

Perri Klass Pattern Recognition

I started thinking about how when you do knit a piece that someone else has invented, follow her pattern, then for at least a while, you almost see the world through her eyes.

I took exactly one skein of Sea Silk* with me on my vacation cruise. It's variegated, brown and gold and tan and light blue and mauve, and it's hand dyed, and apparently each skein is a little different, so they don't have any dye lots. I took it along after careful consideration of a number of alternatives (and you know I gave a lot of thought to this decision, I must have worried over it for several hours at least, total, during the few weeks before I left; during that same period I regret to say that I gave no more than a moment or two of thought, total, to what I would wear to the Captain's Welcome Dinner and the Captain's Farewell Dinner, which no doubt explains why I neglected to pack any dress shoes, and had to attend both of those events in either my walking sandals or my flipflops).

So first, this yarn, which is made from silk and a seaweed derivative. First and foremost, it was completely silky, non-woolly, completely smooth, no trailing ends, no slubs. I don't do so well in hot weather with wool or wool blends or anything even remotely fuzzy. Second, 100 grams gives you 400 meters, so it was fine enough that even in my most paranoid what-if-I-run-out-of-knitting moments, I didn't believe I was going to knit my way through the whole skein (and I didn't have extra room in my luggage for backup knitting projects because I also suffer from paranoid what-if-I-run-out-of-books fantasies, though I am apparently immune to what-if-I-don't-have-the-right-shoes anxieties, even when they would be appropriate). Third, it was so pleasantly variegated; I would have several colors to work with. So I took my skein of Sea Silk and I went to sea. To make it even more thematically appropriate, I was knitting fisherman's lace, making a scarf—or maybe a shawl—a thickish scarf or a relatively narrow shawl—a scarf that

could be blocked into something more like a shawl if it turned out there was enough silk to knit it long enough that I could stretch it out laterally.** I still don't know whether there's going to be enough, since I've now come to the end of the cruise, but not yet the end of the silk (good planning, huh?). A nice simple pattern of decreases and yarn overs, all tending in the same direction so the scarf (or the shawl) grew in diagonals. Fisherman's lace, Sea Silk, what could be more in the spirit of a small ship cruise to the fishing ports of Dalmatia?

About the cruise. This was not my first Adriatic cruise. When your husband is an expert on the history of certain parts of Eastern Europe, there are occasional travel opportunities. Well, for Larry, there is professional travel; his research and his professional meetings take him to conferences and libraries and archives in England and France and Bulgaria and Romania and Ukraine. But when someone invites him to come deliver lectures on a cruise off the coast of Croatia, as has now happened a couple of times, I get to go along. On one of our previous cruises, the passengers began referring to Larry as "the Professor" (as in, "Hey, look, everyone, the Professor's sitting at our table tonight! Maybe he's going to give us a quiz!"). The problem for me was that the conjunction of the terms *cruise* and *the professor* made me think irresistibly of "Gilligan's Island" and I would begin to wonder whether that made me Mary Ann (I didn't think I had a hope of being the movie star).

But this is about knitting. So off we went, Larry with his books and his lecture notes and his maps, and me with my Sea Silk. And I had wooden knitting needles so they wouldn't show when my carry-on luggage was x-rayed, because I had heard a couple of stories

**The pattern was my own modified version of the Montego Bay scarf, designed by Amy R. Singer and published in Interweave Knits, Summer 2007.

about how strict the European security people were being, at this rather tense moment, and I had had a pair of tweezers confiscated at a European airport check, when those tweezers had never occasioned even a lifted eyebrow (no pun intended) in all my US travel. And anyway, I like wooden needles better, especially in hot weather. And I left the stitch-holders behind as well; they're sharp and metallic, after all. And I got through security okay, and we flew to Dubrovnik, the beautiful walled city on the Adriatic. The first time I visited, in 1997, the wars that tore apart the former Yugoslavia were only recently over; the hotel we had planned to stay at had been bombed and no longer existed, and as you walked the city walls, all you could hear was the hammering noise of workmen replacing the red tile roofs that had been destroyed in the brutal bombardment of the town by an army on the hillside above. Now the city looks fully restored, and the cruise ships have returned—small ships like ours but also huge ships which send people into port by the hundreds and thousands, and the streets in the summer are crowded with tourists. So we boarded our small ship (it could hold thirty-some passengers, but we were actually a smaller group). And we sailed the spectacular Croatian coastline of offshore islands and coastal mountains, and got off the boat in various ports to visit churches and town squares and historic sites. And Larry lectured on the complicated layers of the history that had shaped those towns.

