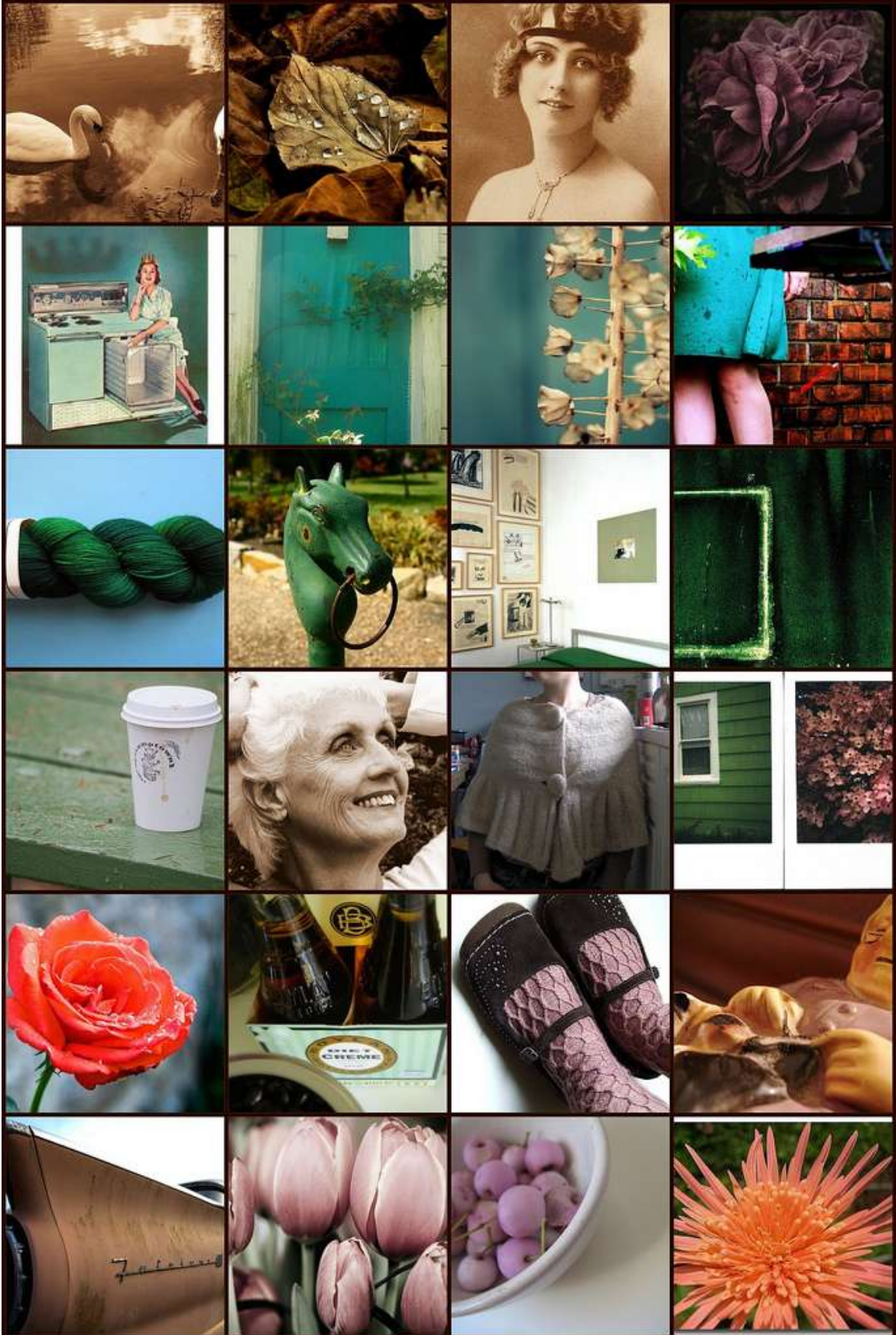
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SYNOPSIS

A knitting book that celebrates generations of craft, from the author of *Knitalong*. *My Grandmother's Knitting* features stories about 30 knitting designers—brief, intimate peeks into the past, and how family and childhood shape today's design. Designers provide 30 or more fresh, updated projects inspired by their own grandmothers, grandfathers, parents, and more. This nostalgic, yet current and alive, book feels like a family album. It celebrates the link between generations, and how our families and homes have made us the crafters and artists we are today.



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THE IDEA

For millions of us, our grandmothers taught us to knit.

