



# Sweater Quest: My Year of Knitting Dangerously

*Adrienne Martini*

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"I knit so I don't kill people" —bumper sticker spotted at Rhinebeck Sheep and Wool Festival

For Adrienne Martini, and countless others, knitting is the linchpin of sanity. As a working mother of two, Martini wanted a challenge that would make her feel in charge. So she decided to make the Holy Grail of sweaters—her own Mary Tudor, whose mind-numbingly gorgeous pattern is so complicated to knit that its mere mention can hush a roomful of experienced knitters. Created by reclusive designer Alice Starmore, the Mary Tudor can be found only in a rare, out-of-print book of Fair Isle-style patterns, *Tudor Roses*, and requires a discontinued, irreplaceable yarn. The sweater, Martini explains, "is a knitter's Mount Everest, our curse, and our compulsion. I want one more than I can begin to tell you."

And so she took on the challenge: one year, two needles, and countless knits and purls to conquer Mary Tudor while also taking care of her two kids, two cats, two jobs, and (thankfully) one husband—without unraveling in the process. Along the way, Adrienne investigates the tangled origins of the coveted pattern, inquires into the nature of artistic creation, and details her quest to buy supplies on the knitting black market. As she tries not to pull out her hair along with rows gone wrong, Martini gets guidance from some knitterati, who offer invaluable inspiration as she conquers her fear of Fair Isle. A wooly *Julie and Julia*, this epic yarn celebrates the profound joys of creating—and aspiring to—remarkable achievements.

## Sweater Quest: My Year of Knitting Dangerously Details

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## Gretchen says

Adrienne Martini's knitting assignment to herself--knit a sweater designed by noted Fair Isle color genius Alice Starmore--is my own greatest knitting ambition, so I was curious to read about her experience. Unfortunately, the book doesn't quite hang together. Unsure of its audience, it alternates between explaining basic knitting concepts for the uninitiated and assuming knowledge of techniques, popular patterns, and insider jargon. Trying to avoid an overly narrow focus on the process of making the sweater itself, Martini includes background on Starmore and her legendary conflicts with the knitting community; Mary Tudor, the English monarch for whom her chosen pattern is named; and interviews with celebrated figures in the contemporary knitting world, in which she prompts the speakers to offer their philosophies of knitting--which unfortunately wear as thin in spots as a pair of 100% merino handmade socks. I love to knit and I too muse on what the appeal is....but to take the whole thing too seriously as a spiritual enterprise is to invite both yawns and mockery--and knitters already get enough of both. By the second half the book starts to feel a bit embarrassingly like navel-gazing by 30-something women with nothing to do but travel the country buying expensive yarn. The costs detailed at the beginning of each chapter aren't comic--after awhile they start to feel like a rather appalling testament to self indulgence, especially in the middle of a global financial crisis. (Unlike the reviewers here who found the book political, I wondered where these knitters' attention was to anything beyond the end of their own Addi Turbo needles.)

Meanwhile, the Starmore sweater itself fades from view, perhaps because Martini discovers it is easier to knit than she'd anticipated. She admits even to finding it boring, such that the element of suspense--can she do it? will it look right? will it fit?--dissolves. Her confession at the end that she's sick of the whole project and doesn't care that it doesn't fit seems to go for the book as well.

On a final nitpicky note for the publisher: The cover design bothered me. If one knows enough about knitting to be interested in a whole book about completing an Alice Starmore sweater, one knows that a Starmore wouldn't be made from the garish worsted-weight skeins pictured on the front. Why doesn't this cover show an elaborate, tapestry-like, fingering weight, Fair Isle-in-progress on needles? Even for the uninitiated, that would offer a much more dramatic and beautiful sense of what's at stake.

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## Maureen Grigsby says

An elegy to knitting!

