

# Perri Klass A Knitting-Shaped Hole

*Actually, I started thinking about whether there was a knitting-shaped hole in my own life—or would be, if I put down my knitting...*

“Why don’t you make her a knitter?” my editor asked. “Or something like that—give her something in her life which fills that same place that knitting fills in yours. It will help people like her. Make her a knitter.”

Some years ago, I was finishing up a novel. What I mean is, of course, I thought I had finished writing the novel, but I was working with an editor who thought there was still room for improvement. She was worried about my main character, who happened to be a woman—like me, and a doctor—like me, and a pediatrician—like me. And in this novel, a series of bad things happened to this woman, and to be honest, yes, they were based on a series of bad things that had happened to me, years before. When I was doing my internship in pediatrics, I began getting anonymous letters, which seemed to be sent by someone familiar with the local medical system; they were written on an assortment of hospital letterheads. I got some insulting letters sent to me (everyone hates you, why don’t you get out of here), and then, more anonymous letters were sent to nurses and doctors around my hospital, complaining about me, and warning that my credentials were faked. It was a strange and terrible experience, and it went on to get stranger and stranger, but that isn’t really what I wanted to tell you about—or even what I wanted to write about in the novel.

In the novel, which was eventually published in 2004 as *The Mystery of Breathing*, what I wanted to do was this: I wanted to take this terrible thing that had happened to me, and assign it to someone completely unlike me, someone with a completely different personality, someone at a completely different stage in her life. I had been an intern, just out of medical school, in my twenties, unsure (and very appropriately unsure) of decisions I made every day. Even without the anonymous letters, I would have been wondering whether I would really make it as a doctor, whether I could

handle the responsibility—and the work hours—whether I had chosen the right place in the world. Given all that baseline insecurity, what an easy victim I was for an anonymous enemy; I was all too ready to believe that everyone hated me and wished I would get out of there. And on some level, even though I knew that my credentials weren’t fake, I probably felt almost as if they were: sure I had actually gone to medical school, and passed my courses, and graduated, but sometimes the whole thing felt like a big mistake.

What I wanted, then, was to assign this whole awful experience to one of the doctors who seemed to me replete with the confidence that I so badly lacked; to a doctor who was absolutely sure of her place in the world, who came to work in the morning ready to do one of the terrifyingly high-stakes jobs of the hospital, and did it with absolute certainty that she was the best one for the task. I had seen plenty of doctors like that in my training, and I made my character a dedicated and ambitious neonatologist, a specialist in the care of the tiniest and sickest patients in any children’s hospital, the premature newborns, the newborns born with congenital heart disease, the babies who almost don’t make it out of the delivery room. Clinical life-and-death decisions were part of her daily routine; babies so small or so sick that they would have had no chance at all to survive only a couple of years earlier were regularly in her hands. And I wanted to see what would happen to her if she started getting anonymous letters.

So there was my character: confident, profoundly committed to her job. “Can’t you make her a knitter?” said my editor. She felt my character needed to be more sympathetic for readers to care about her properly. As I wrote the novel, she had turned out to be a little bit fiercer, a little bit harsher, a little bit less kind, than I had initially planned. She took wonderful care of those tiny sick babies, but she was sometimes arrogant with her colleagues, and

if any of the interns failed to meet her standards, she could be kind of brutal. In other words, she was a wonderful doctor—if you had a very sick newborn baby, you would have wanted my character in charge—but occasionally, she acted like an arrogant jerk. And even though I hadn’t thought that was where I was going, it did seem to me a legitimate mix: haven’t you ever come across someone who was a very good doctor, but had certain traces of arrogant jerkhood in the mix? I had certainly been exposed—during residency and after—to plenty of excellent doctors who didn’t always behave themselves.

I don’t mean that I didn’t like my character. I liked her fine; she was driven and ambitious and occasionally arrogant, but she was also smart and interesting and devoted to her job. And that was who she was. That didn’t mean that she deserved to be the target of a hostile anonymous nutcase—but it did mean that when the anonymous letter campaign became public in her hospital, there would be at least a few people who be eager to believe the worst of her, delighted to spread rumors that there was something wrong with her credentials, happy to see her in trouble, ready to feel that she deserved whatever she got. But my editor was afraid that readers wouldn’t forgive the occasional harsh moments, the occasional arrogance; that readers would feel she deserved what she got. And one answer to that, my editor thought, was to make her a knitter—or to give her some equivalent passion to fill that knitting-shaped hole in her life.