They were the first ones whose hands made the motions that now we have made a million times until they're like breathing—knit, purl, hold the working yarn. For some, our grandmothers were the first to unfold the map of an afghan or lead us through the entirety of a scarf.

For others, we had a different first teacher, a friend, another relative, or perhaps ourselves. But our grandmothers are present in our lives or in our memories. They may not have literally taught us the purl stitch, but more fundamental than that they showed us what a home looks like, what beauty is, what cozy feels like.

The exact relationship is not the critical element, as much as the passing along of beauty and craft between generations.

This book celebrates these influences. It honors the fact that knitting is passed from person to person, quite often by family members sharing a skill that has made its sinuous way through generations.

Whereas *Knitalong* was about relationships between people who shared a love of knitting but might know each other only on the Internet, *My Grandmother's Knitting* shines a light on family. It celebrates the link between generations, and how our families made us the crafters and artists we are today.

This book is for any knitter who has been influenced by a dear family member—or any knitter who wants to create the gorgeous and inventive patterns within.

Not your grandma's knitting?

All too often, knitting books and web sites claim “this is not your grandma's knitting.” (In fact, an entire line of craft books called *Not Your Mama's Crafts* is published by Wiley).

But there is a strong movement among knitters who picked up the craft over the past 10 years and are now intermediate and advanced knitters. They are adamantly against easy peasey, “chunky funky” knitting, and are ready to honor the roots of the patterns they enjoy working today.

The truth is, all the knitting we do **is** our grandmothers' knitting. Not only are the knits and purls the same stitches our grandmothers made, but also the unique “knitter's hand” that comes through in each of our works is influenced in some part by the people we grew up with and what *they* made with *their* hands.

This book will revel in that fact, with about 30 stories from knitting designers about their own grandmothers, and the influence they had on their artistic lives. The stories—**written by the author, based on interviews with designers**—are brief yet intimate peeks into the past, and how family and childhood shape today's design. Along with these stories, the book is dotted with photos, amateur snapshots of knitters and their grandmothers together (perhaps when the designers were much younger than they are today.)

Paired with these stories will be projects. Each designer will update and remake one or more projects that were knitted by his or her grandmother, grandfather, mother or aunt—turning them into timely, stylish designs. Or, rather than a remake, will create a wholly new design inspired by that special, influential family member's home or style.

The array of designers' stories and family backgrounds will allow the reader to dip into many knitting traditions, from the porch swings of 1960s America to a little girl's front lawn in Scotland.

How the book works

The book is made up of brief but moving **stories, photos, and projects**. The weight of the books tends more toward projects, with stories running shorter than in *Knitalong* at about 500 words each.

Generally, a story, photo, and project are paired. But the book is more fluid than that, and the number of stories and designs does not need to be rigidly equal. A designer or knitter with a wonderful family story may not contribute a project, while another with simply a picture and a short caption about grandma may have two beautiful projects to contribute, which illustrate updates on nostalgic designs.

Family members celebrated may include grandfathers, parents, and special aunts or others. The exact relationship is not the critical element, as much as the passing along of beauty and craft between generations.

Projects and sections

The projects in this book will be related to the stories, in much the same way that projects in *Knitalong* were paired with its chapters. I will work with each designer to push his or her designs beyond the ordinary, even for something as simple as a scarf. I will draw together a palette and yarns that are coherent and lovely, and ensure the book has a broad and balanced selection of inviting patterns.

I see the book as having three major sections. (Note 2011: These have utterly changed.)

- **Knitting for herself**

I often speak with designers who remember dreamily, “My grandmother was so stylish.” They remember pillbox or flapper hats, lovely shawls, skirts, jackets with peplums and tiny cap sleeves, belts, and more. Whether she was at the height of her style during the 1920s like my grandma, or in 1890 or 1950, a designer’s grandmother herself may be the jumping-off point for projects that include garments and accessories. These will be timely knitted updates on items grandma might have knit or worn.

A designer may have a grandmother with a very individual and less-mainstream sense of style, and her story could lead to a special project like a hand-dyed, distressed scarf or filigreed bed jacket. (An example of the latter kind of story follows, with Heather Saal’s story, in the Samples section of this proposal.)

- **For the home**

We may remember a few sacred objects from our grandmothers’ homes that took on huge significance in our childish minds—crisp flowered summer-house sheets, a warm welcoming couch, a mysteriously crafted doily that never moved from its dresser, a fascinating doll with a roll of toilet paper under its enormous skirt.