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## Amanda says

This book pulled me in because it is about knitting. I did enjoy reading about Alice Starmore, whom I had never heard of before and I enjoyed some of the bits about why knitters knit. However, it was pretty boring at times and the only thing that got me through was wondering more about Alice. This would have at least gotten two stars if it weren't for the ending. I was extremely disappointed that in the last few pages of the book she threw in a big nasty word and then started raving about her radical political ideas and putting down

anyone who thought differently. If I'd wanted to read about someone's political views I wouldn't have picked up a book about knitting.

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## **Belinda says**

"Had I not discovered knitting, I would not be the paragon of sanity that I am today."

So begins Adrienne Martini's *Sweater Quest: My Year of Knitting Dangerously*. She tells us that after the birth of her first child, she experienced postnatal depression so severely she needed to be hospitalised. During that time, she discovered knitting and, long after she stopped taking the drugs she needed to get well, knitting stuck with her. She had a second child - less eventful this time - and kept knitting, using knitting to help her get through the long nights and sleep-deprived days.

However, after raising her kids for a few years, Adrienne gets bored. The tedium of everyday life means an entire year has passed her by without anything interesting happening. This (for obvious reasons) sucks, so Adrienne decides to set herself a goal of knitting an Alice Starmore sweater in one year and chronicling her journey in what became this book.

I was quite disappointed with this book. Martini has a really engaging tone and at times her discursive excursions into parts of knitting history, like the history of fair isle, were really engaging. However, the book just didn't know what it wanted to be. It wasn't really a knitting book, because there's very little about the actual knitting of the sweater. There are also these really odd quite patronising sections in which basic knitting concepts are explained in detail ("remember, circular knitting makes a tube") but an understanding of the online knitting community is expected. It was a project that Martini obviously needed because some sense of excitement or purpose was missing from her life but it's not a memoir, because Martini never tells us much about her everyday life. What we're left with is a journal of Martini's travels to visit famous knitters and basically transcripts of the conversations she had with them, which I'm sure was super interesting for her but, for the reader, not so much. There's so much missing information in the storyline - why Alice Starmore? Why this particular Alice Starmore sweater? In one bit, she gets most of her wool in one brand but one colour only comes in a different base, which is a disaster...that is never mentioned again. Why did the editor not bring this to Martini's attention? Not good enough, team *Sweater Quest*.

The end of the book is really rushed - the last three months take up only 14 pages - and there is a sense that Martini is really bored with the whole thing. Most bewildering for me, is that *\*spoiler alert\** the whole time she has been knitting a sweater that is not her size. She's spent hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars on a project that will not fit. WHY?!?!? Look, I think Martini sounds like someone who would be fun to have a coffee and a chat with, but this book needed a lot more work on it before going to print. Two stars.

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## **Tracy Miller says**

I'm going to write a book, "My Year of Reading Books about People Spending a Year Doing Something." Catchy title, right?

Update: if I write that book I probably won't include this one. It didn't quite work. The writer couldn't decide if she was writing purely for an audience of knitters (the only people who would be remotely interested in

this book) or if she was trying to explain knitters to non-knitters. So there were lots of knitterly references interspersed with detailed descriptions of knitting terms. So, half the book feels like it is for one audience, half for another. But I don't think either would be quite satisfied.

I think the author actually hits on the problem when she interviews the Yarn Harlot. They decide that the key to the success of the Harlot's books about knitting is that they aren't really about that. They are about people through the prism of knitting. This book was all about the knitting, so I think it fell flat.

I think I would enjoy hanging out and talking knitting with the author. And I think I'll check out her blog, because her style seems really well-suited for that format and I'd bet I would enjoy it. But, I'm going to leave this one out of my book. :)

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## **RlJulie says**

The "cult of personality" in the knitting community since the early 2000's is one I've long had a hard time understanding. Mainly for the reasons that I am old, and also that I came to knitting through the portal of sewing, a clothing construction craft that does not rely on such a microcosm of celebrity personalities. As seamstresses, we work to make clothes that please, fit, and satisfy us or those we sew for. Period. I have never needed or desired a name-brand designer behind a pattern to enjoy the things I make with my hands. I have never given a second thought to whether or not the person who wrote a sewing pattern would approve of my choices, execution, or finished results, using their pattern. The products from my hand belong to me, and I would never think of my dresses as "a Butterick" or "a Vogue", so once I took up knitting, I also never thought of my knitting as in any way "belonging" to the person who wrote the instructions for a pattern. I hardly ever follow the directions, completely--to me, alterations and customizations are the very reason we undertake the art of "bespoke" clothing. And before the internet, there would have been no way of a designer seeing anything I made or wore, anyway, my work couldn't have possibly made any difference to them.

