

GETTING TO KNOW ... RONDÉL FERRETT



Fabric, old movies, costume design and people in shopping centres are all rich fodder for Rondél Ferrett's imagination and her irrepressible urge to create dolls with real personality.

Story by Renee Aiken

It was when the group she stitches with – the Circle of Friends – was trying out one of her new designs that Rondél first realised the true extent of her doll addiction. “They were working on Esther,

who was all dressed up for afternoon tea, and one of the ladies asked if she needed a hat. Without thinking I replied, ‘well that depends on whether she is going to tea or serving it!’ With that they all turned

around and started laughing because I was talking about it as if she was real,” she chuckles. From that moment on she has proudly acknowledged that she’s hooked.

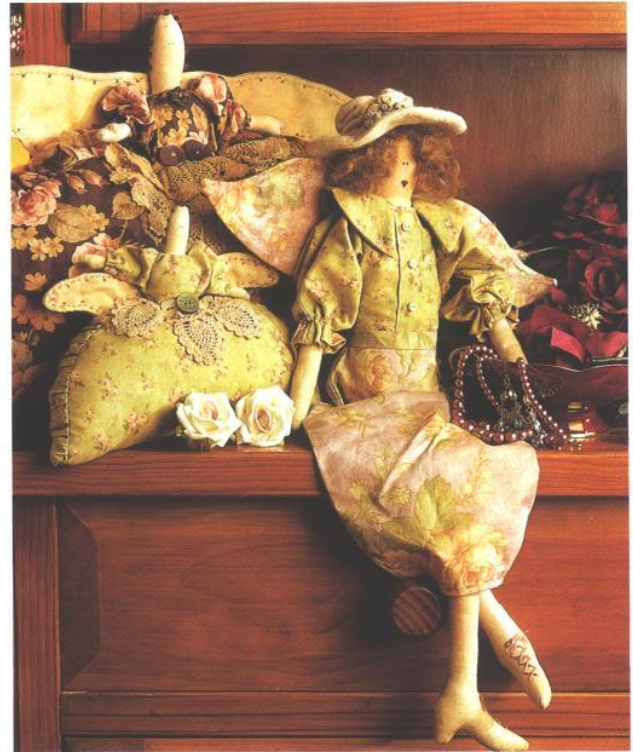
While she jokes that her habit of thinking of her dolls as actual people is a ‘sickness’, it is precisely this personal connection that gives her work an irresistible charm and has made her business, Gathering Stitches, so popular. Each doll she creates has a definite character, which is reflected in its beautifully constructed outfit. Rondél is a self-confessed ‘fabric girl’ and the initial inspiration for her designs often starts with the material ‘talking’ to her. However, she is constantly finding new influences everywhere, including old movies, costume designs and even people in the street. “I often see something, like a style of hat, and start thinking how it would work on a doll,” she explains. “Or I might notice a lady in the shopping centre and make up a bit of a story about her – where she is going, what she likes to do. That’s when my kids think I’m weird,” she adds laughing.

It’s clear that being able to express her rich imagination through craft is a very important aspect of Rondél’s life. She freely admits to suffering withdrawal





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symptoms if she spends too much time away from her sewing room. And while she only started doll making 10 years ago, her passion was ignited at a young age thanks to her very talented mother and grandmother. They exposed her to craft as an everyday part of life and she is still inspired by their attitudes to their work. "My grandmother lived through the Depression era and was of the 'if you can't fix it, feature it' way of thinking. She was marvellous at making something gorgeous out of nothing," she reflects. She has vivid memories of the first time she was allowed to use a sewing machine – after pestering her mother constantly – when she was eight. "I think it was some kind of doily thing. I remember it was pink and white and Mum sat close by the whole time keeping an eye on me – it was fantastic," she recalls with a smile. But while growing up surrounded by such creativity certainly fostered her talents, she is also thankful to her high school needlework teacher who provided extra

motivation to push her natural ability further. "She would set very high standards yet we always met them because of her advice and support," she explains of the woman who probably doesn't know the profound impact she had on her student's life. Perhaps this positive experience is one of the reasons Rondél enjoys being able to pass on her knowledge by teaching at Primitive Patches in Mentone, Victoria. "I would like to do more," she tells. "I think there is something amazing about women coming together and creating things – I get a real thrill from it."

After high school Rondél studied dressmaking and design and spent many years creating everything from wedding dresses to children's clothes, but surprisingly it was when she joined a group to make items for her kids' school fete that she first discovered her doll-making flair. In fact, her distinctive designs, which were often based around a theme or hobby, became such a highlight

of the fair that customers started placing orders for personalised dolls as special gifts for loved ones. They also attracted the attention of the owner of a children's wear store in Tasmania who began to stock some of them. She admits that the early days were a bit like working on a production line and her sewing room was slowly overrun with featureless bodies. These peculiar items became a favourite with her two young sons, who put them to good use as crash-test dummies! But it was thanks to her friend Helen Granleese from Patches of Heaven that she was 'pushed' into making patterns for her charming characters. While Rondél was writing up her first pattern she happened to visit Primitive Patches with the doll. Annmarie, the owner, recognised her potential and asked her to teach a class using her designs. Yet perhaps it is the Circle of Friends who have been the most influential in actually getting her work out to the wider public – after all, they test-drive every pattern and make suggestions



on how things should look. "Some of us have been stitching together for 12 years and they are never shy in telling me if there's something more I need to do. They offer me all the encouragement I need," she beams.

From this early start, Gathering Stitches has grown so much that Rondel sometimes has to pinch herself to see if it is all real. Recently, with the help of her

husband Greg, she's been focusing on the business side of things. "Greg is great because if I did it my way I'd probably end up with a room full of dolls and no-one knowing anything about them," she laughs. The move has proved a great success and they've noticed people from all over the world are discovering her designs. "It's strange to consider that someone in Brazil is getting pleasure from

making something that I thought up over here," she reflects. "Strange, but absolutely wonderful!"

For more information on Rondel's gorgeous characters contact Gathering Stitches at 5 Allnutt Court, Cheltenham Vic 3192; phone (03) 9515 3322; email rondel@gatheringstitches.com.au or visit www.gatheringstitches.com.au ✨