But this is about knitting. And the truth is, at first they kept us so busy on board eating and drinking that I didn't have much time to knit. But every time we got off the ship and onto a bus to go visit a town, I happily unfurled my scarf and tried to get in a couple of inches. I do not easily take any kind of car or bus ride without knitting—trains and planes are a little different because I can read, so



though I always bring knitting, I don't quite feel that my life depends on it. But put me on a bus trip, especially with a guide talking through a loud-speaker, and my scarf is my lifeline. So I knit on the road to our embarkation port north of Dubrovnik, and I knit on our ride to the Orthodox Monastery at Savina, and I knit on our fascinating journey inland to the city of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there was terrible house-to-house fighting during the war between the Christian and the Moslem populations, which had lived side by side for so long. You go to Mostar now to see the famous bridge, built by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century, which survived a long time into the war, hung with cloths and tires to protect it from artillery, and then was finally destroyed in 1993, its ruined arch an international symbol of the breakdown of connection, communication, civilization.

And now the bridge has been rebuilt, as an international gesture toward reconciliation and cooperation, though I would guess that however large the task of engineering an historically accurate reconstruction, it is probably still a much more straightforward job than the reconciliation of the former neighbors. But Mostar itself is beautiful, built on the gorge along both sides of the river, and the cafes and restaurants and souvenir shops are open, and it is possible to buy bridge souvenirs in every conceivable form (a snow globe? No problem!). And the bridge itself is beautiful, and all of its possible meanings load the trip up with emotions of different kinds.

But this is about knitting. So a few days later, we docked at the island of Hvar, which is famous for its lavender, which is planted all over the island,

*Hand Maiden Fine Yarn, Fleece Artist

and harvested to make lavender oil, and also for the dried herbs, sold in sachets to perfume your clothing and keep away the moths—see, I told you this was about knitting! And when we walked onto the town square, there were two elderly women, sitting in the shade of the cathedral, selling their lace. Both of them were busily crocheting new pieces out of white cord as they smiled invitingly at our group. The guide warned that this was not in fact the famous agave lace of Hvar, but it was beautiful handmade lace, and several people bought pieces.

Now I have to tell you that for a little while before leaving on this trip, I had been obsessing a little bit about lace. In addition to the brown-toned Sea Silk, I had bought a quantity of blue-toned variegated silk, a rather large investment by my standards, and I had bought a pattern for a very simple lace shawl, but I wasn't quite satisfied, and I had been looking through books and magazines for other possible lace patterns. And of course, something in me was saying, are you really going to start something like that, a complicated pattern that will require your careful attention? Don't you know you'll never finish it? Don't you know you'll make mistakes and they'll always bother you, but you'll be afraid to rip out because you'll think you'll never pick it up properly?

But when you find yourself buying books on lace knitting and paging through your Barbara Walker volumes, you are not planning to listen to that inner voice. I am clearly going to think about lace knitting. I am clearly going to attempt something large and ambitious and possibly foolhardy with my blue silk. I don't think I will ever be primarily a lace knitter, and I don't think I will ever work in truly thin yarns, but I go through phases of feeling obsessed with pattern and with the possibility of creating the kinds of fabric images you can only make with lace.

The guide on Hvar did eventually lead us to the Benedictine Convent, established in 1664, where the sisters have been making agave lace for more than a century, and where particularly

fine specimens are displayed in a small museum. We were shown one of the long green pointed leaves of an agave cactus; the hardy green plants thrive in the difficult rocky soil of the island. The single thin fibers are pulled out, each as long as the spear-like leaf, and then prepared and joined and worked into complicated pieces, elaborate snowflakes on an island where it doesn't snow, webs of circles and flowers and geometric shapes, patterns which according to the guide are invented by each individual nun. "This kind of lace is not made according to already settled designs," the museum pamphlet explains. "Benedictine sisters imagine patterns themselves, thus every one of them creates a unique piece of art."