So, as you might imagine, a book about a knitter in pursuit of the ideal "Alice Starmore", asking of one knitworld celebrity after another, "When does an Alice Starmore [project made after a pattern] stop being an Alice Starmore?" is a bit at odds with my philosophy of making things. I find the very question illogical. And when one is starting without the assumption that the designer somehow "owns" all things knitted following her/his pattern, all other points and ponderings become illogical, too. She compares choosing your own colors of yarn to "changing the colors in a Matisse", whereas I would say if you're comparing knitting to painting, nothing you do from your own hand in paint is ever, ever going to make your painting "a real Matisse", no matter how closely you copy his colors. The fact that you might look at Matisse's work and work with Matisse's subjects doesn't mean your painting belongs to him. If that's what you want, you have to buy a Matisse.

This book also clings to the cult of personality in the author's construction of it, as she travels from place to place to interview various designers and name-brand knitters and get their input to her question. Unless you already know and recognize these folks, it's a bit hard to care. It's very "blogger with a book deal": that literary genre of the early 21st century that's already as dated, in writing style, as a drop-sleeve fair isle sweater is in fashion. Part stories of the knitting process, part stories of the author's family and social life, part investigation of the history of knitting traditions, specific designs, or the feud around one specific designer...all of those things make good blog posts. But bound together in one book, these tales don't make for good literature. This isn't a book that has aged well, even four years from publication. A really good meditation on the craft of knitting could transcend its moment and provide insight to knitters working in any

tradition and be as timeless as the practice itself.

One thing I do agree with Adrienne Martini absolutely on, however: Sleeves leech away your will to live.

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### **Beth G. says**

It seems like such a silly idea: A memoir about knitting a sweater? But like Stephanie Pearl-McPhee (who makes an appearance), Martini isn't really writing about knitting. She's writing about knitters. Mostly, just one knitter.

Over the course a year, Martini sets out to complete a sweater known as "Mary Tudor". As she tackles the challenges of acquiring an out-of-print pattern and substituting for out-of-production yarns (no small feat for a project in which color is key) as well as stranded colorwork and steeking, she gathers together details about the designer, Alice Starmore. She explores why knitters are so attracted to Starmore's famously difficult-to-obtain and difficult-to-knit patterns, and how far they can stray from the designer's vision yet still remain faithful to the project.

Martini travels to Rhinebeck, Nashville, and Toronto to interview bloggers well-known to knitters around the world. The history of Tudor Roses and the Alice Starmore brand intertwine with the history of knitting in the Shetland Isles and North America and the life one particular American woman in the early twenty-first century. Witty and self-deprecating, Martini doesn't hesitate to share her liberal leanings or drop the occasional curse word. Her writing style is clean and sharp, a pleasure to read. She's clearly aware of the absurdity of her "quest", which just makes it all the more enjoyable.

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### **Sarah says**

I was sadly underwhelmed by this book. There were some cute parts, and funny parts, but by the end the book seemed far less about knitting and more about knitterly name-dropping. It seemed that she lost stride with the book when she lost stride with the project - and, frankly, finishing the book was a bit of a slog for me, too. Positive: it made me want to knit. But it felt like this, too, was an assignment for her, and one that she felt more dutiful than passionate about.

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### **Vy says**

I really do like books about people immersing themselves in a project for a period of time, and I really do like knitting, but this particular book was only just okay.