Somewhere deep in the mix of our life experiences these become building blocks for the undeniably individual craft aesthetic we each have today. This chapter will include stories and projects that are focused on the house and family outings. A designer might remember a picnic blanket and linen napkins. Pillows for a porch swing. Curtains. Perhaps a hearth rug, potholder, or dishcloth with an inspired twist.

- **For others**

Knitting grandmothers have been keeping their families warm for hundreds of years. Many are the ultimate gift knitters. (Ann Shayne of *Mason-Dixon Knitting* wrote that a first-time grandmother was on a knitting mission from God.)

The reader can take a cue from these grandmothers, in a section about gift knitting. This chapter could include first-day-of-school socks, interesting, updated colorwork sweaters sized for kids, teens, and adults, an anything-but-boring baby set, and men’s projects such as a sweater, vest, and slippers that are designed beyond the ordinary. A designer might recreate something her own grandmother knit for her (as Adrian Bizilia does in the Sample section of this proposal.)

What the book looks and feels like

A family album, but with a dash of perfection and prettiness that sometimes don't exist in real life. It could have a very minor kick of kitsch, but not much at all. The book is more lovely and loving.

The look of the book will be warm and nostalgic, but updated and alive, with colors like burnt orange, red cabbage, avocado, and cream. Photography will bring to mind the many places a person might have sat and knitted with a family member—a grandparent's house in summer with breezy lace curtains, an inviting hearth, a simple patch of grass, or a pair of comfy chairs on a lazy porch. The book will look like a place straight out of memory.

(This has changed to a visual metaphor of “summer house” and colors that include turquoise, emerald green, cream and mustard/gold.)

Somewhat like *Knitalong*, this book will mix amateur photos contributed by designers and knitters alongside beauty shots of the projects. However, the number of amateur photos will be **considerably less** than were in *Knitalong*—perhaps one photo per designer's story, or a smattering of excellent photos throughout the book.

(This has changed; no amateur photos are used, only family snapshots from the designers. It's a good example of a major change from proposal phase to book.)

About the author and sample designers

Larissa Brown

I'm a writer and designer who was taught to knit by my own grandmother, Olive. My recent experience writing the book *Knitalong*—which is about relationships and knitting, and involves essays about history and tradition alongside timely knitting patterns—makes me uniquely qualified to write *My Grandmother's Knitting*. I have experience drawing together varied artists and leading them in creating designs and choosing yarns that work together for a wonderful book. My experience writing a knitted and crocheted art column for knitty.com, and my blogging experience, have allowed me to develop relationships with designers worldwide whose work would be perfect for *My Grandmother's Knitting*.

Designers who have contributed to this proposal:

Heather Saal

Heather Saal has been designing her own knitwear since the ski pants she knit as a teenager. She is owner of Abundant Yarn & Dyeworks—a yarn store and natural hand-dyeing company in Portland, Oregon—and of Happiest Girl Dyeworks, a hand-dyed yarn line.

Wendy Bernard

Wendy Bernard, author of *Custom Knits*, knits, writes and designs from her home in Southern California. Her patterns appear in *Interweave Knits*, *Knitscene*, and *Yarn Forward* magazines, as well as on her blog, KnitandTonic.net.

Adrian Bizilia

Adrian is a trained artist, yarn dyer, and spinner. Her yarn, spinning fiber, and more, are available at helloyarn.com, her cultishly popular online store. Adrian's patterns appear in *The Knitter's Book of Yarn* (Potter Craft, 2007), *Son of Stitch n' Bitch* (Workman, 2007), and *Knitalong*, as well as on her website.

Potential additional designers

Additional designers who have shown interest in the project include Julia Trice, whose work has been seen in *Welcome to Knit Café* among other places, Clara Parkes of *Knitter's Review*, Sarah Gilbert (whose shawl appears in *Knitalong*), and Alicia Paulson, author of *Stitched in Time* (Potter Craft, 2008). Larissa has relationships with other designers who might be perfect for this book, including Kristin Spurklund (author of several knitting books), Cosette Cornelius Bates (author of *Knit One, Embellish Too*), Marnie MacLean, Chrissy Gardiner, Lisa Shobhana Mason (author of *Yarnplay*), artist Hildur Bjornasdottir, and more. The author is very open to including anyone with whom STC wants to connect. The dream list includes at least a few male designers, and at least a few designers with grandfather stories, too.

SAMPLES

Heather & Grams

Heather Saal's grandmother grew up in a boxcar.

