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# Cable Guys: Men Who

By Sandra Broitman

n of a day goes by that Witt Prat doesn't knit. He knits on the subway, in coffee shops, in movies and cathedrals; before work, on lunch breaks, evenings, and on weekends—anywhere, and anytime he can find a spare moment to get in a few rows and the space to work. And space is important. Witt Prat is a bearded, 6-foot, 8-inch, 240-pound man; a Paul Bunyan with knitting needles—not a common sight in his home town of Washington, DC. While some guys might feel a little intimidated knitting in public, Prat has no fear. "I look more like a defensive tackle than a knitter," he says, "and that might keep some of the negative comments at bay. Men probably tell themselves 'He's twice as big as I am, and he has something sharp in his hands, maybe I better keep my mouth shut!'"

Ask just about any guy strolling down Main Street, USA, and he'll tell you knitting is for grannies. Says who? During the 16th and 17th

centuries European knitting guilds were for men. The famous cabled sweaters from the Aran Islands were traditionally knit by men, as were the Scot's tams. (In fact, women didn't even wear sweaters until the twentieth century!) In America, it was not uncommon for frontier pioneers of both sexes to knit their own cold weather gear. And during the American Civil War, and the First and Second World Wars, here and abroad, the wounded, and males too young or too old to fight, contributed significantly to the tons of war-effort socks and sweaters knitted for the boys at the front. In fact, knitting has been a tradition enjoyed by men as well as women in many parts of the world. And, although it may come as a surprise, nothing's really changed. There are still lots of male knitters everywhere.

Men—young and old, married and single, gay and straight—embrace this supposedly female craft. There are guys selling their handknits at country craft fairs, there's a Web site for male knitters on the Internet, and the most famous knitter of all time is a man—the venerable Kaffe Fassett, a hero to knitters around the world, and a household name in his adopted home of Great Britain.

Kaffe Fassett electrified the handknitting world with his first book, *Glorious Knitting*. It thrilled new knitters and resuscitated the lapsed. Statuesque and charming, today Fassett lectures to sold-out audiences of adoring women, but he has also encountered a few male knitters along

the way. "What I find is that all around the world there are men who knit, but they're mostly in the closet," Fassett says. They slink up to him at lectures and exhibitions to show their work, but if he suggests going public they back off immediately with excuses. "My mates down at the pub wouldn't like it," one Australian confided to Fassett when asked if he would like to be interviewed for an article on men who knit.

tom to taking pucks in the face (before he invented the goalie mask), was a prolific knitter, though his coach encouraged him to keep it under his hat (or in this case, his famous handknit toque). Fassett says that living in England perhaps made it easier for him to get started knitting than if he had stayed home in the States, because, he says, "it's more acceptable in England for anyone to do anything." He began knitting in the late sixties—a time when many young people were experimenting with folksy crafts. "It was a wonderful thing to hang out at home with friends, and work with our hands meditatively and quietly. That was a big scene back then." These days Fassett is often recognized in public, and strangers approach him constantly. He is delighted when he encounters male knitters, but finds men are invariably interested in what he is working on, whether they are knitters or not.

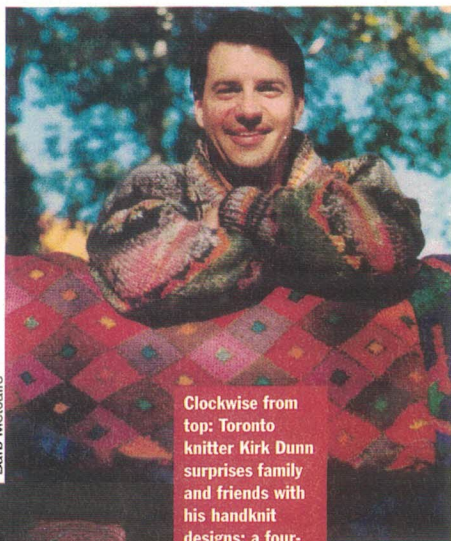
A big fan of Kaffe Fassett, Toronto knitter Kirk Dunn is currently working on a Fassett-inspired sweater for his father. It's a pattern of crosses, in a myriad of oranges and blues—a wonderful gift for a Presbyterian minister who had the doors of his church painted his favorite color, orange! Dunn has knitted more than forty sweaters in the seven years since he learned the basics from a woman in a little yarn shop in Ontario. He was twenty-four, and started knitting because of a competitive relationship with a female colleague, who was an enthusiastic knitter. Dunn took up knitting as a challenge. He was immediately hooked, and soon surprised a girlfriend with a handknit sweater for her birthday! Dunn experienced little resistance to his new passion from his family, especially after the Christmas all nine of them found a custom-knit "Kirk Dunn original" under the tree.

