

# The Craft of Living

*Third-wave feminism  
before and after Elizabeth  
Zimmermann*

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## Before EZ

The year I was born, my hometown newspaper segregated its Help Wanted ads by gender. Even now, forty-some years on, that fact floors me. Roe v. Wade was only just working its way through the state courts. This past is still so recent.

My mother graduated with a BA in home economics, a degree that trained her for what society wanted her to be and, it must be said, for what she wanted to be: a housewife. A decade later, she was divorced, left without the picket fence in the suburbs and the 2.5 children. The social order quaked and her generation of middle-class white women was flung into an ocean of theoretical possibilities. These women could pick any boat to carry them across, except for the safe one they'd had. That dinghy was scuppered.

My mother worked a series of women's jobs that were no longer called women's jobs: childcare, secretary, teacher. She took in ironing. She kept us afloat. But she was exhausted, most of the time, and depressed. Despite living with a home ec graduate, I never learned to cook or clean or craft. I watched a lot of TV. I read a lot of trashy science fiction. I kept my house key in my backpack and ate cold cereal after school while I did my homework, just like so many of my friends. We were a generation of motherless girls.

We grew up, as one does, if one is very lucky. We went to college, where home economics was then called human ecology, or family and economic sciences, or any other name that disguised its true intentions, which was how to teach mostly women how to build a well-run home full of well-adjusted children. Not that any of my cohort would have wanted to go to college to learn to roast a chicken or balance the household books or sew curtains. We saw how that turned out for our mothers. We would do something important with

our lives, just like the generations of women who came before us were now urging us to do.

My little Italian grandmother—not my mother’s mother, but my father’s—refused to teach me how to make the red sauce we ate every Sunday at her house. She hated being a homemaker and wanted me to escape her lot. “You will pay someone to cook it for you,” she’d say, as I sat next to the dishwasher in the upstairs kitchen and watched her make supper. “You’ll be too busy being a doctor.”

I didn’t become a doctor. Nor did I go with her second choice, which was lawyer. She’d long given up on her third choice—nun—when I proved to be a shitty Catholic. She did suggest I think about converting to Judaism, because all her Jewish friends had maids. Instead, I majored in theater, moved to Texas, got married very young, and flailed into a career, one that didn’t require ironing. My knowledge of the womanly arts was limited to sewing buttons back on. I did learn how to really cook, however, mostly because I also learned how good food could be when it didn’t come out of a can.

And then, assigned a trend piece about knitting for the newspaper I was working for, I learned how to do it. I didn’t expect the lessons to stick, especially since the learning curve is steep. But there I was, knitting away—hats, mostly. During editorial meetings, where I was the lone female at the table, I knit because busy hands weren’t as compelled to throttle anyone. It was subversive, the knitting, something that a well-educated career woman shouldn’t admit she does. The illicitness exponentially increased after I was knocked up and waddling around the cubicles trailing yarn.

But this is about Elizabeth Zimmermann.

## **EZ**

It’s hard to know where to start when introducing the uninitiated to Zimmermann, or EZ, as the knitters know her. Let’s start at the end, then, with her 1999 obituary that ran in the *New York Times*:

Elizabeth Zimmermann, who brought a penetrating intellect and a sculptor's sensitivity to revolutionizing the ancient art of knitting, died Nov. 30 at a hospital in Marshfield, Wis., where she lived. She was 89.

And her beginning, also encapsulated in the same obit:

Elizabeth Lloyd-Jones was born near Devon, England, in 1910, the daughter of a naval officer and the woman who invented Meals by Motor, a British forerunner of Meals on Wheels. Her youthful memories, as recalled in *Knitting Around* (Schoolhouse Press, 1989), suggested a bucolic paradise, framed by plum trees and plum jam, governesses and private schools.

But in between, she went to art schools in Switzerland and Munich, met the man who would be her husband, Arnold Zimmermann, and fled the continent with him in 1936 after he spoke out against Hitler. The couple kicked around, eventually landed in rural Wisconsin, had children and lived their lives. In 1959, EZ started a newsletter about knitting, a craft she'd been taught by her mother, who had likely learned it from her mother, and so on.

She published four books. The first one, *Knitting Without Tears*, came out in 1971, the year of my birth. Her fourth book, *Knitting Around*, was published in 1989, the year I graduated from high school. When Zimmermann was in high school (or the British equivalent thereof), she wouldn't have been voted most likely to become the voice of the knitting cognoscenti. Her publishing career was born out of pragmatism rather than by ambition.

