

*Victoria's fabric
exploration took
her across
the globe*



WEAVING

Across the World

*Michelle Rowley caught up with
author Victoria Finlay to hear about her
incredible adventure in search
of the stories behind our fabrics*



Image credit: Katia Marsh

Victoria Finlay

Victoria Finlay is the critically acclaimed author of *Colour – Travels Through the Paintbox* and the former Arts Editor of the *South China Morning Post*. She studied social anthropology and has travelled around the world in search of stories alongside her work in international development. She explores our relationship with cloth for her fifth book *Fabric: The Hidden History of the Material World*.

Following the death of her parents, Victoria Finlay spent five years travelling the globe in search of the stories behind the fabrics that have woven our world. Her resulting book *Fabric: The Hidden History of the Material World* dedicates each chapter to a different fabric, many familiar to us such as cotton, silk, linen and tweed and some less familiar. The book entwines Finlay's two journeys: one of grief and one of fabric exploration across countries such as India, China, Scotland, Guatemala and Norway to name just a few.

Where in the world are you today? Having read your book, I realise that you could be absolutely anywhere!

Ha! I'm actually just in my office at home, looking at my lovely new typewriter.

You have led such an exciting life, travelling to so many interesting places. Before travelling to Papua New Guinea, to learn about barkcloth from the Maisin tribe, were you nervous?

I did feel nervous, especially knowing that someone who had recently travelled there had taken 15 bodyguards! I also knew I would have no access to medicine, but it was very exciting as well. I had total confidence in my wonderful tour guide Florence and I was very lucky to stay in Papua New Guinea for two weeks.

Was beating barkcloth with the Maisin tribe the most surreal experience you had for the book?

It was extraordinary! However, I think the most surreal moment happened on a bus in Guatemala when I could suddenly smell the cream my mother used to use. I got talking to a woman on the bus who turned out to be an expert in textiles. We got on so well that I ended up changing my plans and travelling to the same destination as her, which was where I found 89-year-old Dominga hand-spinning cotton. She had been spinning cotton since she was small and had 11 children, eight of whom were girls that she had all taught how to spin. She agreed to teach me. I was absolutely hopeless at it!

You tried a range of fabric production techniques in the different countries you visited, such as beating bark cloth, hand lace making and weaving. Was hand spinning cotton in Guatemala the most difficult?

I just couldn't do it! One hand has to draw out the cotton whilst the other twists it.



Victoria's patchwork sample
Credit: Mary Ann Pettway



Mary Ann Pettway demonstrates the Gee's Bend quilting techniques

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When I saw how much sewing had helped these women, I was astonished
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Dominga made it look easy and like one single movement but for me it just kept breaking.

Had you ever worked with fabrics before embarking on this journey?

Not much, my mother hadn't had anyone in her life to teach her crafts and so she

couldn't teach me. We were taught at school, but I was nervous and too focused on having to share the result in front of the class. When I was working as journalist in Hong Kong, I was sent to cover a story about a women's community sewing group. I confess that I wasn't particularly excited by the idea. However, when I saw how much sewing had helped these women, I was astonished. It completely changed my perception.

Which fabric experience researching the book did you enjoy the most?

Although I really loved beating barkcloth in Papua New Guinea, my favourite experience was learning to patchwork in Alabama with Mary Ann Pettway, the manager of the Gee's Bend Quilting Collective. Gee's Bend was one of the poorest places in America during the Great Depression. To keep warm, the women made quilts from any fabric they



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A Gee's Bend quilt

could find. As a result, Gee's Bend became famous for its astonishing quilts.

Mary Ann doesn't usually teach. Hearing how my mother hadn't been able to teach me sewing skills, she recognised that she had been lucky to be taught from an early age so she decided she would help me. I had hoped that she would but had no expectations. She taught me how to sew the nine-patch, court-house steps and prison bars squares. I felt such a sense of a calmness whilst working on the samplers.

Do you have a favourite fabric out of all the ones you researched?

Ooh that's a tough question! For its story, barkcloth. I love the passion of the Maisin tribe for its fabric and more importantly that this fabric

enables the people to protect their forest.

I didn't expect to love tweed as much as I did. I love the fact that it is all made in people's homes and is so cared for. It is amazing to see how it all comes together in quite narrow rooms. The result is like an incredible optical illusion; a beautiful fabric that appears one colour from a distance but up close you discover is a woven recipe of many separately dyed colours. I have always been fascinated by colour, so I think it's the colour of a fabric that appeals to me.

There is an extensive list of museums you visited at the back of the book. Did you visit them all in the five years that the book took?

Yes! There were only one or two that I

had been to prior to that time. I wanted to include them because they had been helpful in my research and to let readers know of more great places where you can learn about textiles.

How did you organise your time writing the book?

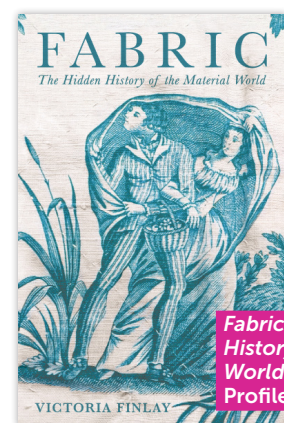
I went on my first trip in 2016 following my father's death. My work with an environmental charity took me to some of the places and I would see what textiles I could explore in that area. I wove the trips in to my life as much as possible. Luckily, I had completed all the trips by the beginning of March 2020, just before we went in to the lockdown. I had to cut the book down considerably, so I did a lot of editing during the lockdown. There was so much more I could have included, but it was already rather large!

Is there a fabric you would have liked to have explored but couldn't?

I would have loved to explore some of the beautiful fabrics in Africa, especially Ghana and Nigeria, but unfortunately the cost of the airfare couldn't be justified when I already had too much for the book.

I really enjoyed the chapter Imagined Fabrics, which explores the positive and negative aspects of a range of synthetic fabrics. More and more people who sew as a hobby are questioning which fabrics are more sustainable. Did you find an answer?

It is complicated and is perhaps more a question of how to use any fabric well. I think we need to put more energy in to what we do with the end of a fabric's life. Using that lovely creativity that we put in at the beginning of a project, we need to find creative solutions for its afterlife. There is good news, amongst the bad, on textile's future. It will be very interesting to see what fabrics might be created going forwards.



Fabric: The Hidden History of the Material World, published by Profile Books £25