

NEEDLECRAFT

MAGAZINE

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Introduction

I fell in love with sewing when I was sixteen. Though I had always enjoyed art class, I was just never any good at drawing or painting. But when I discovered fabric, I knew I had found my medium. That's why, when most of the girls at my high school opted for "serious" elective like calculus, I wanted to take home economics. My mom had taught me how to sew the year before, and the class gave me an excuse to sew during school hours. The home-ec girls were looked down upon as "time wasters," but as a burgeoning feminist stuck at an all-girls Catholic high school, I had learned to start thinking for myself, so I didn't worry too much.

After high school, I paid my way through college working at a fabric store. I majored in English, and lapped up feminist theory as I wrote paper after paper on women writers. But after every semester was over and I finally had a break, I would spend days at the sewing machine. I made bags and purses, skirts, dresses, and leggings, Barbie clothes for my nieces, wall hangings for my room, maternity clothes for my sisters, and then baby clothes for their babies.

I didn't really know anyone else my age who sewed (other than my co-workers), and I often felt like I was living this strange contradiction: feminist by day, seamstress by night. How could the two coexist? As I moved on to graduate school and a career, I still sewed here and there, making the occasional skirt or baby quilt for a friend, but it wasn't a big part of my life. I thought maybe I had just outgrown my passion for sewing.

Then in 2004, Jean Railla wrote *Get Crafty: Hip Home Ec* and coined the term "The New Domesticity." She wrote about everything I had been feeling all along: that domestic arts and feminism don't need to be at odds with each other. "Being crafty means living consciously and refusing to be defined by narrow labels and categories. It's about embracing life as complicated and contradictory and, out of this chaos, constructing identities that are feminist and domestic, masculine and feminine, strong and weak," Railla writes.

This amazing revelation is what led me back to sewing. As I thought about my own little circular journey, I knew that I needed to write a book that celebrated the larger story of sewing, without completely romanticizing it and glossing over the contradictions. That's exactly what *Sew Retro* is: a smart history of sewing written for the modern girl. The book begins with the nineteenth century and the invention of the sewing machine and makes its way through decades of turmoil and indulgence, nostalgia and liberation—right up to today. Timelines, Q&As with designers, short biographical sketches of crafty and pioneering women, vintage ephemera, and period-inspired sewing tips help bring this history to life.

In addition to talking about what sewing has meant for generations of spunky, needle-wielding women, *Sew Retro* also offers up easy-to-make projects inspired by the various decades. (Because who wants to just *read* about sewing?) I designed these projects to appeal to the modern sewer, so I don't pretend that they are always 100 percent historically accurate. However, I do promise that they are fun and functional, with just the right amount of vintage flair! The projects are another way to pay homage to fabulous retro fashion and décor, and to celebrate sewing's role in our culture over the last two centuries.

Today, sewing is a rock star and we have hundreds of wonderful craft blogs, beautiful sewing books, and innovative magazines to inspire us. But the New Domesticity wasn't a given—we had to work out the contradictions within ourselves first. Now young girls can grow up in a world where they can choose to be a bunch of different things at once: They can be doctors who embroider, scientists who crack tile to make mosaics, or professors who know how to whip up a mean batch of cupcakes. It's all fluid and you're not locked into any one identity.

I wish I could have understood this when I was twenty years old. But it doesn't matter: I'm here now. And so are you. So let's go make something.