

Visionary Quest

Never heard of “the Visionaries”? You’re about to. The (not so) best-kept secret in the knitting world is set to debut at TNNA this June, when a collection of self-published books incubated at the quietly held yet widely influential Visionary retreats hosted by Cat Bordhi will be made available through Unicorn Books & Crafts.

“It hasn’t been a secret, though we’ve never tried to be public before,” says Bordhi about the growing group of designing writers she’s mentored since the first Visionary retreat back in 2005.

In 2001, when Bordhi put out the seminal *Socks Soar on Two Circular Needles* on her own, self-publishing was hardly the widespread phenomenon it is today. “I knew nothing about it, but I thought, ‘I’ll try it anyway.’” To her surprise, the book was a hit—so much so, she was able to quit her job as a teacher and pursue designing full-time. With that success came queries from other knitters looking for advice on how to self-publish. And that’s when Bordhi began to envision the Visionary retreat.

Bordhi invited eight knitters—all but one of whom has subsequently self-published—to her picturesque home turf of San Juan Island for the debut retreat (“I didn’t know if there would ever be a second”). The intimate five-day exercise in collaborative brainstorming and peer-to-peer encouragement set the stage for the many retreats to follow.

“Because of the noncompetitive atmosphere and diverse nature of the group, the amount of feeding every author gets is extraordinary.” (Literally and figuratively: Bordhi brags about the great caterer who furnishes the retreat repasts.) “Every Visionary is like a flat sponge,” she says. “They soak up information from the others, and they and the book pop up; then they have to go home and do the hard work.” All Visionaries adhere to a clear statement of confidentiality, agreeing not to discuss peers’ projects without, Bordhi says, “express permission or until a book is published and it’s time to start marketing. This mutual mentorship and lack of competition is very fruitful.” She adds that Visionaries look out for one another’s specific territories, alerting fellow authors if they hear of similar projects going on in the wider world.

That doesn’t happen often, partly because of the nature of the work

that spurs Bordhi to accept an author to a retreat. Applications are numerous and slots are few, and Bordhi is careful to cull designers who will benefit from one another’s participation. “Part of the purpose of the retreat is to ensure that the best possible fiber books are able to be born and refined to the best point they can be,” says Bordhi. Visionary topics are “original, advanced, specific, not done before.” Cases in point: Chris de Longpré’s *Timeless Knits for Kids*, Margaret Fisher’s *Seven Things That Can Make or Break a Sweater* and best-selling sock titles from the estimable likes of Cookie A, Chrissy Gardiner and Janel Laidman.

While many of these designers are now well known in the industry, Bordhi is not interested in filling her retreats only with A-listers. “A name can sell a book, but if someone who’s not well known has something important to say, we can create a name,” she says. “Now we know we can bring people into the forefront.” (Keep an eye out for Sandra McIver, “a total unknown in the knitting world,” whose forthcoming *Knit.Swir!!* will “set a new standard for knitting books,” asserts Bordhi.)

Visionary retreats now take place several times a year, including dedicated sessions for returnees looking to “get a deeper sense of things on their books in progress,” and one

just for men, which Bordhi says was “something else”—in the best way possible. And with the Unicorn distribution, the movement is on the brink of a whole new level of recognition. Bordhi is excited about the possibilities.

“It takes a long time to write a book,” she explains. “So we’ve never had the critical mass of books to do what we can do now,” allowing for the retreats to lead to “an imprint of sorts.” Part of the Unicorn rollout includes exclusive LYS lesson plans from the authors to help retailers teach the rarefied techniques inherent in a Visionary book.

“We view the local yarn shop as the cardiovascular system for knitting,” she explains. “It must remain vibrant and strong, and we hope to do everything we can to support it.” See the Visionaries collection, which exemplifies the group’s motto—“These books ring true”—at Unicorn Books’ TNNA Columbus booth, where several authors will be signing.

