

... a sort of David Sedaris-like take on knitting—laugh-out-loud funny most of the time and poignantly reflective when it's not cracking you up." — *Library Journal* on *Yarn Harlot*



the yarn harlot writes again

Free-Range Knitter

stephanie pearl-mcphée
best-selling author of *at knit's end*

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**Andrews McMeel
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For my Uncle Tupper, who taught me that intelligence and insight can occasionally be faked,
provided you are willing to replace them with really hard work.

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INTRODUCTION

I have been in the definitely odd and sometimes enviable position of having been on a knitting book tour (sometimes I call it a yarn crawl) for roughly the last two years. Obviously, I'm not on tour every minute of every day, but I do spend a completely unreasonable amount of time wandering from city to city all over North America talking to knitters. Since I'm not a teacher, just a knitting philosopher of sorts, I don't necessarily have a reason for being there. I have no agenda, I don't promote one sort of knitting or some particular patterns, I don't sell yarn. I'm just there to sign humor books about knitting, meet knitters, drink beer with them, observe them in their natural habitat (the local yarn shop), scrutinize them as they vacation at fiber festivals and conferences, and talk to them as I discover them in the wild.

Book tours (even knitting book tours) move really fast. So fast that a typical day involves getting up at an ungodly hour, going to the airport of whatever city I'm in, knitting while I wait to be flown to another city, knitting while I fly to another city, knitting on the way to the hotel, unpacking and showering in the hotel, knitting in the cab on the way to the speaking engagement (about knitting, and usually in a yarn shop), meeting all the knitters, and then sleeping (briefly) before I do it again in another city the next day. If you wanted to meet as many knitters as possible there would be no better way to do it, though as I'm sure you can imagine, the city you are in starts to be irrelevant after a couple of days, enough so that you forget to find out where you are. Doing the same thing every day while being constantly surrounded by only yarn, knitters, and knitting for days on end gives me an odd perspective. Since I often lose track of what city (state or province) I am in, it removes the idea that geography matters and leaves me with the odd impression that I am traveling a world where only knitting matters, all the people are knitters, and all the stores sell yarn.

Following the logic here, visiting more than fifty yarn stores and guilds a year means that I meet a lot of knitters, I get a lot of material about knitting, I see knitters without the boundaries of politics and geography (mostly because I am completely freaking lost), and I buy a lot of yarn, which is another problem and another story for another day, but for the record, totally not my fault. I'm only human. (Who among you can throw the first stone? Even if you only fell down and bought yarn at half of the shops, wouldn't you still have a really big problem?) This constant exposure to yarn, patterns, needles, and yarn shops of all kinds lends another set of insights: our stuff and what we do with it.

I have then, as a passionate knitter, a knitting book writer, a knitting

traveler, and a compatriot of the knitting masses, spent a lot of time thinking about knitting and knitters. I definitely think about knitting and knitters more than most people, which I guess isn't that hard, since I have recently confirmed an ugly truth that explains a great deal: Most people aren't thinking about knitting or knitters at all.

This book, then, is what I think knitters are thinking. Some of these stories are true. Some are mostly true. Some have names changed to protect the innocent, and in some cases, names have been written down perfectly to glorify the clever. This book shares stories of knitting triumph and failure, knitting success and defeat, lessons missed and lessons learned. This book is about the things we have in common, we knitters, no matter where we live, whom we love, or what we are knitting. This book is what I'm using to prove to my family that I may be completely out of my mind with this knitting thing, but I have a lot of friends just like me. This book is about yarn. This book is about needles. This book is about the truth about the way things are.

This book, though it appears to be about knitting, is actually about knitters.



CHAPTER 1

Cast On

Stories of Beginnings, Good Starts, Optimism, and Hope Springing
(Mostly) Eternal

Annabelle

Annabelle is four, almost five years old, and she is knitting. Sitting on the very edge of an old, once-blue, upholstered chair, she couldn't possibly be working with a greater degree of focus. Her hair is golden and tousled, hanging in loose curls, and her downcast eyes, hidden under devastatingly long lashes, are a beautiful, warm light brown that always makes me think of toffee and topaz. I know that somewhere within you must reside certain stereotypes, maybe born of childhood readings of *Little Women* or a Jane Austen novel, and that those ideas mean that you have begun to form opinions and have visions about the sort of little girl who would be sitting still and enjoying knitting. Maybe these ideas have already helped you begin dressing Annabelle and that, in your mind's eye, you've got her wearing something like a pinafore or a velvet dress with lace ruffles and some small buttons.