This seemed kind of reasonable to me. After all, I wasn’t being asked to change her into a different person; only to add another facet to her character, or show her in a slightly different light so that all the facets could be seen. So not knitting, I thought, because knitting is me, and she isn’t me—but let’s give her something else in its place. Maybe she could be a talented amateur painter, I thought. So I tried. I sent



her out sketching, and she didn’t want to go. She couldn’t sit still and look at things, and she didn’t have the patience for sketching or water colors. She was an interventionist; she needed to put her hands on the world and change it around.

Okay, then, a potter, a ceramist. We could see her in her studio, pounding out her frustrations into the clay when the anonymous letters got too intense. I looked at a local pottery studio, and tried to imagine her into it—but she balked. She wasn’t drawn to clay, and she didn’t like the delayed gratification; she wasn’t ready to put in the effort and then wait to see how a pot looked when it came out of the kiln. Besides, she and her husband lived a rather spare and stripped-down life (or was I just trying to distinguish her from my own cluttered circumstances, my own house with its piles of unsorted mail and unread newspapers and its dust-collecting world bazaar of travel souvenir tzatchkes?) and I just couldn’t fill it full of hand-thrown pots.

So I came back to knitting. After all, I understand knitting—I wouldn’t have to do any research trips to figure out the vocabulary. Among the other papers and books and travel souvenirs in my house were neat stacks of back issues of this magazine. So why hesitate? Was I worried about giving her one more trait of my own, concerned that knitting might push people who know me into reading this as nonfiction, as autobiography? And if so, wasn’t that silly? My goal was to write a good book, and if I could write her a convincing passion for knitting, I should just go ahead. What better to fill the knitting-shaped hole than, well, knitting?

And after all, I reasoned, making her a knitter would certainly make her much more likeable. I mean, I

myself always like people better if they turn out to be knitters. I could make her a knitter and use it as a way to show her love of color and her desire to create beautiful things and her generosity of spirit—maybe she could knit hats for premature babies, thereby bridging the different sides of her life! I started planning out her relationship to knitting—she would be a knitter completely unlike me, goal-oriented and organized. She would be one of those mysterious people who shop only for a single project, buy expensive luxury yarn, complete the project, and give it away. She would be drawn to rich subtle colors and textures—I thought that since the book was set in Boston in the winter, she could work with mohair and maybe angora, yarns that I don't use too often. She would knit mostly to make gifts for friends, scarves and baby blankets and the like—surely that would help her seem sympathetic. And she would be a knitter without a stash; she didn't like clutter and she didn't like extraneous objects, not on her desk and not in her closet. It was as if I were bargaining with the novel gods, telling them, see how different we are, she and I!

But my character refused to pick up the knitting needles. She just plain wouldn't do it. She had plenty of friends, but none of them would ever get a handknit mohair scarf from her. She was fiercely possessive of those premature babies in the newborn intensive care unit; she breathed with them, and sometimes for them, she obsessed over the details of their GI tracts and their kidney function—but she wasn't going to start knitting little hats for them. She just wasn't. I had created a character who was not a knitter, and I couldn't make her into one. Maybe I could understand what kind of yarn she would be drawn to, if she were drawn to knitting at all, but she couldn't understand why I was drawn to knitting in the first place. She just didn't get it, and that was that.

It's a truism in writing fiction, of course, that your characters take over at a certain point, and announce

their preferences. I have had fictional characters do all kinds of things that I myself don't want to do or wouldn't want to do. I've had characters fall madly in love with people who I don't find appealing at all. I've had characters I thought were supposed to be bad guys, pure and simple, stand up and announce that they were really complex and somewhat sympathetic.

