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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: With One Needle: How to Nålbind by Mervi Pasanen

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In the modern world currently, there is an interest in and desire to understand ancient craft technologies, along with learning the practical side of these skills. Nålbinding is a craft which has been taught and demonstrated for the last 50 years, mainly within heritage and re-enactment communities. The cultural and social history of this craft has survived as a narrative better in some countries than others. In some places it has completely disappeared, leaving only fragmented archaeological remains behind. With a limited collection of

archaeological examples surviving, each nålbinder or scholar comes up with their own way of assessing, learning and teaching this craft. In many cases it is this practical knowledge that is passed-down from archaeologists or fibre historians to a student; this then starts to create its own social application of the craft. Once that tutor has gone or the student moves on, nålbinding then can either evolve into an artistic craft form for the nålbinder, or frequently it slips back into the mists of time, until someone finds it again. Its teaching, understanding and research needs to be constantly investigated so that it can be understood for others. Nålbinding is also not just a fixed historical craft, it has the ability to evolve and adapt into the modern world too.



This book is a brave attempt by someone very clearly passionate about nålbinding and developing their own craft, but it is not recommended for beginners.

The individual cultural application of each nålbinding technique certainly needs more research; as does the different social and practical ways in which we teach and demonstrate this craft. There are many different resources available for nålbinding, many of which whether they are in book or digital form, attempt to bridge the gap between what is known historically and what the practical technique demonstrates. Most of the current books available, try to combine both these aspects and sadly miss the mark in explaining both clearly to a beginner. This is one of the main reasons why nålbinding is seen as a “complex” fibre craft, the technique tends to be confused and varied, however that need not necessarily be the

case.

There are many different cultural applications of nålbinding, using animal and plant fibres to create the required items. In this new book *With One Needle: How to Nålbind*, the author aims to introduce a beginner to the Finnish application and technique of nålbinding. Finland has some extremely well preserved examples of nålbound remains within the archaeological record and this book is written mainly from that perspective. This new book has been translated into English and is meant to be accessible enough to encourage readers to learn the ancient craft of nålbinding for the first time. It is from this perspective that this review has been written.

At first glance the book is very well presented, with high definition photography used to illustrate the textiles pictured throughout. The font is large and easy to read, making the reader feel quite comfortable within the first few pages. The nålbound items in the book have been crafted by the author and show the striking colour and finishes that can be achieved when you develop this craft. The preface is a pleasant introduction to the author and how they have learnt and developed their own skill from the re-enactment community in Finland and further afield.

The book states early on that it mostly focuses on the method and tradition of nålbinding from a Finnish perspective. There is a chapter briefly explaining the terminology and chronology of nålbinding in Finland, with an explanation of some key sites. The author shows recognition and understanding of the work undertaken by Krista Vajanto in her 2014 published article *Nålbinding in Prehistoric Burials – Reinterpreting Finnish 11th–14th-century AD Textile Fragment*. The author has recognised the three different visual groups of Finnish nålbound items based on Vajanto's work as well; monochromatic, embroidered and striped nålbinding. The author later uses these to frame her own tutorials. It is apparent that the author has clearly been influenced by the work of Egon Hansen's nålebinding notation (2014) which has provided one of the classification systems for assessing nålbound material. Early on it is also apparent that the author has closely aligned the nature of her own practice to the practical teaching techniques of Sunna-Mari Pihlajapiha.

As you move into what is meant to be the main practical part of the book, the explanations of the 'basic technique' are brief and not greatly explained. Key facts have been used to frame certain points, such as "nalbound fabric doesn't unravel" (p14). That is certainly true, but the author doesn't explain why the inter-locking loops create this finish and how natural materials, such as wool, lend to the benefit of such a technique. It would have been nice at this stage to have seen a case study breakdown in more depth of the various complexities of the Russian and Finnish stitches and how these are very different from other cultural examples of nålbinding. If this had been achieved, the reader could then follow the forms and complex developments of this type of nålbinding and understand how the Finnish examples are framed within the wider historical context.

It was pleasant to read about the cultural Finnish sayings and folklore that have stayed within modern Finnish culture regarding nålbinding. However, these are not referenced anywhere within this book, there are no sources or footnotes to point the reader to where to follow further reading; this is sadly one of this book's major short comings. What becomes apparent at this stage is that the author has fallen into the trap of other published works on this topic. The author cannot decide whether it is a practical tutorial book on nålbinding or a historical instructional book with reference material. A lot of the following pages are created based on the experiences of the author in heritage re-enactment and subsequent individual artistic application. From this point onwards it leaves it to the reader to pick apart the book, searching for relevant tutorials and applications. The guidance from the author stops in a cohesive way and the teaching technique starts to become confused. This combined with an erratic layout and lack of narrative and tutoring ability, sadly does not come across very well throughout the rest of the book. However, the author does highlight the importance of local traditional techniques and allude to the cultural variation and identity displayed in the Finnish nålbound remains.