Let go of that idea right now, because although Annabelle (she prefers Annie) is currently sitting and knitting, and she is indeed quiet, concentrating, and peaceful, she is also clad in an outfit of her own choosing, which she began with a pair of gathered flannel green and black plaid pants, complemented with a yellow top with lace sleeves, and accessorized with two necklaces cleverly concocted of macaroni and a rainbow of beads. To round out the look she has donned a ripped raincoat and a purple wool hat her mother knit that is supposed to have dinosaur spikes on it, but Annie has decided it more resembles a crown. She is only wearing one sock, and there is just no way to know where the other one is. (As long as all of the motors in the house's major appliances are still working and I don't smell smoke, then I have decided that I'm not going to worry about where it might be.)

There are other clues to Annie's basic nature, for those astute enough to notice. There is a very large smear of sparkle glue on the arm of the chair she's sitting in and what may be dried ketchup or blood (or both) on the other. One wall behind this chair is covered in several vibrant works of graffiti art, which center almost entirely around the expressive use of the letter A. (Remind me to give Annie a little tip later: Never sign your name when defiling something; it makes excellent evidence for the prosecution.) Down the hall there is an entire roll of unwound toilet paper that I haven't cleaned up yet, and frankly, if I keep her alive (and from setting fire to that roll or trying to flush it down the toilet in one big wad) until her mother comes back, I will feel that I have done an excellent job while babysitting.

As you may be beginning to suspect, Annie is not the sort of child you would expect to be knitting. In fact, she's the opposite type. Annie is fast moving, dirty, bright, thrill seeking, and loud. She's the exact sort of child that people are always pointing out to me as an example of the sort of kid

who won't be able to knit because they have a short attention span and can't sit still. When I suggest teaching these quick-witted children to knit, their mothers say things to me like, "You haven't met my Marcus" and "Ruby isn't old enough to focus." Yet here sits Annie, who I can assure you, even without having met Marcus or Ruby, would be able to give them a serious run for whatever titles they hold in the department of mischief ... and she is knitting. She sits on the edge of the chair, one needle in each tiny hand. There are about twenty stitches on her needles, and I am only guessing at that because I cast on twenty for her, but that was a while ago and things may have gone a little freestyle since then. Annie's yarn has rolled off of the couch and under the table in front of her, but that doesn't bother her. Her tongue is stuck right out of her mouth to help her concentrate, and concentrating is what she is doing.

Annabelle uses her whole right hand to grasp the needle and stick it into the next stitch. Once it's in there, she drops the needle, leaning it a little against her leg so that it doesn't fall, then picks up the yarn, wraps it around the needle, and drops it too. Annie then grasps the needle, holding it midway along its length like a baton, and swings it frontward to pull the loop through, then way away from her to sweep the stitch off. Her movements are large, exaggerated, and awkward, and I love them. I am entirely charmed by her knitting because I know that it won't be long at all before she has the efficiency of age and experience. The way that very young new knitters handle the needles reminds me of the crazy big feet on puppies or the ridiculously long legs on a colt.

I'm not charmed just by Annie's knitting but because it's being done by Annie herself. I feel that Annie and I have a connection, an understanding of sorts, and it is not only because she's knitting, or because my mother would be happy to tell you that I was the same sort of kid (talking it through is part of her recovery program). Annabelle bears a real resemblance to my eldest daughter, Amanda, and not just because two hours ago she liberated her hamster and set off an incident involving the cat and the toaster that will likely take another hour off her poor mother's life. Like Amanda, Annie is a seriously challenging kid. Whatever you're thinking a regular kid is, Annie is just more. If she's happy, she's the happiest kid ever. If she's angry, you will be stunned at the degree of fury her petite body can throw your way. If she's doing something and is determined about it, she'll define determination, and if she wants something, she will pursue it with a passion and dedication that could bring a veteran grandmother of twelve to her knees.

