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INSIDE THE RELIEF EFFORT

SPECIAL REPORT

By CHARLIE GILLIS
in Banda Aceh

'A drive down the main road is a journey through hell. At a refugee camp, Ernawati Sulaiman mourns the death of her husband and three of her children. The fourth is missing.'

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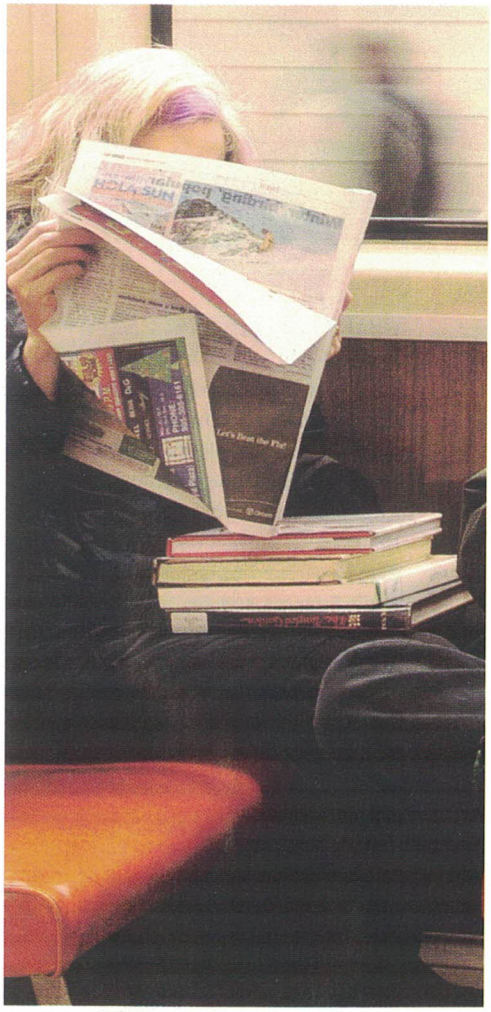
BULLISH WOOLLIES

Knitting is on a roll as young hipsters across the country—including some men—reinvent the craft



KNIT TWO, PURL TWO, clickety-clack. There's something mesmerizing about knitting. But the guy beside me on the subway conjuring up a sock from a strand of teal blue yarn isn't likely to drift into a trance. Three years after learning to knit, Karol Orzechowski still has to focus on finagling the wool around the needles. "I tried to knit without looking," says the 23-year-old student at Toronto's York University. "I could do it, but I had to concentrate even more." A sock presents an exceptional challenge: first, there's the matter of its tube-like form requiring four, not two, needles; then there's the heel, achieved by an awkward dance of dropped and regained stitches. This is Orzechowski's third attempt; his two previous efforts have become arm bands. "I never destroy what I've done," he discloses. "I just can't do it."

Reverence for the woolly craft is clearly on the rise. Across Canada, a nation of 2.5 million knitters, the ham-handed are mixing with the nimble-fingered in knitting clutches at schools, church basements, campus dorms and coffee shops. A recent Craft Yarn Council of America survey found that the number of people who knit and crochet doubled between 1994 and 2002. Aging baby boomers returning to the craft they learned in childhood are a big part of that story. But the real momentum comes from a younger, hipper crowd. Kids, teens and twentysomethings are passing over pastel baby bonnets, Icelandic sweaters and synthetic booties in favour of bolder, edgier patterns with names like Big Bad Baby Blanky or Girly Boxers. A gender shift may also be under way. Orzechowski represents a tiny minority, but men who knit, observe some needlework afficionados, are a growing presence in guilds, yarn shops, knitting blogs and other Internet sites.

Funky knitwear is all the rage, but there's more to this upswing than just fashion. Cynthia MacDougall, Barrie, Ont.-based head of the Canadian Guild of Knitters, attributes it to our high-tech, consumer-oriented culture. "People want to balance the fast-paced world of computers with a peaceful, tactile activity," she says. Catherine Blythe, creative and marketing director of Listowel, Ont.-based Spinrite LP, one of North America's largest craft yarn manufacturers, agrees. "In the 1980s, women were into obsessive, showy things like aerobics," she says. "Now it's yoga and kinder, gentler means of self-fulfillment and creativity—part of a cocooning mentality that 9/11 and the U.S. war in Iraq have helped perpetuate."