I know I will make a fool of myself if I try to explain how the lace is made. There are a couple of different techniques, involving needles, involving a double-ended "fisherman's tool" that was on display, and involving paper patterns. I brought home some postcards of the agave lace pieces, since I couldn't afford to buy one, and I thought about what would be involved—if you were more of a lace knitter than I am, or more of a scholar—in looking at them carefully enough to decode them, to understand how they were put together. I started thinking about how when you do knit a piece that someone else has invented, follow her pattern, then for at least a while, you almost see the world through her eyes. You follow the same path, you encounter the same tricky moments, you solve the same problems. You don't always solve them in the same way, of course, but over the years, chances are, someone else has come upon your particular solution before you. That's why Elizabeth Zimmermann always called any clever idea she came up with an "unvention"—acknowledging the unrecorded collective history of all the people who had applied their ingenuity to these problems over time and had made and remade the small and satisfying discoveries that you can only make when the yarn is actually in your fingers.

I wondered whether there was any

connection here to what holds people together and what sometimes breaks them apart—could lace-making offer at least a small metaphor for the necessity of understanding what the world looks like from your neighbor's point of view? Was it a symbol of some all-important discipline, a way of learning some intense and difficult lesson about the ways in which we are all set similar tasks and have to apply our different blends of skill and dexterity and diligence and invention?

That's not the moral that the Benedictines drew. The motto often associated with the Benedictines is the Latin injunction, *Ora et labora*, pray and work; this was one of the kinds of work with which the sisters fulfilled their mission. And needless to say, when the guide offered us that motto, it struck another knitter's chord with me, so I went home and looked it up on the internet (I'm not trying to pretend to be knowledgeable about monastic history here). I found a certain amount of confusion about just what the relationship was supposed to be between the work and the prayer (and even about whether this was really something that Saint Benedict himself had enjoined).

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem about the founding of the Benedictine Order (oh, the usefulness of Google searches!), and expressed the opinion that Benedict was advising not just a life compounded of those two important ingredients, but a more mystical fusion of the two:

*For, more than thirteen centuries ago,
Benedict fleeing from the gates of Rome,
A youth disgusted with its vice and woe,
Sought in these mountain solitudes a home.
He founded here his Convent and his Rule
Of prayer and work, and counted work as prayer;
The pen became a clarion, and his school
Flamed like a beacon in the midnight air.*

C.S. Lewis, in his theological writings on prayer, invoked a different, but closely related saying: "The two methods by which we are allowed to produce events may be called work and prayer. Both are alike in this respect—that in both we try to produce a state of affairs which God has not (or at any

rate not yet) seen fit to provide 'on His own.' And from this point of view the old maxim *laborare est orare* (work is prayer) takes on a new meaning. What we do when we weed a field is not quite different from what we do when we pray for a good harvest. But there is an important difference all the same."

Just as I am no lace knitter, I am no theologian and will never ever even try to be. But I suspect there is no devoted knitter (or lacemaker, for that matter) who does not resonate at least a little to the question of how to compound your life from the work you do and the things you make, on the one hand, mixed with the spiritual on the other. Is it a question of *Ora et labora*, mixing the two in good proportion, finding the balance, filling your life with both? That feels right to me; I could quote you without benefit of the internet the motto of Abigail May Alcott, mother of Louisa (you know her as the model for Marmee in *Little Women*): "Hope and keep busy." I think I spend my life negotiating some variant of that combination, that mixture, that balance.

Or in certain circumstances, at certain moments, does the work become something more than the sum of its parts, drawing on creativity but also on your ability to follow directions and perhaps even see through the eyes of someone else, and on the parts of your mind which can be called up by the right mixture of pattern and problem, repetition and invention. Knitting, of course, is my way to use time happily on the bus or the airplane or the boat, and my tension reliever, and my happy source of color-drenched projects and lace-patterned imaginings. But it's also my meditation and my way, occasionally, into the brightly-lit intricate imaginings of someone I'll never know, and into patterns I might otherwise never have noticed, never have imagined, never have puzzled over, never have recognized, never have understood. ☪

Perri is the author of *Two sweaters for my father* (XRX, Inc.), and with her mother, Sheila Solomon Klass, of *Every Mother is a Daughter: The Neverending Quest For Success, Inner Peace, and a Really Clean Kitchen* (Ballantine).