

STRAIGHT FIRST TIME: SEWING LESSONS

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I have two abiding memories of sewing and needlework lessons at school, both from my early years at South Wolds Comprehensive School in Nottingham. The stern young Home Economics teacher, well-groomed in high wedge sandals, tan tights and an A-line skirt, ruled the sewing room, in spite of her slight frame. She would count out every needle at the start of the class, and, after a frustrating hour encouraging us to master running stitch, counted them back in. If any needles were missing, we were kept in at break until the missing needles were recovered.¹ Rumour had it the school was trying to avoid any amateur tattoos being inked using school property.

Mum was protective of her sewing machine, so I first used one at school. Before we were allowed to sew material, we had to practice on an unthreaded machine, using sheets of paper, cut from a long roll. I was proud when the teacher held mine up: *Look at these perfect lines, straight first time! Do you use a machine at home?* I explained no, but I'd watched my Mum sewing at her Singer. *Ah, you'll like these Berninas*, she said. *Much easier to thread up.*²

The class was tasked with making a 'floppy frog bean bag.' I delved in Mum's rag bag for scraps from Sarah's mauve peasant dress. The Bernina machines were indeed very easy to thread² - and I finished my frog in record time too, with no unpicking or resewing. On the night before the class I remembered I had been supposed to ask Mum to buy rice, but she had none in her store cupboard (*If you'd only said in time, I would've got some!*).³ After a brief emergency discussion with Gran, I was sent to school with an alternative stuffing - their old

¹ Provoking a unanimous wail of *Oh, Miiiiis...*

² Older Singer sewing machines require a complex threading, whereas the school Bernina machines were threaded up-down-up-down, as has become standard since.

³ I was also infuriatingly bad at putting my Physical Education kit in the laundry basket to be washed in good time.

tights. The overall effect was squashed, rather than floppy frog, but I was fond of it - a stuffed animal I'd made myself. It wasn't much use as a bean bag, as my friend C pointed out.

In 1979, South Wolds was a typical East Midlands state school built from prefab concrete and steel, 1,200 pupils behind drafty picture windows, the siren ready to warn of nuclear attack mounted on top of the tower block. My year was based in the H-block, so named because it was the Humanities block, and not after the notorious prison in Northern Ireland housing IRA hunger strikers which we heard mentioned in daily news bulletins on the radio.

The school had a progressive comprehensive curriculum, with obligatory social studies and mixed ability classes in many subjects until our sixteenth birthdays. Boys took needlework and cookery classes, just as girls took woodwork, metalwork, and technical drawing. As soon as there was any choice, matters quickly resolved along norms of the time. Everyone had to choose a craft to study to exam level at sixteen; in spite of all our opportunities, only one boy (my friend D) took Home Economics; and only one girl took technical drawing. I wasn't that girl, though I enjoyed the subject, and found it ridiculously easy. *Of course*, said Gran. *Your grandfather Don was a draftsman in a machine tools factory.*

Music was counted as a craft and, because I played clarinet, my mother was a teacher at a Sixth Form College in the city, and I was deemed bright enough to go to university, I opted to take an O Level in Music rather than Home Economics. *You can sew at home whenever you want, don't waste school time on that*, was the family attitude.⁴ I'm glad I learned to sew for pleasure in my own time, at my own pace.

⁴ It would have been useful to learn to type but no-one foresaw how computer keyboards would make it so necessary. I was on the academic track, and with only 8 subjects allowed to exam level, a CSE in secretarial skills (where girls - always girls - learned to type) was never seriously considered. Even Gran, a shorthand typist in the 1930s, agreed. You can learn typing after school if you need it.

In the early 1980s, music and fashions were changing. Even we swotty girls were altering our jeans to the skinniest, narrowest legs possible, appreciating the usefulness of learning to machine sew in a straight line in readiness for those floppy frogs. I had to point my toes to squeeze my foot through the narrowed ankle hole, only to find my heel wouldn't fit through. Here followed my first encounter with ripping out seams sewn in error (using Mum's smallest dressmaking scissors to nick the stitches on one side, before turning the fabric to remove the released line of thread in a gratifying single pull). Our newly skinny jeans were so tight we had to lie on our backs and pull up the zip with coat hanger hooks.

Our handiwork is on display in group photos taken on the school band trip to our twin town in France, or on the school German exchange - there we all are, bandy-legged in our painfully tight jeans, hoping our mothers won't be proved right about getting thrush. We're the players of musical instruments, the girls who were faking their test results so we wouldn't be seen to get 10 out of 10 in class.

That wasn't the only thing I was learning to fake.

*Jay Whittaker grew up in Nottingham and has lived and worked in Edinburgh for almost 30 years. She has published two poetry collections, *Sweet Anaesthetist* (2020) and her Saltire Award winning debut, *Wristwatch* (2017). A life-long sewing enthusiast, she is currently working on a new prose book: *Altered patterns: a sewing memoir*. <https://jaywhittaker.uk>*