I'm here, babysitting Annie, because her mother has the same problem that I did when I was trying to raise my first child. Only a seasoned professional parent can take the heat these intense kids can dish out, and usually the only thing a mother with a child like this can do is to opt not to leave her side until she can be trusted not to take out a sixteen-year-old babysitter who let her guard down for a moment. (I once had three police cars show up because my novice babysitter had made the foolish mistake of going to the bathroom for a

tissue. In the seventy-nine seconds it took her to blow her nose, my darling and intrepid three-year-old had dialed 911 and then hung up. The guileless sitter was none the wiser until moments later, when six cops were bashing on the door shouting, “What is the nature of your emergency?”) Annie’s mother, Ruth, had been trying to avoid just such an event by supervising her canny progeny herself and trusting no one until Annabelle was less of a danger to herself and others, but the projected twelve years became a long time to go without a dental cleaning. Ruth had tried taking Annie with her the last time, but after the firemen had left the clinic and the gas leak had been repaired, the dentist had suggested to her that she lose his number until she found Annie a babysitter. Enter me and my experience.

My daughter Amanda’s specialty was stripping. (She minored in volume and its applications in the art of persuasion, another field in which she excelled.) My kid, wearing a full set of clothes and a full-body zip-up snowsuit with boots, could go from being fully clad and restrained in her stroller’s five-point harness system to absolutely stark naked and running the store like a wild animal in the amount of time my back was turned to pay the clerk. I spent years wrestling a naked, furious, and occasionally wet toddler back into clothes in all manner of public places. I could never figure out how she did it, and I still have a special fondness for dressing kids in tights, layers, and overalls, as they were the strategies that seemed to slow Amanda down, even a little. (Should you have a similar strip artist at home, know that she is now eighteen and seems to have outgrown the urge, which has been a tremendous relief. For a while there I worried it would end up being her job.)

Annie, on the other hand, specializes in escape and liberation. (Like Amanda, Annie has also chosen not to limit herself and works at a subspecialty of destruction and vandalism.) Annabelle unties dogs, opens cages, releases ferrets, and has poured fish in the pasta water. She removes babies from cribs where they have been wrongly incarcerated, serving under the cruel régime of naptime, which Annie herself has seldom succumbed to. (Like many intense and challenging kids, she seems to need less sleep than her parents.) Continuing the liberation theme, Annie will, if the possibility presents, instantly make a break for it herself. She has gone missing everywhere her mother has taken her for the last four years, and from the moment in her infancy that she gained the ability to roll over, and thereby roll away, her mother has spent half of every day saying, “Where the hell is Annabelle?”

Despite the obvious downsides to trying to parent a kid like this (constant vigilance takes its toll), I actually think that having a kid of this type is a wonderful thing. (I think this especially now that mine has grown up without either of us going to prison, and I have accepted the premature aging, gray hair, and twitch over my right eye as necessary costs for her survival to maturity.) I like kids who are hard like this in general, and I like Annie in specific, because I’ve come to believe that a lot of challenging behavior in kids comes about as a result of these particular little ankle biters being too

darn smart for their own good, and I have respect for that, just because I knit.

It is my considered belief that the number one reason knitters knit is because they are so smart that they need knitting to make boring things interesting. Knitters are so compellingly clever that they simply can't tolerate boredom. It takes more to engage and entertain this kind of human, and they need an outlet or they get into trouble. I think you could probably get a surprising number of the mothers of knitters to admit that they are grateful their child knits now (even if their child is forty-five, not four) because they know that their child's brains cause trouble without constant occupation and that knitting probably prevents arson, prison, theft, and certainly mischief. I think knitters just can't watch TV without doing something else. Knitters just can't wait in line, knitters just can't sit waiting at the doctor's office. Knitters need knitting to add a layer of interest to the world so that they can cope without adding a layer of interest in other, less constructive ways. I can tell you that if anyone in the world thinks of me as charming, calm, or productive, they should try me without my knitting.

Mothers of ordinary children have always found them busywork to keep them entertained. Mothers of challenging and ferocious children have turned to busywork to occupy their kids for the additional benefits of crime prevention and safeguarding what little is left of their property or sanity. Teaching these demanding and adventurous kids to knit can be a lifesaver. Once taught, many of them catch the spark and approach the goal of knitting with the same ferocity they do anything else, and as it engages mind, body, and soul all in one go, it's often enough to hold their quick minds and bodies in one place to a remarkable degree, and that's how it's worked with Annabelle.

