

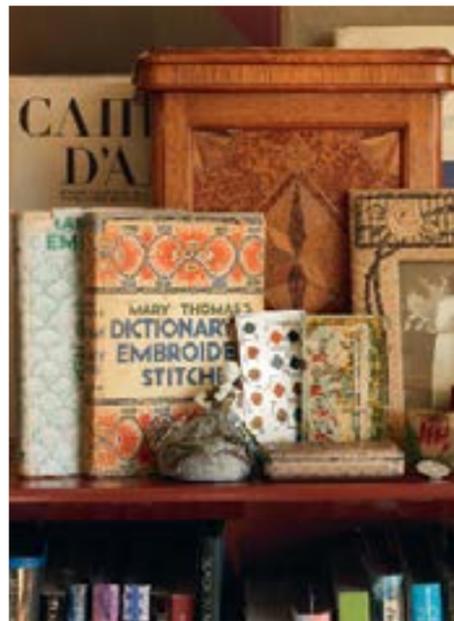
**THIS PAGE** A hallway rug made from early 20th century rags welcomes visitors to the Mt Victoria, Wellington home Rosemary McLeod shares with book-dealer husband John Quilter and two adult children; six projects featured in her new book are pictured here: a felt bag, striped gloves and patchwork cushion at left; a hessian bag and cravats to the right; and a patchwork cushion on the chair in the centre.



# INVITATION TO STITCH

Rosemary McLeod's new book is a celebration of the lives and needle skills of generations of New Zealand women

WORDS SARAH LANG / PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER



**THIS PAGE** (clockwise from top left) Needle-and-pin-stabbed fingers are an occupational hazard. Rosemary's many antique and contemporary books span crafts, design and fashion. The author likes to see colour and wear black. Rosemary working in her office beside her collection of vintage tins.

**YOU** MAY RECOGNISE Rosemary McLeod and her blunt bob from the byline photo that accompanies her column, syndicated in seven newspapers. The journalist known for her strong opinions has contributed to some of our leading magazines and has won numerous writing awards. Writing is her livelihood, but it's needlecraft that is her passion. She makes it, exhibits it, teaches it and, naturally enough, writes about it.

Her 2006 book *Thrift to Fantasy: Home Textile Crafts of the 1930s-1950s* broke ground as the first volume to consider craft's place in New Zealand's social and domestic history – and won a Montana Book Award. April 5 marks the release of *With Bold Needle & Thread* (Random House, \$55), a collection of instructions for making bags, tea cosies, cushions, home decor, aprons, accessories and jewellery, using the needlecrafts of embroidery, knitting, crochet, patchwork and appliqué work. Knitting the projects together are Rosemary's commentaries, reminiscences, amusing anecdotes and historical tidbits.

Each project is plucked straight from, or inspired by, Rosemary's collection of hundreds of magazines dated between 1900 and 1960 that once linked women living isolated lives throughout the English-speaking world. Now, their reproduced covers, illustrations, quotes, fashion advice, agony-aunt columns and ads (one for Gordon's extols "The Gin That Has Medicinal Properties") add humour, context, colour and charm to her book.

Thanks to Jane Ussher's photographs, you can almost reach out and touch Rosemary's childhood petticoats, her collections of antique evening bags, vintage food tins and 1930s rayon crêpes, her antique needlecraft books, her threads, yarns, buttons and felt flowers spilling from drawers and boxes.

Among all this eye candy and over cups of tea in her Wellington home, Rosemary tells me she detested sewing as a child. Her mother and her boarding school tried – and failed – to teach her basic needlework skills. "I hated embroidery and my tragic sampler, proof of my loathing, appears in the book. I never expected to do any sewing as an adult."

But as a stay-at-home mother with cabin fever (her children are now 32, 28 and 19), Rosemary started "junk-shopping" at thrift stores. She found herself bringing home more and more textile handicrafts and materials such as embroideries, felt work and fabrics, adding them to "The Stash".

"I've always collected the improvised," she says, smoothing out a patchwork quilt made from blazer scraps. "Things like this give me far more pleasure than a pretty store-bought quilt because they come from an honest impulse: they're invented, not colour-coordinated. I like their randomness, their possibilities."

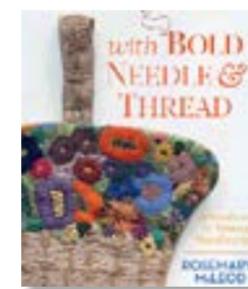
During a time when no one was paying attention to domestic crafts, Rosemary saved countless items from the tip and oblivion. She viewed them as social history, a link to the lives of women generations before her, including her mother (who died when Rosemary was 22) and great-grandmother. "This book is about rediscovering those roots, celebrating that past. And I don't think doing this kind of thing demeans women or says we're not intelligent. Historically, it was a creative outlet for women who had limited opportunities outside the home but were very resourceful."

After decades when women full of feminist ideals rejected the domestic world and its tasks/accomplishments, the 21st century has seen a revaluing of craft. Tapping into and strengthening that craft revival, *With Bold Needle & Thread* is "an invitation to stitch". Summaries of materials, methods, tips, options and hints will help beginners, and some book and craft shops will also sell Rosemary's starter kits with entry-level projects requiring knowledge of only one or two basic stitches. "All you need to be able to do is thread a needle, make a knot in the end and preferably sew a straight line. I taught myself and, if I can, anyone can."

"For me, it was a natural progression from collecting to making. I'd seen so much home-made stitching that I was reassured it wasn't all expert work, so I dyed some second-hand baby clothes and embellished them with colourful cross-stitching. You handle beautiful things and think, 'Other human hands made these – maybe my human hands could'." ■



**THIS PAGE** (clockwise from top left) The Beautiful Brown Woman Bag was inspired by Rosemary's collection of South African felt bags. An early 20th century collar box holding 19th century lace caps sits on a beaded Victorian teapot mat. Rosemary reckons red pom-poms add a flirtatious touch to these woollen Lounge About Slippers. Rosemary's friend Marilyn Daly helped with some of the book projects, including this appliquéd cushion. Who knew white thread came in so many shades?



She segues into a story about her great-grandmother, who took and processed her own photographs. “When she died, my uncle buried her photographs and glass plates in a riverbed. And it didn’t occur to anyone in my family to keep her rag rug, because it was women’s stuff. These things weren’t valued.”

To make the point, Rosemary gleefully flips a Topsy-Turvy rag doll inside out to reveal another doll; one black, one white. “You can’t think the women who made these didn’t have skills – or fun.”