

THE KNITTER'S

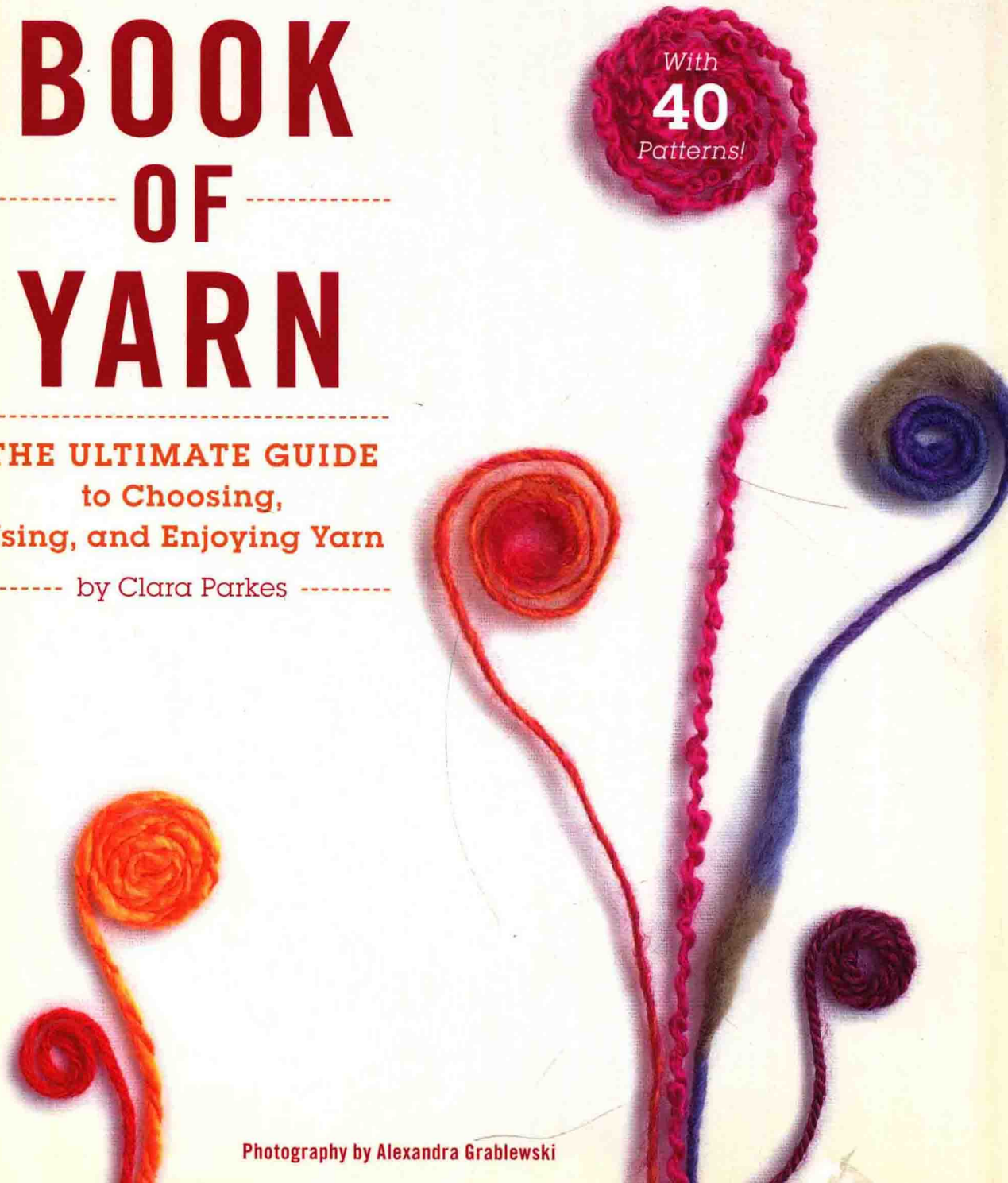
# BOOK OF YARN

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE  
to Choosing,  
Using, and Enjoying Yarn

by Clara Parkes

With  
**40**  
Patterns!

Photography by Alexandra Gablewski



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**BOOK OF YARN**  
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THE ULTIMATE GUIDE  
to Choosing, Using, and Enjoying Yarn

----- by Clara Parkes -----



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Published in the United States by Potter Craft,  
an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group,  
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.  
[www.crownpublishing.com](http://www.crownpublishing.com)  
[www.pottercraft.com](http://www.pottercraft.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Parkes, Clara.