Mothers like me and Ruth, given the challenge of kids like Amanda and Annabelle, should be very proud of ourselves that we've turned to knitting as a tool instead of other, more coarse coping techniques. The cruel truth is that kangaroos under stress will remove young from their pouches and abandon them, that some birds will eat their very own eggs if they are overcrowded, and that some overwhelmed and inexperienced hamster mothers have been known to kill and eat their own young. Ruth and I (along with any mother who has ever had a kid whose nickname was "Houdini" or "The Volcano") should give ourselves a little pat on the back each and every day that despite being very much under stress, profoundly inexperienced, and helplessly overcrowded, we have turned to no such maternal crimes, although I think if you got us a glass of wine or two we would all be happy to tell you that we certainly understand the urge. Instead, clever parents that we are, we took a kid like Annie, a kid who ten minutes ago was trying to shave all the fur off the cat to make her more comfortable in the summer heat, and we taught her to knit.

The best part is that we don't think of it as a tool we're giving our kids to cope with their extraordinary and potent natures for the rest of their lives,

and we don't think of it as a way to help them learn to manage their intensity. No, no, my knitterly friends, as I look at wee Annabelle, who has been sitting in one place and knitting quietly for a whole seven minutes now, no, no. We think of it, now that those seven minutes have elapsed without our kids trying to take apart the stereo, paint with glue, or escape the confines of their homes, as pure, unadulterated, and mercenary self-defense.

Dear Designer #1

Dear Designer,

I want you to know that I'm very much enjoying your beautiful sock pattern. The panels down the sides of the legs are fetching and rather remind me of wings, if wings were stacked on top of each other, which they almost never are, but you know what I mean. I knew the moment that I saw it that this design was exactly what I was looking for and that my search for the perfect sock pattern to use with this particular yarn was over.

I really love it. It is perfection in and of itself, and I have no idea or explanation for why I was compelled to ~~bastardize~~ modify personalize the design. I believe I have a disease for which I cannot be held accountable. I stood there and talked about how darn ideal this pattern was, and then despite my every intention to just haul off and knit it, I lost control of myself. It appears now that I am incapable of knitting a pattern all the way through without changing something—even if, and I stress this, even if there is absolutely nothing lacking in the pattern whatsoever.

I have modified the finest Aran sweaters in the land (they tend to be a little wide for my frame, and I don't care for bobbles—no offense intended), and I have altered classic Norwegian colorwork sweaters that have stood the test of time and been knit millions of times by perfectly satisfied knitters who didn't find them at all wanting. (The neck was a smidge too round. I can't believe no one has noticed before me.)

I tell you all this as a way of explaining that I am an equal opportunity despoiler, that I do not discriminate on the basis of reputation, talent, or design experience. Nay, I feel free to mess with any and all patterns that strike me as needing a little improvement. If it is any comfort to you at all, these improvements frequently result in a certain *je ne sais quoi* that renders the garment unwearable, so perhaps you shall have your revenge yet, when I alter my way right out of a pair of socks that can be worn on human feet. In any case, I didn't want you to think that this was in any way personal, which it certainly was not.

There's nothing wrong with your design. It needed nothing done to it at all, and I didn't want you to take my string of rampant alterations personally. It means nothing that I have changed everything, except that I am a difficult person with odd taste. Again, I beg your forgiveness. I would tell you that I'll try to stop, but I'd be lying. And I don't want that to be between us.

In the spirit of that honesty, I do feel that you have a right to know what I have done with this pattern, the fruit of your needles, and I have enclosed a

photo. It is best that you see this, since I have a terrible habit of telling people that it is so-and-so's pattern (in this case, yours) even though I have altered it beyond recognition. (Again, I feel dreadful about this, but until there is some sort of recovery program for me I think it somewhat likely that both of us will continue to be tormented by my behavior, and warning you up front and admitting to my faults is all I can do.) Please don't take any of this personally; the work was indefectible, masterful, and sublime before I took a fancy to it.

Thank you,
Stephanie

P.S.: I have also taken to referring to the panels as "openwork" rather than using the term "lace." These socks are to be a gift for my brother, and I think it sounds more masculine.

P.P.S.: After I changed the stitch count, reworked the heel, continued the panels, and opted to widen the panel, the stitch count isn't quite working for the toe decreases. Please advise.

Glory Days

I knit in the summer. All the way through the hot, steamy days, wool slips on my rather sweaty needles. Although Canadians are a northern people, and the summer here is very short, it can be so hot that it seems to produce a sort of amnesia in us. People come up to me while I'm knitting this time of year, and they stare like they can scarcely believe it's happening. "Isn't it a little hot for a hat?" they quip, and I get where they are coming from. The long and dark Canadian winter demands a certain fortitude, and the only way to build that fortitude is to have a few months where we deny its existence at all. "Mittens?" my countrymen wonder aloud. What on Earth would we need mittens for? It's summer! As long as the flowers bloom and it's a hundred degrees in the shade, our collective psyche sits on a patio in a sundress, drinking cold beer, going to the cottage for barbecues, and diving into the lake to cool off.

