

To a Teague

Designer Ysolda Teague has been the boss of her knitting for as long as she's been in the industry. With a steady stream of self-published patterns and pattern books and a whirlwind travel schedule from her home base in Scotland, she's always keeping busy. During a recent trip to New York, Teague sat down with *YMN's* Erin Slonaker.



YMN: What was your first design? What started it all for you as a designer?

YT: My first published pattern, Arisaig [a lace wrap card], appeared in *Knitty* in the fall of 2005, but I'd mostly been designing for myself, making things up as I went along. I was terrible at following patterns, and Arisaig was the first time I wrote a full pattern and graded sizes—which I did entirely on graph paper, size by size.

YMN: Are you a self-taught knitter?

YT: More or less. I taught myself from books, although I did have relatives who knit who I could go to with questions. I learn more easily from books than from other people. I was the kid at the back of the math class reading the textbook and trying to block out the teacher.

YMN: I've heard that you didn't start knitting until you were in college. What made you pick it up?

YT: I learned the very basics as a kid, but it was at the very bottom of my list of things to do on a rainy day. I liked sewing a lot more and couldn't understand why anyone would knit. Suddenly, while at university, I realized why. It's portable, sociable and much less damaging to your bedsheets than cutting fabric. I'd also picked up a 1950s knitting encyclopedia that made it seem really interesting. This book is arranged A–Z, not in the order you should learn things, and it assumed that the reader is smart and good at math. I think the fact that I started with a book that was hard to learn from made it seem more interesting, since it was challenging.

YMN: You've always had an independent streak, then. Is that what led you to self-publish rather than seek a more traditional route?

YT: Sort of, but I really started self-publishing because it was the easiest, most accessible option. I submitted to *Knitty* because I'd just discovered it and didn't realize anyone else actually looked at it. Looking back, there's no way I'd have done that had I not been so naive.

It never occurred to me to submit anything to a print magazine, but I'd seen a few people selling PDFs and that seemed easy enough.

YMN: You've since had to become a savvy businesswoman—promoting your books, planning your tours. How do you do it all?

YT: To be honest, if I was just knitting or even just designing I'd probably have gotten bored and found something else to do by now. A big part of the appeal of self-publishing is that I get to do a lot of different things. It's also a lot of work. When I toured in 2009, I mostly arranged events by posting where I was going to be on my blog [Ysolda.com/wordpress] and asking stores to contact me. That worked pretty well, but it was all a bit last-minute and not particularly well organized. I do have an assistant now, and she handles most of the business admin stuff. I hire other people to do specific things, like sample knitting, graphic design and helping at events.

YMN: Your new book, *Little Red in the City*, comes out in March. Are you going on tour again?

YT: Yes! And for the book tour I am planning on doing workshops to give people a chance to work through some of the stuff that's covered in the book, like taking measurements, choosing sweater styles and sizes, and adapting shaping. It will be very much led by the students, since the book came about as a result of the questions I frequently got from knitters on those topics.

YMN: I've noticed you provide a lot of sizes in your patterns—is this because of reader response?

YT: I do provide a lot of sizes, but in some ways that was also a result of my naiveté; it never occurred to me not to. Starting out publishing online removed a lot of the space constraints that print publishing puts on patterns. I was really skinny when I started knitting, and I remember being frustrated

that in some patterns I was the smallest size or too small for any of the sizes. I knew lots of people smaller than me, and plenty of people more than four sizes larger. Narrow size ranges just seemed ridiculous.

YMN: When you size things now, do you use math instead of graph paper?

YT: Ha, yes. I tend to start with the grading, in a spreadsheet, and if it seems like the design isn't going to grade nicely—it uses a stitch pattern with a really large repeat or the proportions only work well in some sizes—I abandon it. There are lots of beautiful designs out there, and I've had ideas that would have been wonderful in one or two sizes, but my focus is definitely in creating patterns that people will use.

YMN: That's much appreciated by your fans. Have you had surprises—patterns that you love that haven't done well, and vice versa?

YT: I was pretty surprised by Ishbel's popularity, to be honest. I mean, [the shawl's] kind of fun to knit and is pretty, but it's hardly the most interesting [lace] pattern. Still, for some reason it seems to be exactly what people want to knit—some have made it more than 40 times over. Through the Keyhole [a striped sweater with a keyhole under the collar, from *Twist Collective*] is one pattern that I thought might be more popular. It's pretty simple but has details that I love, and it's very wearable. Fun-ily enough, almost everyone who has made it seems to have made more than one; maybe you have to knit it before you get the appeal.

YMN: You've mentioned more than once that you hate being bored. What do you do to fill time besides knit?

YT: Um, I write about knitting? I take a lot of photos, and I like to bake. Knitting really does hold my interest—I keep [making more discoveries] that prevent me from being bored.

Keep up with Teague at Ysolda.com.