

A Reader's Guide



Knitting

by [Anne Bartlett](#)

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"Reading *Knitting* is an experience as sensual and mystical as plunging your hands into skeins of wool and color . . . A joyful narrative of creating and connecting, *Knitting* is a stunning first novel, one of the most fearlessly original and relevant to real life that I've read in a long time." — Sena Jeter Naslund, author of *Ahab's Wife*

About the Book

Sandra is a rigid academic; her talent for the domestic arts lies in studying them. Martha is a brilliantly gifted knitter, a self-educated artist who spends her days working on elaborate projects. They meet by chance when they both stop to help in an emergency.

Sandra's life has been slowly unraveling since she lost her husband to cancer ten months ago. In need of a new project to consume her, she persuades Martha to help her mount an exhibition on the history of handknit clothing and textiles. What begins as a professional collaboration becomes something transformative and deeply personal.

A perfect selection for reading groups and knitting circles, this engaging first novel will appeal to fans of Jan Karon or Debbie Macomber. In *Knitting*, Anne Bartlett weaves a story that is seamless in its exploration of healing, grace, and the search for meaning, both within oneself and in the larger community.

A Book Sense Selection

About the Author

Anne Bartlett spent her childhood in rural South Australia. While raising her four children, she worked as an editor, a ghostwriter, and a feature writer as well as a professional knitter, making original creations for clothing designers. She recently completed a Ph.D. in creative writing at the University of Adelaide. *Knitting*, her first novel, was an Australian bestseller and a finalist for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. She lives with her husband, who has been a pastor for more than twenty years (a background she has drawn on for this book), in the Adelaide Hills of South Australia.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and knitting groups as well as provide a deeper understanding of *Knitting* for every reader.

1. In *Knitting*, the central characters ultimately find new ways of engaging with themselves and with the greater world. How does the novel comment on the healing power of connection and community? How has knitting (and other women's work) traditionally fostered connections and communities? How does the act of knitting also invite reflection?
2. Sandra Fildes and Martha McKenzie are seemingly opposite in every regard, especially in temperament — Sandra is intellectual and icy, Martha emotive and generous. What spurs their surprising friendship? Which of the two do you identify with more? Do Sandra and Martha change by the end of the story? How does your perception of each woman evolve as the novel progresses?
3. Sandra and Martha, like many people, struggle with burdens of shame and guilt. Each is aware of her imperfections and tries to hide them from herself and others. This knowledge weighs on both of them, sometimes consciously, but mainly unconsciously. In what different ways do their imperfections manifest themselves, and how are they suppressed?
4. Sandra and Martha agree to collaborate on a professional project, a show of women's handiwork to be displayed at a local church. How would Martha and Sandra each define "women's work"? How does each one's contribution to the show reflect her attitude toward women's work?
5. Throughout the book, Martha knits gifts for other people — a shawl for Sandra, a scarf for Cliff — and she has countless other projects on the needles. What does the process of making these gifts mean to her? What do the gifts themselves represent? What special meaning does the white dress carry?
6. Bartlett's characters come from a variety of social and educational backgrounds, and they offer one another many transformative lessons. How does each character view the others? What statement is the author making in this regard?

- 7.** Sandra is working her way through grief, and Martha recounts her own experience of doing the same. Consider their different responses to loss. Is one healthier than the other? How does their relationship with each other help them break through their own suffering?
- 8.** In a moment of reflection, Sandra recalls a time when her late husband, Jack, rescued her from drowning. What does this scene tell you about Jack and Sandra's marriage, her dependence on him, and the emotions she is working through now that he is gone? Compare Jack's behavior with Sandra then to Sandra's behavior toward Jack during his illness.
- 9.** The hospital cleaner appears several times in the novel and has significant encounters with Cliff, Martha, and Sandra. How do his actions change the course of the story? What might his interventions represent?
- 10.** Cliff and Kate play important roles in connecting Martha and Sandra. How do they also, in their own ways, influence that friendship? How do their friendships with Sandra and with Martha differ?
- 11.** For some readers, one of the most powerful scenes in the book is the Good Friday service at Kate's church. How does this scene represent a turning point in the novel? Where else does Bartlett show this type of transcendence? What is your interpretation of these passages?
- 12.** Two scenes in the novel involve Sandra's dancing to Berlioz's *Invitation to the Dance*, but they conjure dramatically different emotions. How do they differ? Why do you suppose Bartlett includes Martha's knitting in both? Why has she chosen to bookend the novel with these parallel dances?
- 13.** How do Bartlett's characters find redemption? How does the concept of grace resonate throughout the novel?

Knitting Ideas

Sandra and Martha are very different knitters. Sandra's academic background has given her a great appreciation for textile arts of all sorts. Her own knitting projects are simple, but she makes them interesting by working with unique yarns. Martha, however, is a skilled and imaginative knitter, a natural with the needles. Her projects are elaborate and often imbued with personal meaning. She frequently gives them as gifts to friends. Sandra's and Martha's divergent knitting styles may inspire you to create your own projects.