The knitter's book of yarn : the ultimate guide to  
choosing, using, and enjoying yarn / by Clara  
Parkes. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-307-35216-3

1. Knitting. 2. Yarn. I. Title.

TT820.P28 2007

677'.028245—dc22

2007009363

Printed in China

Graphic design by Goodesign  
Photography by Alexandra Grablewski  
Illustrations by Kate McKeon

Thanks to the Craft Yarn Council of America  
([www.yarnstandards.com](http://www.yarnstandards.com)) for their Standard Yarn  
Weight System Chart, which appears on page 236

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First Edition



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*This book belongs to*







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Published in the United States by Potter Craft,  
an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group,  
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[www.crownpublishing.com](http://www.crownpublishing.com)  
[www.pottercraft.com](http://www.pottercraft.com)

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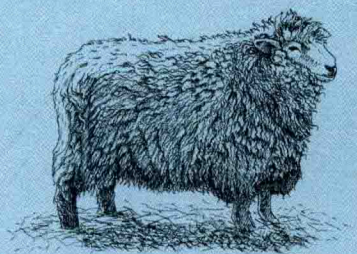
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THE KNITTER'S BOOK OF YARN



# Introduction



ALL KNITTERLY CREATION STEMS FROM ONE SIMPLE ELEMENT: YARN. IT IS THE BAKER'S FLOUR, THE JEWELER'S GOLD, THE GARDENER'S SOIL. YARN IS CREATION, CONSOLATION, AND CHAOS ALL SPUN TOGETHER INTO ONE PERFECT BALL. IT'S A SIMPLE CONCEPT, TWISTING FIBERS TOGETHER INTO A CONTINUOUS THREAD OF YARN. BUT THE VARIETY OF FIBERS, BLENDS, AND SPINS IS TRULY INFINITE. SO IS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YARN. WE LOVE IT, WE COVET IT, WE ARE KNOCKED SENSELESS BY IT, YET SOMETIMES WE ARE BAFFLED, THWARTED, AND BETRAYED BY IT.

Few materials undergo so many transformations during their lifetime. From the plant or animal where it originates, it gets clipped and fluffed and dipped and blended and twisted and dyed, displayed as a skein in your local yarn shop (LYS), wound into a ball and worked into just the right garment, washed and blocked, and finally worn.

With so many steps and choices along the way, it's inevitable that one or two things will go wrong. I'm not talking about the dropped stitches and funky decreases. I'm talking about the bigger mistakes we usually don't discover until it's too late: The socks that grow twice as long in the first wash, the cardigan that droops and sways like a church bell when you wear it, the gorgeous scarf that feels like sandpaper against your delicate neck.

These are what I call *yarn-related errors*. Sometimes they're caused by eager yarn manufacturers who need to sell more of a yarn, even if it isn't entirely right for the pattern. But more often they stem from a deeper knitterly dilemma we all face at one point or another: matching the right yarn to the right project.

In an ideal world, we'd fall in love with a yarn, find the perfect pattern that calls for this yarn, and knit our way into the sunset. Or we'd fall in love with a pattern and the yarn it calls for, both of which would be easily available, and we'd all live happily ever after.

Sadly, this is rarely how it works. We fall in love with a yarn and simply must have it, giving little thought to what it will become. We collect patterns, books, and magazines for projects we may never complete. And we struggle to bring the two together.

Some yarns have little if any pattern support from their manufacturer—especially the smaller-scale farms and hand-dyers. But even when the company does provide patterns for its yarns, sometimes we just don't like them. Perhaps we like the aesthetics of a designer who works with one yarn company but we love the yarns of another. Maybe we need to find lower-cost yarn alternatives. Or we're seeking patterns for a yarn in our stash that has long since been discontinued, or trying to find yarn for a pattern written ages ago for a yarn long gone.

Discontinued yarns are one of the biggest headaches for knitters. By the time this book reaches you, chances are that several of the yarns mentioned in these pages will no longer be available. No matter how hard we try, we'll never be able to escape this reality. We must learn to work around it.

And that's why this book exists. I believe each of us has the potential to be a *yarn whisperer*, to hold a skein in our hands, look at it, touch it, listen to it, even smell it, and instinctively know what the yarn wants to become. With this innate understanding, we'd never need to rely on a specific pattern again.

Some of us are relatively new to knitting and approach impromptu pairings with anxiety and uncertainty. Others, having gone it alone for years, have developed their own instinct—yet they still may have occasional doubts.

I want to give a formal vocabulary to that instinct and help you refine it further.

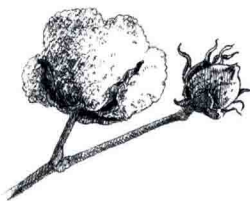
While I've assembled a vast selection of yarns in these pages, it is by no means intended as a compendium of every yarn available. Considering the frequency with which yarns enter and leave the market today, such an effort would be futile.