As an actor, Dunn spends a lot of time waiting around theaters, and travelling. He puts that time to good use. His wife, Claire, has been surprised with numerous colorful creations, all knitted on the sly. Dunn has received a few odd stares as he knits on the subway, but these are balanced with praise, including comments from men who excitedly tell him he has inspired them to go back to their forgotten childhood hobby of knitting. One incident that really stands out for Dunn is a late night ride home on the Toronto subway. Knitting up a storm as per usual, he noticed a rather intimidating fellow watching him. When Dunn finally reached his stop, and got up to get off the train, the guy called out "Hey man! You forgot

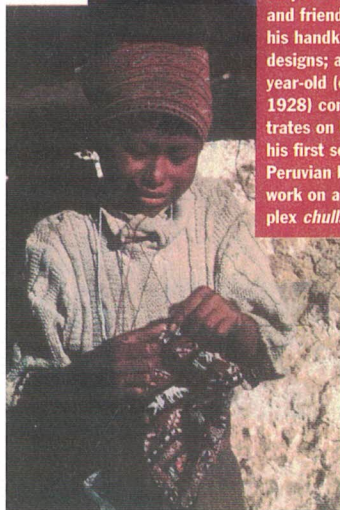
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Jacques Plante, Hockey Hall of Fame goalie for the Montreal Canadiens, accus-



Clockwise from top: Toronto knitter Kirk Dunn surprises family and friends with his handknit designs; a four-year-old (circa 1928) concentrates on knitting his first scarf; a Peruvian boy at work on a complex chulla...



Cynthia Gravel LeCount



Barb Metcalfe

# KNIT



Barb Metcalfe



Left: Knitting guru Kaffe Fassett revolutionized the craft. Right: Handy man — Kirk Dunn in action.

Anne James, Photo courtesy Westminster Fibers

“What I find is that all around the world there are men who knit, but they’re mostly in the closet.”

soothingly croon “That’s very relaxing, isn’t it?” which, he says, “makes me feel like they think I’ve just been released from a mental institution!” Knitting is a natural for performance artists, who sometimes crave a more tangible outlet for their talents. “Knitting is string and needles; choreography is dancers, studios, time, and space. With knitting you can be creative, and if you don’t like it, you rip it out. It’s a low risk way of keeping creativity flowing through you, in a very joyful way.”

Recently Witchel took his knitting and entertaining talents to cyberspace as the moderator of the “Men Who Knit” forum on the Internet. It’s a place where male knitters describe their latest projects, ask for help on specific problems, or just chat about knitting.

Although men and women bring the same enthusiasm to knitting, there seem to be some differences in preferences. Fassett has noticed that although his painterly designs are very popular with both sexes, “men knit for the technical stimulation and the relaxation, rather than the artistry.” Many male knitters appear to be more fascinated by the “architecture” of knitting as opposed to the surface decoration. Richard Ferretti, design director for *Self* magazine, is in the architecture camp. “I’m more interested in the shapes of things. Making that work is the art for me, rather than the decoration applied to a shape.” After his first knitting venture, Ferretti never looked at a commercial pattern again “I totally love trying to figure out what is going to make a sweater work. I love the mathematics of knitting. I stopped using

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this!” Dunn turned around, expecting a confrontation, but the man just smiled and tossed him a ball of yarn he had dropped.

Like Kirk Dunn, ballet dancer and choreographer Leigh Witchel spends a great deal of time traveling on buses and hanging around theaters. He took up knitting as a “lovely little background task.” It became an obsession after his first encounter with Kaffe Fassett’s *Glorious Knitting*, which kept him up until four in the morning making swatches for a sweater. Always the artist, Leigh describes his knitting habits as “eclectic and omnivorous.” Each project is different from the one before, and he’s always exploring “moving from color, color, color to monochromes and textures.”

Witchel knits for one to two hours a day. He has even devised a method of knitting and walking at the same time. People in Manhattan often stare curiously as he knits his way to work, but they generally keep comments to themselves. Some

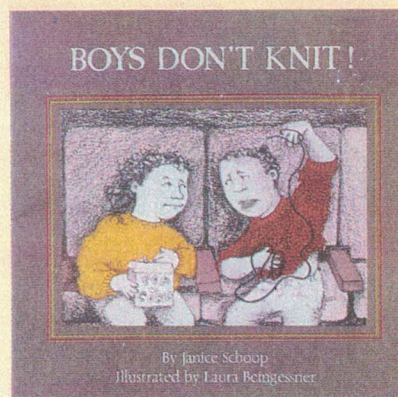
## Boys Don't Knit

Janice Shoop

Illustrated by Laura Beingessner

(Women's Press) Price: \$5.95 U.S., \$6.95 Canada

When Marvin accidentally unravels the sweater his grandma knit for him, he is at a loss about what to do. “You’ll just have to get it fixed before you go home,” says his friend Elsa. “Boys don’t knit!” shouts an outraged Marvin. “They do so!” Elsa replies. “My grandfather knits...He might help you.” So begins Janice Shoop’s charming children’s story, *Boys Don’t Knit*. Fascinated by Grandpa’s “flying fingers and clicking needles”—and overcome with ideas for all the things he can make (a secret pocket, a hat for his hamster)—Marvin asks if he can learn to knit too. Everyday after school he races to Elsa’s grandfather’s house for a knitting lesson. Before long, he has finished his first project — a long, red scarf for his grandma.