Her great-grandfather worked for “the train people” says Heather, turning a well-worn family phrase. His wife and children—including Heather's Grams—traveled to where he was needed, and their home was literally a boxcar, tiny, tidy, and by necessity spare. What luxuries Grams had as a child were handmade and were singular. One hat, one scarf, as space allowed.

Heather has a much larger space to play around in. A 3700-square-foot yarn shop is her domain. In the back, on imposing professional grade stoves, pots simmer, getting ready for the day's yarn dyeing with dried plants, flowers, and even coffee grinds. She owns a dyeing company with the same name as her store—Abundant Yarn & Dyeworks.

And yet, in a way, Heather never plays around. She is as direct and down-to-earth as her Grams, and doesn't belabor anything. She dives in. At age 11, she knitted a pair of ski pants without a pattern. Watching her buy yarn is watching a futures options trader on the Wall Street floor. She calls out numbers, colors, and quantities, and then is abruptly finished, confident, moving on. Her own dyed colors are direct as well, with reds and golds out front. Their frank prettiness belies a romantic heart.

Heather sings her grandmother's praises, without realizing she could easily be describing herself. “She was down to earth and practical, but knew how to

make things look nice with a simple gesture. She liked to make things look pretty."

Later in her life, Grams had her own home on an orchard. Heather was fascinated by a bunch of crocheted potholders in the kitchen, and a collection of tin salt and pepper shakers which seemed nearly extravagant in her Gram's plain home.

But mostly she remembers "the scarf."

Grams had been fashionable in her day, though Heather says "I was the last grandchild. I got her in her polyester phase." Heather recalls an outfit Grams wore every single day to feed the geese in the backyard. Galoshes, work pants, a plastic rain bonnet tied under her chin. "It was a look to end all looks." The outfit was rounded out by the scarf—an acrylic wonder that would likely melt and was shockingly turquoise. It's an item Heather calls up immediately from the past, with little prompting. It hung on a nail by the back door and never wavered.

Heather remembers thinking Grams needed a lovelier scarf. In a high school batik class, she snuck in a ball of wool and dyed it purple, Gram's favorite color. The result, she says, "was horrible. It was the wrong kind of dye, it was for cotton, and I just shoved this wool down in there hoping no one would see me after class. And I used it to make a horrible scarf for her."

Now a professional dyer, Heather cracks up at the memory, and then excitedly adds, even though her Grams has passed away, "Oh my goodness. I can actually make her a pretty one now!"

Heather calls the aesthetic of her yarn shop “modern homespun.” It’s a dichotomy she’s comfortable with, just like her Gram’s crocheted potholders—a little bit frilly, a little bit scorched. And every bit as fascinating.

Project: Feeding the Geese Scarf

By Heather Saal

A scarf like Heather’s grandmother’s—a little bit rusty, a little bit pretty. This one is made with built-in imperfections, streaks of rust, and a far less meltable yarn. Heather writes “Simple scarves are a dime a dozen these days. What I want to do is recreate the years of wear, in a beguiling way that invites the artist in every knitter to play with rips, pulls, stranded streaks, and dropped stitches.”

Wendy & Shorty

They ate liverwurst or ham sandwiches for lunch, while Wendy Bernard's grandmother knitted her beloved slippers with pom poms.

Among the nudes.

Wendy's grandmother Helen married a man they all called "Herman the German" but whose real name was Everett. He was a sculptor for a living, and he made kitschy statues of naked ladies with captions. Wendy and her grandma hung out, ate lunch, and pondered the wonders of knitted afghans and slippers among girls arching their backs provocatively with taglines like "Ho Hum."

Herman called grandma Shorty, and claimed all the nudes were modeled after her. Nonetheless, she didn't allow them in the living room, which was her domain and sanctuary.

The living room had heavy gold drapes—"very Liberace-esque"—and matching everything. A chandelier that stands out in Wendy's memory. Wendy says, "She lived the good life."

In their retired years, Shorty and Herman celebrated Happy Hour every day. At 4:30 a light would come on that said "BAR OPEN." At 7 it would go off, and everyone would dump out their remaining drinks and trash their Spanish peanuts.

Shorty was fun, but sentimental too, and a great keeper of the things she loved. Wendy cross-stitched her some hand towels at age 12, and they are still in

Shorty's bathroom decades later. "I can't believe how well she took care of them. It was as if they hung in time, strange and magical." She had a pair of very clean couches, which remain white to this day.