Instead, the yarns in this book serve as examples of the most common fiber types, preparations, spins, and ply combinations that you'll likely find in your local yarn shop and unearth in your stash. They come from large-scale manufacturers and importers, medium-sized companies, boutique dye shops, community spinneries, and old-fashioned sheep farms. Some are ironclad standards, while others are smaller, magical blends from noteworthy people whose story I felt needed to be told.

Because the best way to learn is by *doing*, within each chapter in Section 3: Ply Me a River you'll find several patterns designed expressly for that yarn's specific spin, ply, and/or fiber type. You're not only reading about yarn, but you get to pull out a skein, cast on, and feel its precise design potential for yourself.

The patterns come to us from some of the most inquisitive design minds in the knitting world—people I admire not only for their work but for their instinctive love and understanding of yarn. They also share insight about what, in those yarns, led them to design what they did.

By the time we reach the end of our journey, you will have a much better understanding of yarn, how it's made, who makes it, how it gets to you, and what it longs to become in your hands. The next time you pick up a skein and someone asks, "What are you going to do with it?" you'll be able to respond with inspired confidence.









## SECTION 1

# Fiber Foundations



BEFORE WE CAN GRAB THAT BALL OF YARN AND START KNITTING, WE FIRST NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS ACTUALLY *IN* THAT BALL. JUST AS OUR PLANET IS DIVIDED INTO ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, AND MINERAL MATTER, SO THE FIBER WORLD IS DIVIDED INTO PROTEIN, CELLULOSE, CELLULOSIC, AND SYNTHETIC FIBERS. EACH FIBER GROUP HAS MULTIPLE VARIETIES, EACH OF WHICH CAN BEHAVE DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENTLY FROM ONE TO THE NEXT, BOTH ON THE SKEIN AND IN THE GARMENT. UNDERSTANDING HOW THESE FIBERS WORK IS YOUR FIRST STEP TOWARD YARN FREEDOM.

### A QUICK TIP

Terms in boldface are defined in the Glossary at the end of the book.



## PROTEIN FIBERS

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Protein fibers are essentially the hairs that grow on animals. They all contain carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and sulfur. The one exception is silk, which falls somewhere between protein and cellulose because it is extruded from the silkworm after it feasts on plants—but, for the sake of order, we'll place it in the protein category.

## CELLULOSE FIBERS

Cellulose fibers are derived from the cellulose that occurs naturally in plants. Cotton has the highest cellulose content (normally 95% cellulose, 5% water) and is somewhat unusual in that it is derived from the seed pod of the cotton plant. The other popular cellulose fibers, such as linen and hemp, are called bast fibers because they're derived from the stalks of plants.

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## CELLULOSIC FIBERS

Cellulosic fibers are also made from the cellulose of plant material (most often cotton and trees) that has been chemically processed down to a base liquid form before being extruded and regenerated into a spinnable fiber form. The most common cellulosic fibers are rayon and Tencel.

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## SYNTHETIC FIBERS

Synthetic fibers—including polyester, nylon, and acrylic—are manmade using entirely artificial materials.

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# Protein Fibers

The oldest and most prevalent protein fiber is wool, which is the hair grown on a sheep. But goats, camels, rabbits, and other animals—including household pets and even humans—also produce protein fibers.

Just as our own hair differs from person to person, protein fibers vary dramatically depending on the animal and the specific *breed* of animal that grew them. They can be long or short; thick or fine; hollow or filled with tiny air pockets; curly, wavy, or completely straight. But they all have a few things in common.

If you look at fibers under a powerful microscope, you'll see that they are covered with tiny **scales**—rather like the scales of a fish. You can experience them for yourself by running your fingers up and down your hair. Slide your fingers away from your scalp and they'll move smoothly; in the other direction, they encounter a faint amount of drag and resistance. You're feeling the scales moving with and against the direction of your fingers.

## SCALES



Scales deserve a section of their own because they play such an important role in how protein fibers look, feel, and behave. First, they act as miniature fingers that help hold fibers together to form a strong, durable yarn. They give fibers something to hold

on to during the spinning process. At the same time, they also provide a microscopic buffer between fibers, making them at once enmeshed and distinctly separate. And scales are also the reason why a wool sweater, when machine-washed in hot soapy water, will emerge a shrunken felted mass—but we'll get to felting later.

A simple rule of thumb to remember is that the finer the fiber, the finer and more numerous the scales; the rougher the fiber, the larger and fewer the scales. A superfine **Merino** fiber, for example, may have as many as three thousand scales along each *inch* (2.5cm)

of fiber. The scales are so microscopic that even the most sensitive person won't be able to feel them—which is why Merino is highly regarded as a scratch-free wool. When the light hits this finely fragmented surface, it reflects back with a matte, almost pearlescent light, which is what gives Merino its lustrous sheen.