But even so, it seemed to me a little unfair that I couldn't get my character to knit. Here I was with the chance to write about something I really love and understand—to put a pleasure and a passion into her life that truly made sense to me, and that I could explain in detail. And instead, I had created a resolute non-knitter; when I made her go into a yarn store, I could see the expression of polite bored incomprehension on her face, as she got ready to say something polite about all the pretty colors. You've all seen that expression, when you've dragged a non-knitting friend (or spouse, or child) into a yarn shop. You've seen it and you've wondered at it: how can this person stand here, surrounded by yarn, and feel no pull, no urge, no sense of temptation? Well, I had created a person like that, and there she was, standing in that imaginary yarn store, and she was bored. I needed to let her leave the building.

Okay, so she wasn't a knitter. I would try not to resent her for that. And perhaps I had been taking the wrong approach. Maybe I had been too cavalier, thinking I could just assign her some kind of hobby, the way you would put a child at summer camp into ceramics, if woodcarving was full. But it wasn't just a fill-in-the-blanks question, wasn't simply a matter of finding her an all-purpose gentle-spirited and somewhat artistic hobby, just to give her personality some softer brighter shadings. I started to think about whether there really was a knitting-shaped hole in her life—which I was not going to be able to fill handily with knitting.

Actually, I started thinking about whether there was a knitting-shaped hole in my own life—or would be, if I put down my knitting, or in the

lives of other non-knitters I know. I guess I occasionally meet someone who does something else—and certainly painting and pottery both come to mind—in a spirit that I recognize from knitting. Knitting is my relaxation and my meditation; it's my chance to use my hands and to use the part of my brain which moves my fingers, and my chance to reach out for color and texture. It's my search for the satisfaction of starting and finishing well-defined projects—but then, what about all those unfinished projects? And what about the stash—what does it say about me that I need to surround myself with beautiful yarn bought for future projects I may never get to, or sometimes with beautiful yarn bought for no defined project, that I still needed deeply to own? What does it say about me that if you gave me an hour in a wonderful yarn store tomorrow, I would come home with a bag of new yarn, and a slightly guilty but profound sense of happiness and fulfillment. And you know, of course, that I could happily spend an hour—or more—in a wonderful yarn store.

Does all that add up to some kind of recognizable puzzle piece? Could you take the knitting right out of my life and look at the gap? Could you conceivably offer me another interest (Beading? Pastry-making?) and expect it to fit comfortably into that particular slot? The whole idea seems absurd—I might decide to take up beading or pastry-making (though probably not both at once; we don't want to find Venetian glass in the eclairs), I suppose, but if I did, I would then more or less grow into the activity, and the activity would grow into my life. What I mean is, my relationship to knitting and to patterns and to yarn stores reflects so many things—the culture and vocabulary of knitting and knitters, the years of rueful experience with unfinished projects and an ever-expanding stash, the specific memories of travelling with knitting and childrearing with knitting and going to conferences with knitting. It's not that knitting fills a certain defined and bounded place in my

life—knitting is in my life. My life is my life partly because I knit, and the details of my relationship to knitting are among the details which shape me. If we were looking for knitting metaphors (and you will notice that I have been resisting them), we might say it's the difference between a design which is embroidered over your knitting, in duplicate stitch, and which you could therefore always pick out and redo, without undoing the underlying knitting, and a design which is knitted right into the work.

So what happened to my character? Well, she certainly never picked up the knitting needles. That just wasn't who she was or what she did. I did discover, by letting her wander a little, that she at some point felt some pull toward gardening, though she had very little knowledge or expertise, and I found out something about her musical preferences, which turned out to be very different from my own. But I'm not sure there ever was a knitting-shaped hole in her life at all; there were other gaps and yearnings, and like the rest of us, she had to negotiate those gaps and satisfy those yearnings. And like the rest of us, she may someday find something new and rich and strange working its way into her life, some new way of engaging the world or creating beauty. I'm not saying that eventually she's going to become a knitter, because to be honest, I still can't imagine it—and since she only exists because I imagined her, in the first place, you might think that would be decisive. But I guess you should never say never. People change and grow in unexpected ways; sometimes you open your eyes and the world looks a little different. Perhaps someday I will be passing a stray hour in a yarn shop—or in the great platonic yarn shop of my imagination—and I will look up to see my character standing there, stroking the skeins of mohair, planning her next project. ◻

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).