To create a Sandra-like piece, choose a luxury yarn and a comfortable set of needles to knit a scarf in garter stitch. For a more Martha-like project, consider making a comfort shawl to give away. Anything from a simple garter-stitch rectangle to an airy and elegant lace-stitch triangle would be a welcome gift to a friend traveling through one of life's rough patches.

A Conversation with Anne Bartlett

Knitting is your first novel. While you were raising your children, did you think about becoming a professional writer? Where did you find the inspiration to move your life in this direction?

While I was an undergraduate it never occurred to me that I might be "a writer," though I did write a short children's novel that I hoped to get published. When the children were small, life was demanding on several fronts, and I had a strong sense that "now is not the time." But I knew I would get back to it later. My first child was born when I was twenty-two, and I didn't really feel old enough or experienced enough to tackle anything too serious. When our fourth and last child went to school, I started to make deliberate writing choices. Meanwhile I puddled about with a variety of freelance work.

How much of *Knitting* reflects your own life?

I never know how to answer this. Nothing and everything. It's not autobiographical, but at the same time I have drawn on the whole of my life experience. I do knit and I have worked as a boutique knitter, I'm part of a church community, and the story is set in Adelaide, in a suburb where I used to live. The places are real, though I've moved Muggs Hill Road a couple of miles to a more convenient location! I've always liked the name of that road.

What does "women's work" mean to you? How did your interpretation of this term determine Sandra's and Martha's occupations and their roles in the story?

The novel was partly a subterranean attempt to define women's work and to explore the tension I've always felt between different kinds of work. There's the Sandra-type work that you get paid for and that you may or may not love, and there's the Martha work that you do mainly for love and that rarely earns money. Both types can be very demanding. And then there's "life work" — a whole nother ball game. Sometimes paid work is a haven from other kinds of work. A lot of the work often done by women — care of family members and many kinds of volunteer work — has little status because it doesn't put money in the bank. What's more, many women workers are highly skilled and work extremely hard, but their skills have to do with relationships rather than something that can be defined by a diploma. It's very important work, and it's grossly undervalued. It's a kind of social cement.

You've said that you never intended to write about knitting. What did you intend to write about?

The first piece I wrote was the scene in which Martha throws the roses in the church — that was before I had any idea of writing about knitting. I sat down to write the rose scene, but what came out was all the mad knitting talk that Martha does in the hospital — a two-page lump of monologue, which I've since broken up for the hospital scene. I was quite surprised. In my journal I wrote, "Where did that come from?" I tucked it away for a few years because I didn't know what to do with it. Then I read it at a workshop, and people liked it and encouraged me to expand on it. But Martha couldn't carry the action alone; I began to realize there was a back story, which in the end became the main story. As a starter for that, I also had a one-page experimental piece on the glass-woman image. So I introduced the glass woman to the knitter, so to speak, and there were the

two main characters.

In the book, Martha acknowledges that knitting is revived by cycles of popularity, though it never fades away completely. Why do we always return to this craft?

Knitting is very versatile. It's easily transportable and doesn't take much room. It's not exclusive; unless you're attempting something very difficult, you can do it while talking with other people. It's practical — you get something useful in the end (though I've got my doubts about knitted mobile phone covers!). But I think its popularity is mainly in the joy of creating, the choosing of patterns and colors, and the anticipation. We all want to express creativity, and knitting offers guidelines without being completely rigid. The pattern can be changed and adapted without too much trouble. And there's the freedom of endless possibilities.

How has being a pastor's wife affected your writing?

Not much, really, though pastoral work exposes one to raw and difficult elements in life. I have been fortunate in that the church we have been involved with for over twenty-five years has never demanded anything of me in the "pastor's wife" role, but has given me space to be myself and encouraged me in my writing. After sharing our lives — births, marriages, deaths, trauma — as equal members with the same community for so many years, I can say that my writing, in a very real sense, springs from the shared community base. The church building and church hall where the exhibition in *Knitting* is held are based on the buildings where I attend meetings and services every week. Pastoral work and life experience have encouraged a particular interest in grief and grieving that often emerges in my work. For me, the challenge in writing this novel has been to find new ways to talk about joy and healing without being preachy.

Sandra Fildes says that the knitting exhibition and the study of textile history and women's work is her "making." Is *Knitting* your "making"?

Oh yes, that's very true. Writing *Knitting* was such a joyous experience — the best writing fun of my life and the best thing I've made to date. I've never worked so hard on anything or enjoyed it so much. As for the word "making," I first heard it used in this context by Kay Lawrence, a South Australian tapestry weaver. "Making" is a concept well understood and discussed by textile artists. But "making" is also much broader than that. We "make" dinner, "make" family time, "make" things better. Making is part of being human.

For Further Reading

The following paperbacks from Mariner Books may be of interest to readers who enjoyed Anne Bartlett's *Knitting*:

[The Bookshop](#) by [Penelope Fitzgerald](#)

[Drives Like a Dream](#) by [Porter Shreve](#)

[Homestead](#) by [Rosina Lippi](#)

[The Distance from the Heart of Things](#) by [Ashley Warlick](#)