

Wore Stories

An anthology surveys what women wear—and why

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

In 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 it too," writes an angry Margaux. "i think 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 mattered."

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, avoiding pronouncements on 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 that they sent to hundreds of women, including Roxane Gay, Sasha Grey, and Lena Dunham. On page after page of photographs arrayed in grids, they also documented the clothing and accessory "collections" of various contributors (one has thirty pairs of black cotton underwear). Interview subjects range from Kiran Desai to Kim Gordon. The book is refreshingly free of koans from Coco Chanel, jaunty illustrations of stiletto heels, and all the other clichés of fashion books. This is because it is not really about fashion, or even style. It is, as the title indicates, about the broader and more multifarious category of clothes—as they are lived in, worn, evaluated, traded, and discarded.

That the editors are so interested in clothes will not be a surprise to anyone familiar with their work. The way we dress is "hard to overlook . . . as a way we speak to the world," says Heti in the anthology's introduction—

and as the yellow-dress incident indicates, it's a form of communication Heti is sensitive to in her fiction. Julavits's last novel, *The Vanishers*, is full of clothing—socks and Dr. Scholl's sandals, cowl necklines, dowdy cardigans—used to signal characters' personalities and preoccupations. (In 2012, Julavits told *The Rumpus* that she had considered collaborating with a designer friend on a collection inspired by the outfits in that novel, an idea I, for one, hope she hasn't shelved.) Clothes carry significance in Shapton's

alone in finding going through a closet sufficiently poignant to provoke tears or in still smarting over the first time you were made to feel ashamed because of something you wore, you will find in this book a sense of common cause.

The book's visual content is similarly wide-ranging, with photographs that tend in style toward documentary frankness: There are pictures of contributors' mothers before they had children, and images of the hands of fifteen female *New York Times*

transcript of a clothing swap, a bit of banal commentary on high heels and feminism, and an essay about the hijab that seems like a missed opportunity.

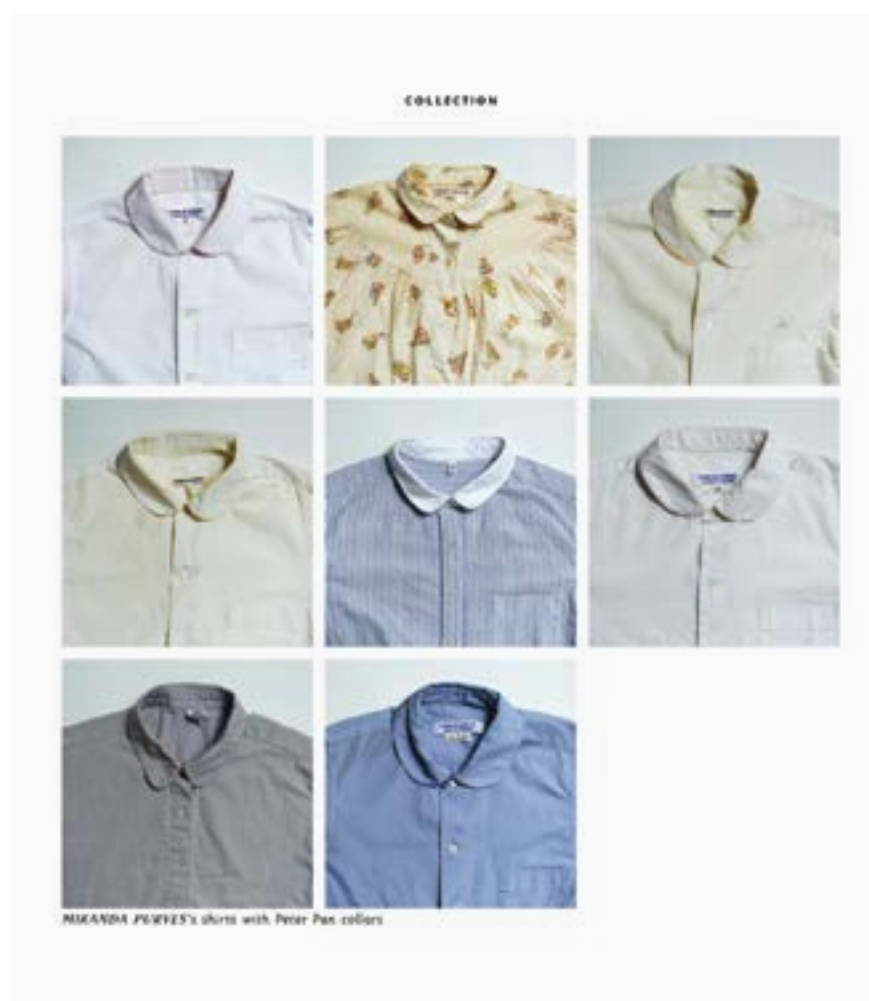
The editors also aim to address the economy of clothing and the production chain that links the woman who buys a shirt at H&M for \$12.90 to the teenage garment worker who made it. Too often, discussions of clothes ignore the labor conditions and trade policies that have caused clothing prices in the 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.

Women in Clothes features numerous contributors who happen not to be young, conventionally attractive white women—a demographic overrepresented in mainstream fashion media to the exclusion of almost everyone else. No other book on this topic would include an interview with an animal-control officer about her tactical-uniform pants; a resident of the Yukon, in northern Canada, explaining what she looks for in a fleece; and a fashion-magazine editor talking in a no-bullshit way about the fashion establishment and the "delirium of desire" it exists to stoke.

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 those black pants are associated with—and about all the attention that is paid to how woman dress. Most affecting, for me, were the roundups of answers to single survey questions, both for the specificity of the unique responses and for their 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 tuck our blouses into our tights. 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 vain, 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 can have a lot to say. □

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One of the book's fifty-four "collections," which visually document the wardrobes of the contributors.

work, too—particularly in her 2006 graphic novel, *Was She Pretty?*, about women's visions of their boyfriends' ex-girlfriends. These imaginings are often made specific by clothes: You may not know your lover's ex, but you can't unknow the fact that she wore "small white shorts" year-round.

The many pieces anthologized in *Women in Clothes* operate in dozens of different narrative modes and media, and the book's cover proudly trumpets its 639 contributors. Perhaps inevitably, it seems a little overstuffed: There are fifty-four collections, twenty-eight interviews, eighteen projects, seventeen essays, eleven annotated diagrams of contributors' bodies, eight as-told-to pieces, seven surveys reproduced in their entirety, and four poems. The best pieces are startlingly original and funny: Julavits goes with the neuroscientist Leslie Vosshall, who specializes in olfaction, to try to identify scents and their wearers by sniffing items in a restaurant coat check. In the series "Compliment," the editors transcribe the fraught act of complimenting a stranger. If you have ever wondered whether your relationship with clothes is uniquely complicated, if you've ever felt

staffers who were interviewed about their rings. There is also powerful new collage work by the Dutch artist Ruth Van Beek, and Shapton's illustrations are used brilliantly throughout, including her watercolors 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 changed with motherhood ("I dress in what I think of as my mom clothes, for my mom job"), and Christen Clifford's "Mother, Daughter, Mustache," on gender and aging. A great piece by sociology 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