On the other end of the spectrum we have **longwools** and rougher fibers, which tend to be larger in diameter with fewer scales covering the fiber surface—sometimes as few as six hundred scales per inch (2.5cm). Although these larger scales still won't be immediately perceptible to the touch, they can have a rougher feel against your skin. But with fewer scales to break the fiber surface, these wools can have a far more reflective, almost luminous quality when light hits them.

Larger scales don't always indicate roughness, however. Angora has chevron-shaped scales that contribute to a powdery appearance and slippery surface, as do the larger but smoother scales on the surface of cashmere and qiviut fibers. Mohair also has large scales that contribute to a gorgeous, reflective quality—and the first shearing can be as soft as cashmere.

Part of what makes a fiber warm is its ability to trap still air, and scales play a role here, too. Their endless nooks and crannies along the fiber shaft give ample room for air to hide. Spun woollen style, with the fibers jumbled every which way, even a thin strand of yarn can be remarkably warm. Meanwhile, the smoother



protein fibers that have been aligned and combed and spun worsted-style tend to compact into a dense, fluid material that's strong but not nearly as warm. This is why an airy Shetland shawl can actually be warmer than a firmly spun pair of mittens.

The only animal-produced fiber that doesn't have scales is silk—a fiber that's a category unto itself. Although it's produced by a living creature, silk isn't a *grown* hair—it's a liquid that the silkworm extrudes after feasting on mulberry leaves, and this liquid hardens when it comes into contact with air. The smooth, scale-free surface of silk helps account for its notoriously brilliant, reflective qualities—but it also helps explain why it's so slippery to spin. Cellulose fibers, such as cotton and linen, have no scales; nor do cellulosic fibers, such as rayon and Tencel, or pure synthetic fibers.

## SHEEP: WOOL



**Wool** in yarn is like restaurants in San Francisco. You could knit a different blend every day for a year without using the same yarn twice. It's as varied as the sheep on which it grows, running the

gamut from rugged and ropelike to delicate and ethereal, with just about everything in between. Even within the same sheep breed, you'll find subtle differences from animal to animal, farm to farm. If you'd like to learn more about specific sheep breeds and the fibers they produce, I strongly recommend Nola Fournier and Jane Fournier's *In Sheep's Clothing: A Handspinner's Guide to Wool*. Here we'll focus on wool as it pertains to commercial yarns.

The first thing to know about wool is that it is hygroscopic—a great trait for clothing and an equally great word for your next crossword puzzle or cocktail party. *Hygroscopic* means that the fiber is able to absorb up to 30 percent of its weight in moisture while still feeling warm and dry against your skin. This helps the fabric breathe, readily absorbing and releasing moisture to maintain a steady ecosystem of comfort against your skin, no matter how cold or damp the external weather may be.

Wool is naturally flame-retardant and has long been a favorite material for firemen's blankets and industrial fabrics in public buildings. When exposed to flame, wool simply extinguishes itself without a peep. The constant level of moisture in the fiber keeps wool from conducting static electricity, which not only causes those annoying shocks but also acts as a magnet to pull fine dirt and dust particles deep into your garment.

Wool is also extremely resilient and highly extensible, which essentially means you can stretch it a third of its length, or two-thirds when wet, and it'll recover to its original shape. Despite over a century of effort, not a single manmade fiber yet possesses all these amazing qualities.

## How We Get It

Sheep are generally shorn twice a year—once in the spring and once in the fall. Depending on the animal and the frequency of the shearing, the fiber length (often called **staple length**) averages anywhere from 2 inches (5cm) in the fine wools to 12 inches (30.5cm) in the longwools.

The mass of fiber shorn from a sheep is called a **fleece**, and it contains everything that was on the sheep at the moment it was shorn—including vegetable matter, dirt, and **lanolin**, a greasy substance that is secreted from the sheep's sebaceous glands. Lanolin helps repel water from the sheep's coat (which can be especially handy for sheep that live in wet climates) and may also help protect the sheep's skin from infection.

Finer fiber fleeces tend to have far more lanolin (sometimes 35 percent of the overall fleece weight), while some Shetlands and Icelandics are so clean that they can be spun “in the grease,” that is, without any washing whatsoever.

Depending on the stringency of the processing, wool can be either squeaky clean, like a fine, triple-sifted cake flour, or left a little *au naturel* with more vegetable matter and lanolin in the fiber—rather like a hearty whole grain. Many of the traditional fishermen's sweaters were made from lanolin-rich yarn to help keep fishermen warm and dry in stormy seas.