If you know nothing about knitting, the following tidbit of information won't fill you with enough wry horror to appreciate it. So a quickie bit of vocabulary and technique to catch you up: Fair Isle is an island off of the British coast where female islanders augment their income by knitting sweaters. The unimaginatively called Fair Isle sweaters feature two-color designs with repeating patterns. You've seen them, even if you don't know that you've seen them.

The Fair Islanders, since they made their living from knitting these garments, streamlined the process. The fastest and easiest way to make one is to do what is called knitting in the round, which translates to knitting a big tube that is cut in three places to add sleeves and a button band. But in the late 1950s in America, sweaters were simply not made that way. Americans knitted each piece of the sweater—two fronts, a back, and two sleeves—and then sewed them together, a needlessly time consuming and complex process that doesn't make your sweater any more structurally sound. Knitting in the round was something done in the Old World, where the socialists lived. Or something like that.

One of Zimmermann's first published patterns was for a Fair Isle sweater knit in the round. The editors at the leading knitting magazine who purchased her work rewrote it to fit the American style. Horrified and bemused, the ever-practical Zimmermann responded by starting her own newsletter, where she could control the expression of her work. With that, a small media empire was born.

But Zimmermann doesn't offer mere recipes, which is what knitting publications want. She is not an ur-Martha Stewart who insists there is only one correct way to achieve any given end. Zimmermann's patterns are conversations with every knitter about all the ways to knit a sweater, or a hat, or mittens, and EZ explains why she has found her approach the most practical. Her patterns are to knitting what Occam's Razor is to science.

So her books are about knitting techniques, yes. But tucked inside nearly every knitting tidbit, pattern, or technique is good solid advice for how to approach your life as well as your knitting. In *Knitting Without Tears*, Zimmermann offers a comprehensive guide to knitting needles, covering everything from walrus tusk to plastic to celluloid. But it's her digression on other uses for good old aluminum needles that sticks with you.

A #6 aluminum needle has been known to furnish an excellent emergency shearpin for an outboard motor. It once saved us seven

miles of paddling. Then I had to spend hours re-pointing the needle on rocks, having nobly, but foolishly, offered the business end instead of the knob end for sacrifice.

And then there's this:

No two people knit alike, look alike, think alike; why should their projects be alike? Your sweater should be like your own favorite original recipes—like nobody else's on earth.

And a good thing too.

And this:

This [checking the gauge; the number of stitches per inch] is almost the only measuring and deciding you will have to do for yourself (after all, no one can do it for you), and it is important to do it accurately and conscientiously. Otherwise you may sup the porridge of regret with the spoon of sorrow.

And this, on how she didn't invent any of the ideas she's sharing, only codified or "un-vented" them:

One un-vents something; one unearths it; one digs it up, one runs it down in whatever recesses of the eternal consciousness it has gone to ground. I very much doubt if anything is really new when one works in the prehistoric medium of wool with needles. The products of science and technology may be new, and some of them quite horrid, but knitting? In knitting there are ancient possibilities; the earth is enriched with the dust of the millions of knitters who have held wool and needles since the beginning of sheep.... One likes to believe that there is memory in the fingers; memory undeveloped, but still alive.

Reading any of Zimmermann's books is like knitting with her. Yes, she can help you over the rough parts of the Kitchener stitch

or the German sock heel, but what matters most is the life wisdom you absorb from her while your hands are occupied. Zimmermann passes on more than a skill; she give you an inheritance of advice.

It's what I wanted most from my own grandmother, while I sat in her kitchen and watched her cook. She told me plenty of stories, including those about her mother, the formidable Mama Lane, whose given name was unpronounceable by my toddler father, and his interpretation of her name stuck. I named my daughter Madeline after Mama Lane, only to discover years later that Mama Lane's legal name wasn't Madeline at all.

During those afternoons with my grandmother, my hands were only responsible for grating cheese and pouring water into glasses. When I asked what kind of cheese it was, my grandparents would only tell me that it was from the Italian store. Even now, I crave her manicotti and her pasta fagioli. For years, I've tried to un-vent them, to reverse engineer them from first principles. My dad and I agree that my efforts have been close but not quite right.

