

Knitting Stories

AMY REISWIG

In her most recent book, Sylvia Olsen tells stories of knitting relationships as well as wool.

February finds many of us curled up in a cosy sweater with a good story. For writer and longtime knitter Sylvia Olsen, one isn't so different from the other. In her latest work, *Knitting Stories* (Sono Nis, November 2014), the award-winning historian and expert on the famous Cowichan sweater shows how knitting is about much more than techniques and materials. In a series of personal essays, Olsen takes us through her own 45-year journey in woolworking to reveal how an ancient art provides opportunities to learn, listen and, in its own humble way, shape relationships between individuals and cultures.

Olsen begins by recounting how she first learned to knit from her Auntie Freda in the late 1960s, when she was about 12 or 13. It was a process she calls "almost magical," as thin strands of wool gradually took shape into her first wearable sweater, a simple shell. She describes falling in love with the alchemy—"the emergence of something completely new, something that had never existed before." That first experience taught Olsen the self-reliance of tackling problems with a DIY attitude and gave her a new power to blend the imaginative and the practical: "Auntie Freda taught me that I could be a creator."

Those important lessons carried over to when Olsen learned to knit for the second time: alongside her mother-in-law, Laura, on the Tsartlip First Nation in Brentwood Bay, where she moved with her then-husband Carl at age 17 and where she still lives. She describes a disorienting transition where nothing "looked or felt the way it did in [her] middle-class neighbourhood across the ditch in Victoria." At that time intermarriage wasn't looked upon well by either community, and the blonde Olsen stood out, out of place. But where she bonded with her new family was over wool.

Coast Salish women have been woolworkers for generations, and Olsen, whose MA thesis centred on that topic, writes about the history of exchange between indigenous and European knitting practices but, more personally, about how she learned to make the world-renowned Cowichan sweaters by watching and listening—two skills so important, she tells me, for understanding one another anywhere, anytime.

"Knitting taught me the lessons I needed to learn in this cross-cultural world," the vibrant, hard-to-believe-she's-a-60-year-old grandmother says, the picture of relaxed at-homeness surrounded



Sylvia Olsen

by bags, scarves and sweaters in muted greys with contrasting whites and blacks in her Salish Fusion Knitwear studio. Those lessons about listening and learning, she explains, "are the biggest lessons for anyone in places where people come together."

And so her slim volume, the first in a series, she hopes, offers truly useful wisdom about finding your own boundaries while treating others with respect and empathy. For example, Olsen's experience with Coast Salish knitting includes her 15 years of buying and selling Cowichan sweaters for her business, Mount Newton Indian Sweaters (closed in 1991). She recounts one instance where a woman belligerently came to the front door insisting Olsen buy one of her sweaters because her kids were hungry. Olsen, herself a mother of four, was shocked to find herself saying: "Don't make me responsible for your family." The two women found a new footing for doing business that was both personal yet professional, and Olsen continuously learned to treat herself and the knitters with respect and compassion. As she writes in the moving essay "Both Sides of Difficult": "It took time for me to understand the habits and

rhythm of deeply rooted poverty, as well as my responses."

In these warm, casual essays Olsen covers the factual—like different kinds of needles—and the emotional, even spiritual side of knitting. She also doesn't shy away from the hardship of reserve life but celebrates every opportunity for self-expansion. My favourite is the story of Elizabeth, one of the area's last native SENĆOTEN speakers, who would visit and just sit in the shop while Olsen worked sewing zippers or boxing sweaters. One day Elizabeth brought in a sweater that Olsen felt was not up to snuff. What she got with the sweater was a lesson. As the old woman told her: "We don't make our things all uptight and just so like you do... We knit what's in our hearts. Some days our hearts line the stitches up, and some days they don't. Sometimes an extra stitch pops up because a visitor arrives. Sometimes a row gets missed because a relative is sick. What you call mistakes, I call windows. The stitches make windows that leave a space where the spirits can come and go." Thus, Olsen found a new way to "listen" to the sweaters as the sewn stories of the knitters, and that in turn helped knit her in tighter to her adopted community.

Decades of daily contact with knitters who shared their stories—"about love, life, dreams, disappointments, and, always, hard

PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALE

“WE’RE ALL YEARNING for something meaningful. Knitting brings people together because we’re getting tired of there not being any meaning in what we look like or what we wear.” —*Sylvia Olsen*

work”—meant Olsen had some of her own perspectives challenged and new commitments forged. “Living on the reserve presents you with some of the most complicated problems,” she tells me. “You can’t get by without thinking about life’s difficult issues. At some point you say, ‘Canada, what the hell’s going on?’ Then you have to decide what you’re going to do.”

Perhaps subtly informed by the drive, realized in knitting, to turn ideas into reality—to be an alchemical, transformative creator of the imagined into the actual—Olsen became an advisor, educator and advocate for on-reserve housing. Having worked in that area for years, she’s now finishing a PhD in the history of Canada’s on-reserve housing, with the hope of publishing a book of essays on a subject she says most of us, including First Nations communities themselves, are woefully unaware of.

“I’m a struggler,” she explains. “I need to know that there’s movement”—an attitude relating to housing and much more.

Olsen is the author of 15 children’s and adult books, including *Working with Wool: A Coast Salish Legacy and the Cowichan Sweater*, which won the Lieutenant-Governor’s Medal for Historical Writing. Many of her books deal with social issues, such as teen pregnancy, cultural tensions, or the history of residential schools. When she presents to students, she tells them there’s no question too difficult. Like her early knitting lesson, this message gives people great power, for it takes the confusing and potentially polarizing and makes it approachable through debate and discussion.

“We’re all yearning for something meaningful,” Olsen says earnestly and with hope for societal progress. “Knitting brings people together because we’re getting tired of there not being any meaning in what we look like or what we wear.” So whether it’s about our national housing policies, our perspective about other people, or our view of artistic traditions, superficial understanding is not an option for Olsen. It’s maybe not surprising that her Salish Fusion knitting partners are involved in politics—daughter Joni is a Tsartlip band councillor and son Adam is the current interim leader of the BC Green Party (yes, he knits!).

Strong, smart, funny, fierce and wise, Olsen has an unwavering passion for making a meaningful world, and the essays in this seemingly simple knitting book (which includes seven patterns) aren’t simple at all and are about so much more than knitting.

What we learn on Olsen’s journey is that knitting stories are the stories of individuals and cultures, tradition and change, obstacles and adaptation. They tell us about people and places as much as they do about our own attitudes and the possibility of learning. Alchemy indeed—thin threads spun into skillfully woven words that bring us together in greater understanding.



While writer and editor Amy Reiswig is not a knitter, she is affected by the emotional spell of the hand-knit and just can’t let go of a certain sweater because it was made by her mom.

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