When it comes to the chapters on practical demonstrations and tutorials, the recommendations are not suited for a beginner learning nålbinding. It is admirable that the author has illustrated the different starts; knots, mouse-ear, traditional start et cetera, that a reader may follow. However, this is where the practical confusion starts to appear and the lack of teaching experience is made visible. As already commented upon by the author at the beginning of the book, nålbinding can be said by some to be too difficult. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the nålbinder to show and demonstrate how to deconstruct the nålbinding technique down to its most basic element and then produce these for the student with clear guidance. Sadly this does not occur.

In the following chapters the author then continues to confuse the historical application of nålbinding, with the modern applications of nålbinding. The section on "Turning after the first row" demonstrates this confusion. The guidance given here is very much about how to take an ancient historical craft, such as nålbinding, and apply it in a modern craft setting; using the stitches available to create non-historical items. This is absolutely fine if the nålbinder explains the two different approaches; the author does not highlight this successfully. Both historical and modern applications are valid approaches to nålbinding, but they often get confused and misrepresented. It is important to distinguish between what is used to create the historical replicas or reconstructed nålbound items for interpretive purposes, and what is created with modern yarns, colours, forms and finishes; effectively creating a modern interpretation of an ancient craft. All nålbinders could do with being more mindful and transparent when teaching and displaying their work in this regard. The foundation of the craft needs to be understood and taught first, if a nålbinder is trying to teach a complete beginner.

The "advanced techniques", "traditional starts" and "round starts" in the book are all based off the historical application which is refreshing to see. However, the reader could have benefitted from being given a great deal more clarity by the author here. It is only at this stage, when we are halfway through the book, that the author gives an explanation of the stitches and notations used. As stated previously, this would have been better placed at the beginning of the book. The layout of the chapters in this book is a major aspect that makes it difficult for a beginner to learn from the author's style of teaching. Without a linear narrative and clear explanations, a beginner will easily get lost in the techniques and stitches demonstrated. After explaining the Finnish Stitches that are going to be covered and used in the tutorials, the author then jumps onto how to make a thumb for a mitten, followed by a tutorial on how to make socks with sporadic tips dotted throughout.

Then follows what can only be described as 'modern pattern templates'. These are not explained and are contrary to the historical origins of nålbinding. Historically, you would nålbind without a pattern to follow. You would be taught the stitch, the technique and then develop your skill to learn how to shape and manipulate the textile; this comes from a learnt

inherent skill, not a pattern. Creating modern patterns for nålbound items in this book represents a false idea to the reader, that nålbinding was traditionally done on a pattern, akin to modern knitting or crochet, it was not.

The next section then shows a breakdown of the three main types of nålbinding, as referenced earlier by Vajanto's work, including explanations and tutorials on how to make "striped" and "embroidered mittens". The stitches are historical, but the way the author has adapted the technique and presented it is a modern variation to the craft. This section of the book is the author talking you through how to make a nålbound item, as demonstrated in the photographs. All these tutorials are presented at the back of the book and give the reader guidance on how to make mittens, socks, hats, pouches and scarves. These are all based on a modern application by the author, who is using nålbinding to demonstrate and promote their designs. This approach is very akin to how modern knitting is demonstrated, by creating individual designs and patterns to promote your own skill.

Reaching the end of the book there is no last word from the author, the reader is left with the final tutorial on how to make a nålbound pouch and then the book just abruptly ends. There are no thanks to those that took part or helped to contribute and there are no sources or references for further material to access or follow up.

Overall, I would say that this book is well produced, but the audience has been misjudged and the narrative and teaching style of the author could be more helpful. This book would be more suitable as a reference book, for those who already nålbind and are curious to see how a heritage crafter is developing their own craft. The disjointed nature of the book will only further confuse a beginner, as the Russian and Finnish stitches are not the most user-friendly to teach, when you are first introducing someone to nålbinding. There are basic and simple looping techniques and other wider contemporary cultural variations that could have been used to illustrate the Finnish techniques better. This book is a brave attempt by someone very clearly passionate about nålbinding and developing their own craft, but it is not recommended for beginners.

Book information:

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🔖 Keywords [review](#)
[book](#)
[sewing](#)
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Further Reading

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