The short, intense summer is so glorious, it's like the autumn knows that the only way we Canadians could part with summer's long evenings and starry nights is if we are somehow bribed at the time it has to leave us. And in the autumn, every tree and plant seems to be making its apologies to us as though they were guests trying to leave a wonderful, wonderful party. Trees throw massive cloaks of color over their shoulders and let them fall to the ground. Pumpkins arrive in previously ordinary-looking gardens, and everywhere I go there are apples. I do not care very much to eat apples, but it would be impossible to not see the romantic lure of baskets of them piled high in red and green in the autumn. The vegetable shops overflow with the most beautiful of foods; squash and kale and beans are plentiful and inexpensive, and I wander the aisles thinking of making thick vegetable soups and homemade bread.

This time of year the crisp chill returns to the air, and suddenly, after a few short months when we consider wearing wool a one-way ticket to heatstroke, or at the very least an unattractive and linty sweatbath, suddenly it is the most glorious time of year. It's sweater weather.

These slightly frosty days, when there is a nip in the air all day, these are the glory days for knitters. These are the days when people start wishing they had a hat. The evenings when they begin to think about tucking an afghan around them while they watch TV. Yea, verily, these are the days when a woolen throw over the back of a chesterfield stops being ornamental and starts being a pretty smashing idea. These weeks, the weeks before the people reach for their winter coats and conceal their sweaters, these days before the central heat comes on—these are the mighty and triumphant days for a knitter. There will be days in the winter (months, actually, but I don't like to

think about it) when knitting will keep people cozy. There will be snow shoveling and tobogganing, skating, and several blizzards in which the freezing temperatures and blowing snow will demand wool. Days when no one would dream of going outside without a hat and will conduct passionate searches for their mittens, but once it is winter, the knitting will always be in addition to something. They will need their parkas and mittens. Their snowpants and a hat. Your knitted stuff will be useful but will not stand alone. The autumn is a brief interval that is chilly but not freezing, cool but not cold, a few shining weeks when all one needs to cope with the Canadian climate is the fruit of your needles. These days belong to us. These are the weeks when we are most appreciated for what we make and what we do. The few. The chosen. The knitters.

These cool days are also, for many Canadians in general and for my family of McPhees in particular, the beginning of the most esteemed of autumn traditions, the Furnace Wars.

The Furnace Wars are an unspoken and holy contest among our people, a desperate war against nature, trying to delay the inevitable winter by sinking deeply into denial and refusing to give in to the need for central heat. For an intrinsically peace-loving populace, this is really the only serious war we wage, and we lose it every year. It's as if we believe that we can actually shorten our winter by not turning on the heat; that somehow it's not really happening unless you allow it to get the upper hand. (The irony is how cold you have to get to prove that it's not cold, but as with many things to do with pride, not everything about this makes sense.) This time of year, many Canadians obsessively watch the weather forecast and check the thermostat. We say things at the market like "How cold is your house?" or "Did you turn your furnace on yet?," or we boast of our past achievements: "Last year I made it until Halloween." The longer you can go, the colder the house gets, and the less heat you use, the more noble the fight.

As the winter approaches, and we simply must cave in to survive, some of us can't even give up all at once. Last year in the schoolyard I heard a woman say, "I put the furnace on, but only for an hour. I just took the edge off, you know, for the kids. Bob and I can take it."

I know this must seem alien to people who live in areas where winter isn't a long dark challenge to the soul, but here, turning on the heat is like admitting to the beginning of winter, and nobody wants to be the first to cave in. To add fuel to the fire, heat is expensive, both financially and environmentally, and the victors of the Furnace Wars get not just bragging rights but also a low gas bill and a sense of moral superiority. As a knitter, I have other, more compelling reasons to play. This period before I turn on the heat marks the weeks when my art is an important part of the fight. These are the weeks that I look like a genius for making everybody thick wool socks. Everyone wears slippers. They are thinking about full-time indoor hat use. Shawls and throws are over laps and around shoulders. Turning on the heat ends these days of