PEOPLE want to balance fast-paced, high-tech, consumer culture with a peaceful, tactile and creative activity

War, politics and . . . knitting? Well, Blythe isn't the only one to connect those dots. Kirk Dunn, a Toronto actor, has been churning out sweaters since he first picked up a set of needles in 1988. He was so taken by the design potential of the craft that he flew to London in 1998 to apprentice with groundbreaking textile artist Kaffe Fassett. On his return, Dunn dreamed up and secured $45,000 for an ambitious project: an imposing "stained glass" triptych and rosette that explore the points at which Judaism, Christianity and Islam converge and conflict. (He achieves a cathedral window effect by knitting mottled patches in rich tones outlined in black and metallic yarn.) "It's about the paradox of religion and war," he says. "They all preach love and respect, and then kill each other." The first panel depicting Christianity is not yet finished, but the knitted tapestry has already piqued interest at the Toronto Textile Museum of Canada and the Presbyterian Church of Canada.

It's hard to think of a better medium to make a point about community—which is why knitting is a compelling pastime for some political activists. Members of the international Revolutionary Knitting Circle regularly show up to protest war, G8 meetings and environmental damage done

Orzechowski; Toronto's Knit Café (below): it's a gateway to community, relaxation

by logging companies, with knitted banners, peace arm bands and "tree cozies." The network's Proclamation of Constructive Revolution aims "to cast off dependencies on global trade" by advocating small-scale, local production and trade.

Meanwhile, Debbie Stoller, editor of the New York-based magazine *Bust*, adds a feminist twist to knitting, arguing women should "take back the knit." Feminism in the 1970s "was about breaking free from the things women had traditionally done," she notes. "Thirty years on, we're saying, 'Wait a minute, child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, needlework all take skill.' " Hoping to spread some of those smarts around, she started a Stitch 'N Bitch knitting clutch in 1999. Today, there are more than 160 groups from Tasmania to Winnipeg, and Stoller has just published *Stitch 'N Bitch Nation*, a follow-up to her bestselling 2003 title, *Stitch 'N Bitch*, and one of several new how-to books.

But if knitting has a subversive side, the trend is hardly unravelling the system—yarn manufacturers are thriving, with their products available in Zellers and Wal-Mart, and over the Internet. New microfibre technology, explains Sharon Airhart, Toronto editor of the online magazine *KnitNet*, has also put novelty yarns on the market that are more appealing than earlier synthetics. Meanwhile, farms raising alpacas, llamas and exotic goats for fleece—and mills spinning such raw material—have emerged to service a more upscale niche market. A host of publications are also cashing in on the knitting frenzy, offering advice, patterns and feature stories. The craft has even inspired a novel: Australian writer Anne Bartlett's *Knitting* will be published by Houghton Mifflin this spring. And in 2003, Langley, B.C., nurse Debbie Enns opened a "knitting café" in a small strip mall (the similar but unrelated Knit Café started up on Toronto's hip Queen Street West in October). It's a cozy establishment with warm yellow walls, wooden beams and four lamp-lit tables. Along with the usual coffee shop fare, Enns' Knit Café sells wool and needlework accessories, while offering workshops on everything from spinning to needle felting. Business, she says, "has been very, very good."

About a tenth of Enns' customers are men—a far cry from pre-industrial times, when knitting was largely a male trade. Toronto's Orzechowski doesn't have time for knitting cafés or groups; he knits solo on the subway before class. And although he does attend anti-globalization protests, he hasn't taken up the craft to make statements about capitalism or gender—he simply enjoys creating something he can wear. So Orzechowski has set himself a challenge: "When I finish my undergrad, I'll be wearing nothing but my own socks." With three years left, he still has time to master the heel. M

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