Wore Stories
An anthology surveys what women wear—and why
JENNA SAUERS

WOMEN IN CLOTHES EDITED BY SHEILA HETI, HEIDI JULAVITS, AND LEANNE SHAPTON NEW YORK: BLUE RIDER PRESS. 528 PAGES. $30.

I
n a memorable scene from Sheila Heti’s 2010 novel, How Should a Person Be?, the protagonist buys the same dress as her friend Margaux, which causes an argument via email: “after we looked at a thousand dresses for you—and the yellow dress being the first dress i was considering—i really was surprised when you said you were getting the dress after me. i thought it’s pretty standard that you don’t buy the dress your friend is buying.”

This seemingly mundane disagreement over a dress—and over a symbolic claim to originality in an area where women are so scrutinized—encapsulates much about power, boundaries, and the fault lines that run through female friendship. Similar unease over “stealing” a look resonates through the new anthology Women in Clothes, edited by Heti, Leanne Shapton, and Heidi Julavits. Shapton writes about the mixture of guilt and exhilaration she felt hunting down an Isabel Marant dress she coveted after seeing a woman wearing it, and another contributor, the Australian director Cath Le Couteur, talks about how in Sydney’s gay nightlife scene, in the ‘80s, copying someone’s style was grounds for a fight: “The other guy said, ‘Bitch, it looks different,’ and Nic said, ‘Take it off right now! It’s mine! It matters!’

How, and to what extent, clothing matters is the question at the heart of this book, which began in 2012, when Heti asked Julavits’s advice, for “a little piece about women’s fashion.” She wanted to know whether Julavits had any “dressing or clothing rules,” or a philosophy of clothes; Heti was trying, she writes, “to figure out how to dress.” This apparently simple query spawned an email exchange, which Shapton joined. Soon, Julavits suggested they “write a women’s fashion book that isn’t stupid like all women’s fashion books.” That is, in 528 pages, Women in Clothes.

The three started the project with a list of goals, including getting “regular women” to contribute stories about fashion by so-called experts, and asking specific questions. The result is an anthology with the feel of a qualitative study—the editors even designed a long, detailed survey about women’s fashion, we are never far from the notion of history (“I dress in what I think of as my mom’s clothes,” one contributor says) and Shapton’s illustrations are used brilliantly throughout, including her watercolor of clothing-pattern pieces that fill the book’s white spaces.

Any book that attempts so many approaches to its subject is vulnerable to accusations that it lacks focus, but this volume is infinitely more interesting for attempting such a panoramic view. Among the standout essays are Amy Fusselman’s “The Mom Coat,” a hilarious take on how the writer’s wardrobe change with motherhood (“I dress in what I think of as my mom clothes, for my mom job”), and Christien Clifford’s “Mother, Daughter, Mustache,” on gender and aging. A great piece by sociologist professor Gilda Haber on the history of sumptuary laws makes one wish that more of the book had explored the historical dimensions of how and why we wear what we do. The British writer Juliet Jacques offers an eloquent account of how her relationship to clothing changed during her gender transition. Less successful are a lengthy transcript of a clothing swap, a bit of banal commentary on high heels and feminism, and a piece offering what she hujah that seems like a missed opportunity.

The editors also aim to address the economy of clothing and the production chain that links the woman who buys a shirt at H&M for $12.90 to the teenage garment worker who made it. Too often, discussions of clothes ignore the labor conditions and trade policies that have caused clothing prices in the US to fall to historic lows over the past century. Here, Julia Wallace interviews Cambodian garment workers (garment production constitutes 80 percent of the country’s exports) about the clothes they wear. There is also chilling eyewitness testimony from Bangladeshi garment worker Reba Sikder, a survivor of the Rana Plaza factory-complex collapse, which killed at least 1,129 people, making it the garment industry’s deadliest disaster to date.

How applicable is all of this to Heti’s original question about getting dressed? The book certainly made me think about my own relationship to and ideas about clothes—what I collect, how I consume, which fights and dates and interviews that pair of flats or these clothes are associated with—and about all the attention that is paid to how women dress. Most affecting, for me, were the roundups of answers to single survey questions, both for the specific population of clothes and for the shared engagement. I liked learning that Eileen Myles resents the way men can let themselves go, because she wants the same “freedom to be a pig” that men have, and that Audrey Gelman and I both took our blouses into our rights. Clothes are vehicles for memory, objects of economic trade, and products of history. The anthology succeeds as an investigation into this often seen, but rarely looked at, element of our material culture.

What Women in Clothes decidedly does not do is make a direct argument for the importance of its subject matter. This choice is to the editors’ credit. When discussing clothing, we are never far from the notion that it is frivolous, or even vam, for a woman to care about what she wears. Women in Clothes does not offer any overt rebuttal to the argument that caring about clothes is shallow and superficial; the text itself aptly demonstrates the shallowness and superficiality of that point of view. As these 639 women show, our clothes have a lot to say. □

Jenna Sauers is a writer and an MFA candidate at the University of Iowa.