by Franklin Habit

Hi, my name's Franklin. I teach knitting for a living. No, seriously. Next year I'll be going to at least a dozen or so fiber festivals, large and small, and I'll be paid to go to every one of them. That's my job. I fly to interesting places where knitters have gathered, and spend entire days talking to them about knitting as we play with pretty yarn. Then I get money.

This is every bit as much an ordeal as you might imagine, which is to say not very much of an ordeal. Pop divas and people who review world-class spa resorts for a living may have a slightly fancier good time at work, but I don't have to date male models or pretend I like eating watercress and tofu for dinner, so it all evens out.

No fleece is without dung tags, though, and when knitting teachers gather, stories fly about the occasional student who is, to use a diplomatic adjective, challenging. There are remarkably few of them, given the size of the knitting community. However, once encountered they are never forgotten.

This, of course, is the flipside of the conversations I recall from my days on the other side of the sample swatch. I'd huddle with my friends after classes had ended and compare teachers. "She was wonderful!" I'd shriek, brandishing my class project like a trophy. "How was yours?" Usually this drew a similar exclamation of delight. Sometimes, though, there'd be pursed lips and a quick, silent shake of the head.

What's amazing is how often the same ten knitters crop up in these chitchats, and how reliably they cause smoke to issue forth from the ears of those who have encountered them. I've put together a field guide, in case you'd like to keep an eye out.

The descriptions are drawn from the collective experience of several dozen knitters who have been kind enough to share their experiences with me. Names have been changed, but you'll know 'em when you see 'em. Trust me.

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Students

Ethel the Unready: Homework? What homework? Ethel usually insists that nobody told her that preparation was necessary for the class, though the other nineteen students got the message.But on occasion she admits that she just couldn't be bothered to do it. She casts on for the first of the seven required swatches just as the lesson begins, then gives up halfway through to sit and sigh heavily at the unfairness of it all.

When asked how the class was, she will tell others it was impossible to follow.

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Teacher's Little Helper: He has paid to take the class, and so is technically a student. Yet he can't resist offering his own class-within-a-class, refuting every point the teacher makes with a counterpoint of his own. It doesn't matter if the teacher has devoted twenty years of her life to a particular technique and published three books about it; Little Helper saw a YouTube video last week that knocks all that on its ear.

When friends ask if he enjoyed the class, Little Helper replies with confidence that he didn't learn a thing.

The Social Butterfly: This animated, irrepressible creature considers the teacher to be the equivalent of a smooth jazz quartet in a smoky lounge—mostly background noise, but nice to listen to when you run out of things to say. Which she never does. Butterflies often flock together, and will announce excitedly that this class is their first chance to catch up since they left each other for dead on a battlefield forty years ago. Any student seated near one or more butterflies had better know how to lip-read because nothing the teacher says is going to make it through the wall of sound.

When asked what she thought of the class, the Butterfly will say the teacher is very full of herself because she kept shushing everybody.

Negative Nellie: She knows with fatal certainty that she will never, not even in a million years under the tutelage of a million Elizabeth Zimmermanns, be able to grasp even the most basic concepts the teacher is trying to get across. She signs up for the class anyhow. When the teacher gently offers additional help or explanation, Nellie firmly refuses. Life is futile.

When asked her opinion of the class, she will say it was hopelessly confusing.

The Game Changer: Yes, he knows the class is called "Introduction to East Andalusian Four-Way Intarsia." But he wants to talk about this cabled sock he's knitting. He brought it with him, see? And this part of the pattern doesn't make sense. Can the teacher tell him what he's supposed to be doing with this sock? After class? No, he's busy after class. This will only take a minute. He really needs help with this sock. Right now.

When asked how the class went, the Game Changer will say the teacher doesn't know anything about knitting.

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Teachers

The Divine Presence: She considers eighty dollars a bargain price for the opportunity to spend three hours just being in the same room with her. Offering actual instruction would be overkill. Instead, she may proffer extempore, colorful anecdotes from her fabulous life; or perhaps an "inspirational" slide show of her immortal designs—the patterns for which are (of course) for sale from her booth in the marketplace.

Vaguerella: She's so sorry to be forty minutes late, but she forgot to check the time class was starting. She has handouts, but…wait, where are they? Here they are. Oh, she only has four of them. No matter, the twenty of you can share. Samples? Yes, she has some. Well, one. And it's for a different class. A demonstration? Sure! May she please borrow your needles and yarn?

The Four-Minute Egg: Everything this teacher is prepared to say on the subject fits into the first four minutes of the class. The remaining two hours and fifty-six minutes are spent circulating aimlessly among the students and asking, "So, have you got that?" The students usually have got it, and can spend their free time calculating how much yarn they could have bought if they'd skipped this class and watched a free online video.

Burnt Toast: Precious little is left of this teacher save a handful of charred remains and a suitcase full of samples that are starting to felt. She tired of teaching this class before the end of the Nixon administration, but is so well-known as a expert on the subject that no one will let her give it up. The class isn't bad, exactly; but the poor thing is dead inside. One day she will snap and skewer the entire front row with an extra-long dpn.

The Prison Matron: No. You should have used the toilet before you left home. There will be one five-minute break, and it's twenty minutes away. The doors have been bolted from the outside. You may not leave the classroom to answer your doctor's call about your biopsy results. You may not ask quietly to borrow your neighbor's scissors. You may not slip as if to purl if you have been told to slip as if to knit. You may not cry. Stop that crying right now. Stop it! *Stop it!*

Franklin Habit is the author of It Itches: A Stash of Knitting Cartoons *and proprietor of the popular blog* The Panopticon *(the-panopticon.blogspot.com). He began as an eager student of knitting, but these days is usually in the teacher's chair. He has never met any of the knitters in this article; he's just heard things, is all.*

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