What I need is an Elizabeth Zimmermann of my family's food, who can do for me what Julia Child did for French cuisine. Zimmermann is like the knitting world's Julia Child, earthy and smart, translating a useful skill into practical steps for a generation of women clutching for bearings in a brave new world. I imagine Zimmermann and Child are eating a hell of a lot of butter together in the afterlife, because if there isn't butter there, I can't imagine why anyone would want to go.

## **After EZ**

I was well into my own knitting pursuits by the time I found Zimmermann. I'd spent most of my first baby's infancy knitting a series of adult-sized hats in an effort to avoid losing my mind again. After my first baby's birth, I discovered that my mother had failed to tell me about one of her own family's traditions, which is severe post-partum depression. Two weeks after becoming a mom, I was on a

locked ward in the same hospital I'd birthed in and unable to stop crying for more than a few seconds at a time. Modern pharmaceuticals gave me more help than they did my mother and her mother and her mother before that. The birth of my second child was significantly less fraught and only involved the usual number of tears.

I won't say that knitting was a cure, but it did help me keep my hands busy, which in turn kept my brain's keel even. I'd hold hats in progress above my infant daughter's sleeping face—she refused to sleep anywhere but on the lap of a human being for the first three months of her life—as I worked on them, the working ball of yarn on the sofa next to me. Small pieces of fluff sometimes covered her like colorful snow.

A finished hat meant a trip out to the yarn shop, which was one of the most exciting days ever in my new small existence. The women there were my mom's age and would coo over the babe while I browsed. My own mom lived far enough away that even monthly visits were impossible. But these surrogate grannies did just fine, thanks, and interactions with my own mother were so fraught that it was better this way. I knitted enough hats that I ran out of heads to put them on. The excess were dropped in the Goodwill box.

Time passed, as it does. There was a cross-country move and the second baby, who actually slept in an actual crib for hours at a time. It felt like a miracle. I kept knitting but moved beyond hats into mittens and sweaters and shawls. Yes, shawls, which I can't seem to wear unironically but still enjoy knitting regardless. I have a career, too, one that would have been difficult at best for my mother's generation. Female college professors and writers existed then, but the barriers to entry were higher than any I'd ever have been able to surmount. Had feminism's second wave never happened, I'd probably be in a suburb somewhere and soul-suckingly miserable. Which isn't to say that I'm not occasionally miserable now; just that it is almost always my own creation.

Zimmermann's *Knitting Without Tears* fell into my lap, the gift of a knitting friend, who felt that I needed it. My kids were five



and two; I was at a crossroads. My kids were old enough to need less minute-by-minute care but still too young to be independent. My first book failed with not a bang but a barely heard sigh. My wheels weren't even spinning, just up to their rims in the muck of everyday routine. So reading *Knitting Without Tears* became one of those life lacunas, a moment where you wonder if you've lived up to your potential. My grandmother would have been disappointed, I thought. Maybe she still would be. I can't hire anyone to cook for me, and wouldn't anyway because I enjoy it, mostly, even though the tyranny of three meals a day can be a drag. I've hired cleaning ladies off and on but can't quite make it work, mostly because they want to talk to me while they clean and I am unwilling to have that much of a relationship. My grandmother would be appalled by how much I do around the house as well as by how much my husband does, too.

Domestic skills don't lessen who I am. I am not invisible or oppressed because I know how to knit. But I still can't make a decent red sauce, damn it. My birthright was crushed by the end of sex-segregated want ads. I'm okay with that. Besides, my grandmother couldn't have known how the world would look four decades on. She did her best to keep me from falling into the same trap she had fallen into. She couldn't have known that specific trap would disappear, only to be replaced by ten more, the teeth of which my generation hasn't figured out how to avoid. We're un-venting centuries of being told who we are and what we should be but haven't yet hit on the elegant solution.

I work. I teach classes. And I clean, cook, and knit. I sew, too, but only dabble. I think a home economics class would be swell. I'm not a homemaker. I have domestic tendencies, though they don't sit well, even as I take pleasure in them. We were supposed to do so much more, though at the same time it's hard to tell exactly what we were supposed to have done, because my generation has no road map. It's hard to tell when you're doing it right if you have nothing to measure against.

So there's EZ. She was her own woman, both a product of her time and removed from it. Knitting was just part of who she was, and she was so much more. Yet she understood, too, how knitting could be connected to everything else—her family and history, her passions and ambitions, her fierce intelligence and uncrushable will. She jerryrigged boat motors, had babies, and ran a business, without apology. You could do worse.