FASHION

Why clothes will always reveal our naked truths

'It's impossible to say nothing about your personality through your attire', says the authors of a new fashion book

It's a Sunday afternoon in late September, and Leanne Shapton and Heidi Julavits, the authors (together with Sheila Heti) of Women in Clothes, are sitting in Shapton's apartment in Greenwich Village, New York, holding true to their preference to under-gather than over-dress. Jeans, T-shirts and casual tops - nothing showy - are the order of the day's work.

Women in Clothes is their survey of the fashion preferences of 639 women, of different ages, social classes and around the world. While a small percentage of women profess not to care about clothes, says Julavits, "Most of us live in a world where we must wear clothes in order to leave the house and interact with other humans. So we wanted to look at what guides our decisions."

Celebrities and artists (including Kim Gordon, Molly Ringwald and Tavi Gevinson) contributed to this idiosyncratic book.

Shapton and Julavits argue that women in the public eye are judged harshly for what they wear. "In the case of politicians," Shapton says, "it's fair that so many have a uniform, that, while potentially desired, allows them to not worry about it and get on with their jobs. I also love that the Duchess of Cambridge wears the same, relatively inexpensive things over and over again, and that a royal being seen in the same outfit two or three times these days can be admired and respected."

Yet fashion is often seen as trivial. "It depends on how meaningful it is to a person," says Shapton. "Many men and women don’t want to be seen to care about clothes even when they do." The question then is, "If you don't care, why do you not care, and how does that inform your choice of clothes?"

It is "impossible", says Julavits, to say nothing about your personality through your attire. "I used to frequent nude hot springs in northern California, and it was always so shocking to see people who’d only known clothesless suddenly in their clothes, and how much more naked they seemed when dressed."

The range of testimonies in Women in Clothes is impressive. The transgender journalist Julianne Jacques speaks about how she learned to dress like a woman at 26, and there is an interview with Reba Siddle, a Bangladeshi factory worker who survived the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in which 1,100 garment workers died. Girl's creator Lena Dunham says that with clothes she tries to become a character - "schoolgirl, new lesbian, lapsed nun, Miami mistress". Shapton agrees that getting dressed can be a performance: "It might be a whispered one-liner, or a charade."

And clothes make the woman, every bit as they do the man.

"Clothing is a wonderful object to use as a prism through which one’s personality can fall," adds co-author Sheila Heti in a later email exchange, "simply because it’s an object everyone has to come in contact with. Everyone gets dressed." - Tim Teeman

Women in Clothes is out on Thursday (Penguin, £24). To buy a copy for £19.20, including UK p&p, call 0530 333 681 or visit guardianbookshop.co.uk

ON MY RADAR

Yotam Ottolenghi's cultural highlights

Israeli-born chef Yotam Ottolenghi studied for an MA in philosophy and literature before training at Le Cordon Bleu in London. In 2002, he teamed up with Noam Bar and Sami Tamimi to open the first Ottolenghi deli in Notting Hill, followed by further branches in Islington, Kensington and Belgravia and the restaurant, NOPI.

Ottolenghi has presented several TV series and seen his vegetarian

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| NT Live: A Streetcar Named Desire | Granary Square, King's Cross, London | Homeland: Miniaturised has a brilliant acting, great suspense - it's what you want from TV. With House of Cards, I watched the whole | Springfields: Sky's new restaurant in Somerset House, which opens in October. Sky's been away from the food scene | Northern cities I've lived in the UK for many years but haven't explored the north as much as I want to. Sheffield, Liverpool and Edinburgh are all | The Baking Bible by Rose Levy Beranbaum | The Baking Bible tell us this October, and my kitchen very soon after that. Rose Levy Beranbaum sets the

Heidi Julavits (left) and Leanne Shapton, photographed for the Observer New Review by Linus Sundahl-Djert. |