



BETWEEN THE CRUEL CRITICISM OF TV's *Fashion Police*, the ongoing phenomenon that is "street style" and those countless BuzzFeed slideshows that preach "10 Ways to Be Stylish," it's impossible not to question the state of your wardrobe. Examining this dynamic is a new book called *Women in Clothes*—a collection of essays, transcripts, photography and illustrations that, on first glance, resembles a university text. What began as an email exchange about women's fashion between Toronto author Sheila Heti and Manhattan-based writer Heidi Julavits quickly morphed into an extensive list of survey questions when Canadian-born, Manhattan-based illustrator and author Leanne Shapton was enlisted for her creative smarts and network of contacts in the international literary scene. Soon, the survey (e.g., "Is there an item of clothing that you once owned, but no longer own, and still think about or wish you had back?") earned enough nods in print and social media to attract 639 contributors from a range of backgrounds and interests. Not all writer types, not all famous.

"When we started doing this, it was a personal project," says Julavits on a conference call from Maine, where she summers. Her two co-editors listen in from their respective locations (it's 9 a.m. EST, so two of them are still in pyjamas; the other is wearing a vintage sundress). "But we wanted to broaden our scope and talk to as many different people as possible, so that any woman who puts clothes on her body would be interested in it. We all felt this book could have gone on for years and years."

SURVEY SAYS

A new book asking women about their wardrobes sheds light on our emotional attachment to clothing.
By JACQUELYN FRANCIS

At more than 500 pages, *Women in Clothes* is packed with information, and is not your typical "how-to." Instead, we see a project about clothing stains, photos of fashion collections, "Ring Cycle" (a montage of 15 women's hands and the rings they wear to work) and contributor Grace Denton reflecting significantly on a college-dormitory insult about her clothing choice that still stings years after the fact. But there is a healthy dose of unexpected amusement too. In one excerpt, Julavits opens a conversation with smell scientist Leslie Vosshall by asking, "Is smell a language?" before tasking Vosshall with sniffing and surmising the personalities attached to 21 coats left at a New York restaurant coat check. And in response to the survey question "What's the first 'investment' item you bought?" Young Kim, former partner of late punk icon Malcolm McLaren (as she repeats over and over), says fashion should be bought because one loves and looks wonderful in it, before describing the term "investment" as "cynical and »

depressing.” With such a range of submissions and formats, it raises the question: Why stick with something as traditional as a book instead of, say, an interactive website or travelling exhibition?

“A book is a private experience,” says Heti from Toronto. “That’s still valuable in this world. It’s fun to play with [this] form of literature and see what a book *can* be and have it be inspired by the way we read, the way we communicate, the way that we are online. This could never have happened before the age of the internet. We had 600 people fill out a survey because it was posted on Twitter and Facebook.”

Yet *Women in Clothes* rejects a lot of what we take for granted online. The body font is relatively small, forcing you to really lean in and concentrate, and there are few photos of clothes or faces. “We deliberately didn’t want that many images of women in the book because of how quickly we judge pictures of women, and how quickly we relate or don’t relate,” says Shapton from London, England.

“There are photo-heavy chapters, but enough time has passed that we look at them with more interest than we would a contemporary photograph,” she says, referencing the “Mothers As Others” chapters that feature archival photography of dozens of women taken before they had their children. The editors then had the daughters supply impressions of their mothers from that time period. It’s a sentimental section, but not overly so, and Shapton felt closely connected to it. “I was pregnant when we started the book. It was interesting looking at pictures of my mother before she had me. I almost didn’t recognize her, because she was somebody who existed in a different way.”

Apart from a few notable exceptions, don’t look for any fashion insiders to break down the runway trends here, and presumably not because Anna Wintour was too busy to file her survey responses. “When we approached people who work in fashion... I don’t want this to sound wrong, [but] their answers sounded a little bit *the same*,”

says Shapton, explaining that random, non-writer survey submissions were surprising because the answers were raw and honest.

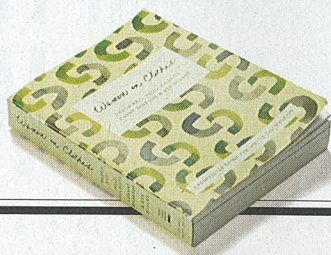
Not that this is an anti-fashion endeavour, says Julavits: “We’ve all read magazines; I just bought *Vogue* the other day. Nothing that we’re saying is good or bad. It is just fact.”

And when all the facts are laid out, as they are so extensively in *Women in Clothes*, there is no denying the fashion playing field does level off, and the judgement that can divide so many women is stripped from view. “The only way you could feel after reading this book is more secure and confident,” says Heti. “And that you have more in common with other women than you thought.” □

IF YOU HAD TO THROW OUT ALL YOUR CLOTHES BUT KEEP ONE THING, WHAT WOULD YOU KEEP?

WERE YOU EVER GIVEN A PRESENT OF CLOTHING OR JEWELLERY THAT ESPECIALLY TOUCHED YOU?

Sample survey questions from the book *Women in Clothes*



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