Delightful black and white drawings bring Marvin and his friends to life; there are even illustrated step-by-step instructions for making a scarf. *Boys Don't Knit* is a wonderful gift, and a great means of introducing the world of knitting for the younger set. Available through Women's Press, 517 College Street, Suite 302, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6G 4A2. 416-921-2425.

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## check these dates!

### March 25-28: TKGA National Conference Milwaukee, WI

Meet up with over 600 fellow knitters from all across the country to shop the market and see the latest fashions. The Knitting Guild of America will also hold smaller regional conferences in Columbus, OH (June 3-7) and in Springfield, IL (August 19-22). For a complete schedule contact TKGA, PO Box 1606, Knoxville, TN 37901; (423) 524-2401 or (800) 274-6034; email [tkga@tkga.com](mailto:tkga@tkga.com)

### April 14-26: Vogue Knitting Tour of New Zealand and Australia

Editor-hosted tour of sheep farms and woolen mills. Meet leading designers and knitters. For information packet, call (800) 677-9412 or (813) 796-7555.

### April 17-19: American Craft Council Craft Show St. Paul, MN

An indoor market and juried exhibition of fine crafts. For more information on this or any of the nine national ACC shows, contact the American Craft Council, 21 South Eltings Corner Road, Highland, NY 12528 (800) 836-3470

### April 25: 3rd Annual Knitter's Fantasy Day Warren, Ohio

A one-day knitting extravaganza with classes, a knitting market and door prizes. Call (440) 449-3662 for more information.

### May 23-25: Crafts, Fabrics & More Calgary, AB Canada

Canadian Crafts and Hobby Association hosts this large exhibition covering all crafts categories including plenty of knitting vendors. For more info contact CCHA at #24, 1410 40 Ave NE, Calgary, AB T2E 6L1; (403) 291-0559; [www.cdnrcraft.org](http://www.cdnrcraft.org)

### July 23-26: Convergence '98: Rhythm & Hues Atlanta, GA

A national conference on spinning yarn. Features exhibit for handspinners. "YARNS - Spun with a Southern Accent." For program, send SASE to: Convergence '98, PO Box 566533, Atlanta, GA 31156

### August 13-16: Chain Link '98 Atlanta, GA

Crochet's answer to TKGA, the Crochet Guild of America, sponsors this national conference. For more info call (708) 862-1243 or send SASE to: Chain Link '98, P.O. Box 1926, Calumet City, IL 60409

### August 13-16: Michigan Fiber Festival Allegan, MI

Workshops for children and adults, demonstrations, competitions, and vendor booths. Information: Michigan Fiber Festival Inc., 142 E. State Street, Hastings, MI 49058; (616) 945-2816; [jiltur@mvcc.com](mailto:jiltur@mvcc.com)

(continued from page 11)

patterns because they weren't really helping me. I can understand knitting as I can't understand sewing—knitting is completely clear."

Witt Prat, Kirk Dunn, Leigh Witchel and Richard Feretti are part of the age-old tradition of male knitters. But they are one end of the spectrum—men who knit as a hobby rather than as a necessity, whether it's to earn money or to dress their families. High in the mountains of Bolivia and Peru, Andean men use thread-thin yarns to turn out incredibly colorful, complex patterns for *chullas* (hats) they sell at the markets. They also knit *chullas* for their young children, including the ruffled edge styles typical for girl babies, socks and arm warmers. When Cynthia Gravelle LeCount, intrepid author of *Andean Folk Knitting*, first encountered colorful knitted *chullas* in the indigenous markets, she naturally assumed they were made by women. "I was surprised, and thrilled," she recalls. "Men don't knit them all, but they knit a lot, and some of the very best. I was totally blown away by the craftsmanship. I had never seen anything like it. They are technically so complex, and advanced, writing out the pattern would just be a mind boggling feat."

And in parts of Kashmir, Bosnia, China, and North Africa today men knit fabulously colorful clothing and accessories for themselves and their families.

But no matter what the purpose, from Canada to North Africa to Peru to the U.S. thousands of men-who-knit are linked by a common bond: the pleasure and satisfaction of exploring creative abilities. In the new millennium, the click of needles may once again be louder from the male side than the female. Only time will tell. ●



## Book Reviews

(continued from page 8)

### Colorful Knits For You And Your Child by Zoe Mellor (Trafalgar Square, US \$22.95)

The young and the young-at-heart will delight in Zoe Mellor's latest endeavor, *Colorful Knits For You And Your Child*. There are more than 25 fun-to-knit sweaters—colorful folk patterns, adorable animals, bright stripes, and textural cables—designed for women, and for kids aged one to ten. Each sweater is beautifully photographed and easy to follow charts and instructions are included.