And she was an ordinary knitter of garden-variety blankets and slippers. "Our generation does stunt knitting," Wendy declares. Grandma never was a great knitter. But everyone went crazy for her slippers. At every holiday they were the expected, and coveted, gift. She taught Wendy "It's really okay to just knit slippers."

When Wendy was eight, Shorty showed her how to knit, purl, cast on, and bind off (though Wendy did not knit again until her 30s.) Shorty also taught her to relax, have fun, and make things people like, with your family all around you.

Wendy visited Shorty when she was 90, and was rapidly losing her sight and her memory. There were tremendous, sad events going on in everyone's lives, and the trip became lethargic and jumbled. Shorty wanted to knit, but Wendy didn't get to helping her. "She didn't recognize me, and we just didn't get to it. Grandma just touched the yarn and the needles. I remember her touching them."

Now Wendy wishes that moment had not passed. At 93, Shorty can't talk to Wendy anymore. Wendy guesses that may be why she herself knits and designs so much. "My knitting is so wrapped up in her."

Making things for other people was important. "She did a lot for me. I do that for my daughter now...and other people."

Today Wendy is author of *Custom Knits* and keeper of the blog Knit and Tonic. Pure fun peeks out in all of Wendy's work, and her blog nearly explodes with the love of hanging out with family and good times. It seems Shorty taught her the basics quite well: Fun is life, giving is good, and being together is the most important thing.

Wendy has her regrets about that trip to visit Shorty, when they didn't get to knit together. But even if the moment is gone, the act of knitting, and those lessons, keep on.

Project: Shorty's Slippers

by Wendy Bernard

A luxurious take on the slippers that every knitting grandma in the 1960s and 1970s made for her family. Made in a soft wool—instead of the old school acrylic—the slippers take on new charm. Cables and updated shaping make them an ultimately wearable, new classic.

Adrian & Grandma B.

Imagine a woman in a 1970s kitchen, inside a foursquare Colonial house, on a quiet small-town street. A tall woman named Marge, wiping her hands on her apron, done canning for the day, or stooping to hand out homemade popcorn balls to her grandkids. She has a drawer full of candy at the ready. She takes great care of her home, everything impeccable.

And at 12:30 every day, she leaves it all behind to sit in front of the TV and knit. For four hours, never fail. Until 4:30 there's nothing else but knitting and her shows.

"It's okay to do it as much as you want," was the lesson that got through to Marge's granddaughter Adrian Bizilia, who sat and made pom poms at her feet. "Do your thing. Let it take over your life."

And so Adrian did.

It took years to happen, but eventually Adrian became a spinner, hand-dyer, designer, and proprietress of Hello Yarn, one of the Internet's hottest yarn stores. Her online store is so busy that yarn is sold immediately as she lists it and servers crash regularly in the deluge. Her husband, Mark, now helps her with plying and a myriad other tasks, and the couple is hoping to move outside the city of Boston so they can raise a few yarn-related animals. At times it seems like all the rooms in her house, let alone her hours and days, are devoted to yarn and knitting.

The obsession began at her grandmother's knee.

Grandma B. immersed herself in her craft, churning out her specialties: scratchy, colorwork-yoked sweaters and mittens tied with strings. It seems no surprise that as a designer Adrian is best known for her imaginative colorwork motifs—skulls, insects, and mushrooms—and for her many mitten designs, sporting surprises from squirrels to fiddlehead ferns.

But while Grandma B. may have taught Adrian about happy obsession—and the beauty of colorwork and utility of mittens—she never did successfully teach her to knit. She tried several times over the years when Adrian visited her house after school and when Adrian briefly lived with her as a girl, but it never stuck.

“I always wanted to knit with her,” pines Adrian. “I just sucked at it. So she gave me her pom pom maker and I sat and made pom pom animals by her side.”

Years later Adrian learned knitting from a book and, like Grandma B., spent hours every day practicing her craft, turning out a sweater a week in her early knitting days in 2001.

It was something Grandma B. did not live to see. She passed away before Adrian became a knitter, designer, and yarn maker. But Adrian says, “My mom makes up for it in enthusiasm.” It seems enthusiasm—like colorwork—runs in the family.

Project: Woodland Sweater

by Adrian Bizilia

A sweater like Adrian's grandma might have knit for her, but not so straight-laced and not so scratchy! Adrian brings her signature twist to stranded colorwork, with woodland creatures gracing the waist and a hood for added warmth and current style.