



by Jane Brocket

I am not great at drawing. In fact, I am terrible. So when my daughter Phoebe was little, I used to draw the same picture over and over again for her to colour in. It was the very simple outline of a ballet dancer with a curving neck and sloping shoulders which could be adorned with jewellery, a frothy tutu to be filled in with patterns and colours and flowers and sequins and glitter, and a fine pair of legs that could end in any colour and style of shoes or socks.

So it's no coincidence that when I'm knitting socks, I think about the endless joys of colouring in simple shapes. For I see my socks as a grown-up version of Phoebe's dancer. I take the same basic shape and fill it in with different colours, patterns, yarns, thoughts and musings. As long as I have four double pointed needles (dpns) and a ball of sock yarn, I, like Phoebe, can be kept amused for hours.

Sock-knitting has become something of a passion of mine over the last couple of years. Although I'd been knitting since I was at university, I'd never knitted a sock. Then, a few summers ago, I

went to a weekend workshop with some creative friends, one of whom brought her sock-knitting out while we were having a glass of wine before dinner. I was fascinated by the way Linda managed to wield four dpns, create stripes, turn a heel and drink wine all at the same time.

As soon as I got home I immediately ordered some yarn and needles and sighed with relief when I discovered that they would come with a free pattern for I was clueless about the various, apparently terrifying aspects of sock-knitting such as heel-turning, top-down, bottom-up, gussets, flaps, grafting, and Kitchener stitch.

Now I have to admit that I am still clueless about most of these things, but this has not prevented me from knitting warm, cosy, colourful and gaily patterned socks which have been worn by all members of the family. And that's because I have, so far, stuck to using one simple pattern which can be 'coloured in'. I know that one day I will no doubt move on to experimenting with cables, lace, different ribs and so on, but for the time being I am revelling, like Phoebe with felt-tip pens, in the joys of filling in a set space.

Nail Varnish Socks

Companies such as Regia and Opal make wonderful sock yarns to suit all sock-knitters' tastes from simple and muted to exuberant and bright. I also adore the stunning self-stripping yarns from small, independent companies such as Vesper and Sunshine Yarns. This Regia yarn, Jacquard Florence, caught my eye with its bright, hot nail varnish colours, the sorts of reds and pinks and oranges I like to put on my toes in the summer – so I made these socks as a consolation for having to cover up my feet in winter.

Phoebe is still keen to fill in spaces with lovely colours but now uses herself instead of a dancer drawn on paper - she often paints her fingers and toes using twenty different colours. So when I asked her to model for me, she was more than happy to get out her grown-up version of finger paints and make her nails match her socks.



Hot Chocolate Socks

After my extensive exploration of the world of hand-painted and self-patterning yarns, I wanted to impose some of my own colouring-in ideas on socks. I also wanted to use a 100% wool yarn for a change. Self-patterning yarns are usually 75% wool and 25% nylon to make them more durable and long-lasting, but on this occasion I wanted something ultra-soft and cosy to make some the sort of socks I'd want to wear on cold winter nights to go with a cup of tea and some delicious chocolate, or perhaps a mug of hot cocoa.

So I mixed a brown yarn for the hot chocolate, and a creamy coloured yarn for the hot milk which goes into cocoa and the pale swirls of foam on top of a frothy hot chocolate. And because I didn't want to get bored knitting two identical socks, I decided to play around with the stripes and reverse them.



Granny Smith Socks

It took me some time to get used to creating stripes by changing yarn colour instead of relying on

pre-programmed, intelligent yarns with built-in stripes. For one thing, you have to remember to actually do it instead of blithely going round in circles, happily twisting down the helter-skelter of your sock rounds. And secondly, you have to deal with the little 'step-up' that comes as a result of making stripes manually. This happens because the rounds don't actually join on the same line; the nature of sock construction and knitting in the round means that the last stitch actually comes just below the beginning of the previous round. My solution is to knit one round and one extra stitch, and to place the join seam up the back of the heel where it's least likely to be seen by me (or anyone else, unless I'm being followed).

My Granny Smith socks are so-called because of the wonderful acid lime-green yarn which reminds me of this variety's peel and the ivory-white flesh. But they also recall the action of peeling apples either by hand which creates a sublime corkscrew of peel – a perfect and apt illustration of how knitting in the round works.