The author decides that she wants to make a complicated Fair Isle sweater and gives herself a year to do so. Along the way, she explores topics such as the history of Fair Isle knitting, the pattern's controversial designer Alice Starmore, copyright issues, the yarn she chooses, and the pattern's namesake Mary Tudor. There are some a-funny-thing-happened-to-me-on-the-way-to-the-yarn-store type of anecdotes, but I think I was expecting more of them. I wanted to hear about what the process was like for her. Why really did she choose this particular pattern out of all the possible choices, especially when she is so clearly conflicted about the designer? What was it like when she dared to first open the pattern book that she had paid so much

for? What was going through her mind? How did she feel after making her first steak? Martini seems to take us to the edge of these moments and builds up anticipation, but then things kind of fizzle. The ending is rather unceremonious.

Much of the book details the author's meetings with prominent knitters, in which she discussed how they learned to knit, their philosophies about knitting, and what role they think the internet plays on the knitting community. These sections, though, contained not brief quotes but extended *transcripts*. Rather than using others' ideas as a context for her own self-reflection, she seemed to instead use them as the foundation for a huge section of the book. Even the early sections in which she provides historical background are largely lifted (with attribution--I don't mean to imply plagiarism) from these other knitters' books and blogs. While having these insights from others was interesting, it wasn't anything that a reader familiar with the blogosphere of the knitting glitterati wouldn't already know. She kept asking people about whether they thought that her end product would be an authentic Starmore since she used some yarn substitutions. This seemed rather forced to me, especially after Martini pointed out that she watched a video in which Starmore herself encouraged knitters to play around with different color schemes. And after all that, Martini did not really answer her own question. Surprisingly, the one person she *didn't* interview was Starmore. It made no sense to me at all that she not at least try. Maybe she did and was rebuffed (which would explain a lot of her sentiments), but there wasn't any reference to her efforts. There were instances in which Martini's personal voice sounded a bit underdeveloped (she uses the turn of phrase "siren call" 3 times and reminds us twice that Fair Isle is "binary"), but I did enjoy it most of the time, and I wish she had used it more.

An additional problem with the book is that Martini seems uncertain about her audience. I frankly would be surprised if someone who was not already a knitter (or maybe a crocheter) would be interested in the book, and yet she explains in some minute detail about the difference between a knit and a purl stitch. At other times she assumes a facile understanding of inside information that only a knitter would have. She also injects a fair amount of political commentary into the book. While I don't disagree with her politics, I don't see how it relates to her topic. Ironically, she said "even in a situation full of other lovers of knitting, I have a knack for saying the wrong thing" and relates a story about how she started an unpleasant argument about politics in her knitting group. She does not seem to have remembered that lesson.

This book read a lot like a blog...except that there were no pictures. Not one--which was really disappointing. I had to go to Ravelry to find her finished sweater. In short, it was entertaining but not my favorite knitting book.

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## Melissa says

I liked this book better than Julie & Julia, but that's not saying much, because that book really ticked me off. There is a style of humor and a level of whining in these books that annoys me but also makes me feel like part of the "older generation". But I simply don't accept that humor must be so derisive and pathetic to be entertaining.

Pathetic. I felt Ms. Martini was rather pathetic in her approach to her challenging knitting project. It was so anticlimactic to discover that the sweater she spent a year knitting did not fit her when it was finished, but this just tells the reader that Knitting is Hard when in fact many beginning knitters produce successful sweaters that fit.

As a knitter, I was offended. We can all do better. We often do.

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## **Mollie \*scoutrmom\* says**

An accomplished writer who knits, rather than a knitter who tries to write. The quality of this work is excellent. I liked it a lot better than the last book of this type that I tried, Julie and Julia : 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen.

Who we have here is a free-lance writer who wanted to write a book around the same time that she wanted to take on a particularly difficult knitting project. She sold the idea of combining these two yens to her agent. A star is born.

