EDITOR'S LETTER

September is the most exciting month in fashion. It does something new and different from every other seasonal drop—it presages the opportunity of a new outfit for a wedding or a party or a holiday, but actually to take a step forward on your own personal style odyssey. You might be thinking new coat, new shoes, but you could also be thinking of that hyper-polished modern woman that Nicolas Ghesquière sent down the runway at Louis Vuitton. Or the easy, poppy Miu Miu girl that had Rihanna running for a coloured fur and a pair of hold-ups. You might want to dish your conservative taste for something crazy and cool from Anya Hindmarch, or perhaps you fancy one of those sharp uptown girls that sauntered so powerfully for Michael Kors? Pick your fancy, and interpret it just for you. Because what all designers, brands, magazines, shops and stylists are trying to do is find that brilliant piece that will lift your wardrobe and turn you into a more fabulous version of yourself. Just like the writer who feels trapped by her hideous “mum coat” and dreams of Comme des Garçons (p61), or Mrs Prada (p46), who asks why it is OK for everyone to dream of a beautiful house or vase of flowers, but not a dress. In these pages I hope you find what you are looking for, something that will transform you—that will make you feel utterly invincible, for whatever life throws at you.

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SIX STRANGERS, EACH MODELLING THE OTHERS' FAVOURITE OUTFIT – BUT CAN YOU GUESS WHOSE IS WHOSE? SAM BAKER INTRODUCES A NEW BOOK THAT AIMS TO UNPICK THE COMPLICATED ISSUES OF HOW WOMEN CHOOSE THEIR CLOTHES AND WHAT THOSE CHOICES MEAN FOR US IN EVERYDAY LIFE.
Heidi Julisar, plus 639 women who participated in their survey. Hiltz has produced an entirely different sort of fashion book: one about fashion, but about our relationship with clothes. If you think about the contents of your wardrobe, you’ll notice, this offers some respite. For a start, everyone is guilty of repeating old clothes. From Julisar’s endless fleshtone tees, to Caroline Issa, Tank magazine’s fashion director, and her extensive collection of white shirts, to the Vogue contributing editor Bay Garnett’s leopard-print tops. Garnett isn’t alone in her leopard-print addiction. “Anything leopard print is generally a good buy,” says the fashion blogger Alexandria Stidham, “or so I told myself when I invested in a pair of Tabitha Simmons boots.” They’re in good company. Lena Dunham’s first “investment” buy was a Marc by Marc Jacobs leopard-print trench. “I still cherish it,” she says. “It makes an appearance about twice a year and it still gives me the same. I’m here for the cocktail party feeling it did when I was 17.”

What gives the investment purchase its mystical power? With me, it’s bags. It started with a Mulberry Satchel—back when you could still score a Mulberry for less than £300. For my last two-book deal I upgraded to a Chanel 2.55. For the American journalist Emily Gould, it was also a handbag: a “large, pale pink Marc by Marc Jacobs,” bought with her first tax rebate. “In 2004, Marc anything was the ultimate status symbol for a specific kind of NYC woman, the kind I aspired to be.”

Everyone’s fashion grail is different. Mine in the perfect grey sweater I wear. For Dunham it’s “the denim jacket that makes me feel like someone else’s high-school crush.” The Canadian writer Gillian Welsh has a whole list: “Perfect lace-high black boots, a trench coat, a bathing suit. Some things have been on the list for more than a decade.” The New York-based writer Sadee Weiss harbours an obsession with the “magic” dress. There have been three so far, but it was the first, and cheapest, a black synthetic number from Urban Outfitters, that turned her into “the college woman I wanted to be.”

FOR THE THIRTY-SIX PROJECT, six strangers, including Molly Ringwald, above, were photographed in the others’ favourite outfits.

The ideiosyncratic power of clothes has nothing to do with the individual pieces and everything to do with how they make you feel. One woman’s miracle dress is another woman’s piece of shit. At Molly Ringwald at demostrates, here, because something looks great on someone else doesn’t mean it will look great on you. Overwhelmingly, women admit to checking out other women for inspiration, sometimes accosting complete strangers to find out where they got their dresses/bags/shoes.

Style—what everyone cares about. According to the London-based journalist Ana Kimball, it’s a gift thing. “At college, a friend and I used to sit on the steps commenting on every girl who walked by. The girls considered the best dressed were not the girls who wore the clothes we coveted most, but the ones who had a consistent style. Style is about knowing who you like and why you like, more than anything else.”

Apart from the truly fashionable, most women adopt a sort of uniform, whether it’s a sticker patch—like the ones wear by Lida Liu, a managing director at Cir Private Bank: “A power suit gives you extra confidence and makes you feel good”—or creation, like the fashion journalist Stacey Duguid, who has been working the “art-school look” since she was 16: she’s now 40: “Grunge is my natural state of being. I’ve never been able to pull off the polished look. I hope the absence of tailoring and high heels refmons my ambition for a creative existence in which I am no longer on a daily fashion parade.”

For Hiltz and her co-authors, though, it’s not about “rules or guidelines,” but belief. “What’s been a revelation is seeing that other women have the same problems, the same anxieties. Knowing that you share everything you’re feeling with other women makes the art of getting dressed less communal,” she says. “This book is one huge admission,” Stidham adds. “Everyone is intimidated or scared or nervous about what they are wearing, and feeling judged by—or judicial of—others. Admitting that is such a relief.”

Women in Clothes by Stella Hiltz, Heidi Julisar and Leanne Shapton (Portobello Books, £22) is available from September 25. To buy it for £15 (no p&p), visit theguardian.com/shop/shopaholix, or call 0845 291 2135