The theme of the work seems to be why we knit. She interviews some powerful luminaries of our knitting community about this question, but they are not presented as research. Instead we learn about the trip up to go see the person, their visit with each other, where they went together, in some cases what they ate. The interview is blended seamlessly into the narrative so that it isn't until you sit back and recollect the book that you realize it happened on purpose.

We learn of the author's family, her friends, her students, her blog, and the online knitting community that supports us all. There is talk of copyright law, of travel, of writers and of knitting designers and of knitwear architecture. I was surprised that for a nonfiction book, I had difficulty putting it down.

She arranged the work chronologically, so we come across themes as she did. My only disappointment is that due to the nature of the work, there is highly unlikely to be any other similar from this author. As soon as I finished it I took it to Mom and said, "You'll like this."

All in all, recommended for anyone who crafts.

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## **Jeanne says**

Adrienne Martini is on a quest: a quest to knit a complex sweater. The pattern is called Mary Tudor, and it is designed by Alice Starmore. With an out of print pattern to procure, numerous skeins of unique yarn to purchase, and a not-so-firm grasp of Fair Isle knitting techniques, Martini seems almost doomed to fail.

And to make things worse, I just looked for the Mary Tudor sweater online. It is ugly.

So, in the process of knitting this sweater, our knitter talks to tons of fellow knitters (some famous, some not) and goes on and on about this Alice Starmore person. Two words, Ms. Martini: nobody cares.

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## **Katrine Judd says**

This book is about a knitter who decides to take on the mother of all knitting projects and what it took to complete it. I realize the premise of the story may be boring for many. But I knit so I thought it would be a good read. Wow. I was wrong. It was dull. I believe the author was trying to have her Julia/Julia moment.



She even has the mantra a year of knitting dangerously as Julie had with her cooking dangerously. The only slightly entertaining part of the book was the calculations of what the project cost her. The pattern alone was \$160 for an out of print book. And then she had other expenses such as a membership to audible.com for books to listen to as she knits. The real kicker is that in the end of that year:

Spoiler Alert:

The sweater did not fit!

The author was okay that the year project ended without a wearable item for herself because it was the entire joy of the journey type thing. I just finished sewing a shirt that doesn't fit that cost me \$10 and 2 hours and I'm upset about it. I can't imagine a year without reaching the goal of the completion of the elusive Mary Tudor sweater.

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## **Josiphine/Tessa says**

I'm really confused as to who she thought her audience was. The only people who are going to read a book about sweater knitting are knitters, yet she stops to define EVERY. SINGLE. KNITTING. TERM. Thanks, I already know that, *that's why I'm reading this book*.

Beyond that, even the idea of the book is a little eh. I don't consider her sweater to really be that big of a deal--people make fair isle sweaters all the time. It certainly is not as big of a deal as she makes it. Though some of the history was interesting, in the end this book is nothing to write home about.

\*Super pedantic sidenote: And the cover is horrible because it's a bulky single ply yarn, not at all what you would knit a fair-isle garment with.

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## **Scarlet says**

Not really enjoying this so far. The author is trying way too hard to be funny. I have my own Alice Starmore pattern obsession (St. Brigid), and I've been following the Starmore saga on the Girl from Auntie's blog for a while, but this book is not grabbing me. Still, it will do for the 10 minutes of reading before I fall asleep.

Okay, now I'm finished. Wow, that was not a good book. It didn't know what it was trying to be: a memoir, a series of interviews with the knitterati, a series of essays. Certainly it wasn't about the process of making Mary Tudor, which sounds mostly like it was tedious, so maybe she didn't have as much material as she thought she'd have. And at the end, she was obviously trying to meet a deadline, and was just trying to wrap it up in as few words as possible. I got the impression that she was sick of both the project and the book halfway through, but was stuck with both. How is this woman a professional writer?

The most interesting bit was how the Harlot got her start. This book had a similar problem to Julie and Julia, where the subject of obsession (the knitterati, Julia Child) was way more interesting than the author and her story.

I can't imagine recommending this book to anyone, knitter or non-knitter.

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