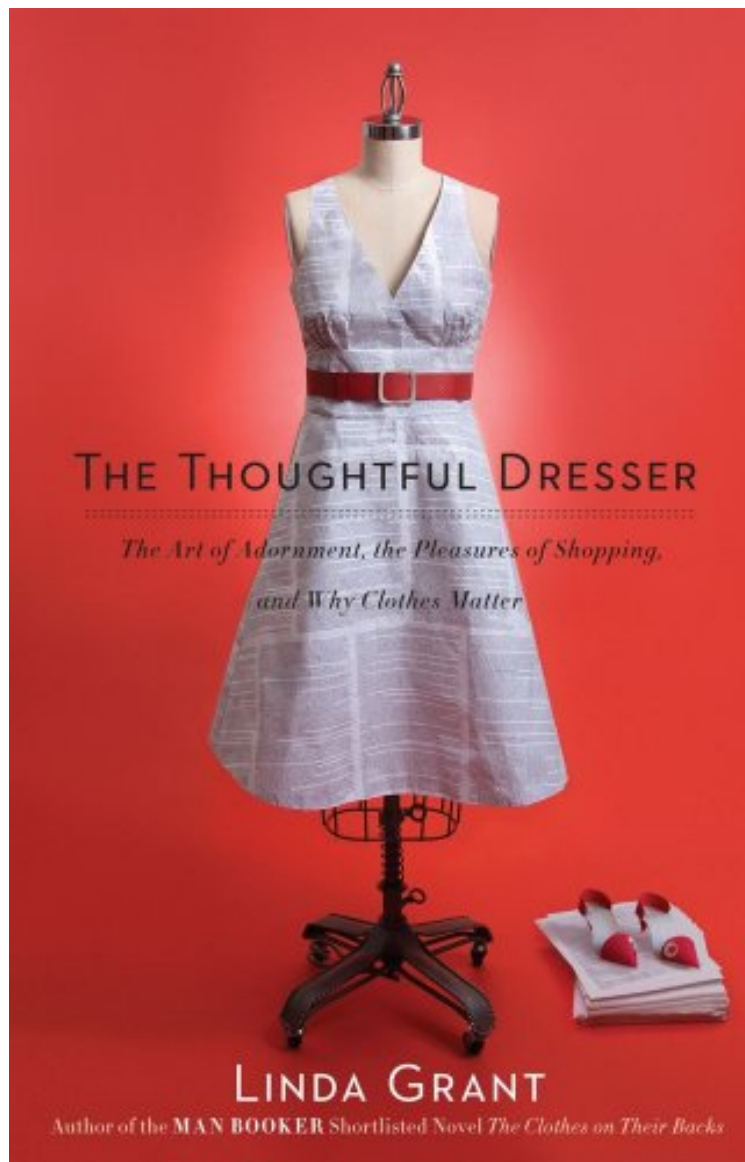


(Mobile book) The Thoughtful Dresser: The Art of Adornment, the Pleasures of Shopping, and Why Clothes Matter

## The Thoughtful Dresser: The Art of Adornment, the Pleasures of Shopping, and Why Clothes Matter

Linda Grant

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**Linda Grant : The Thoughtful Dresser: The Art of Adornment, the Pleasures of Shopping, and Why Clothes Matter** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Thoughtful Dresser: The Art of Adornment, the Pleasures of Shopping, and Why Clothes Matter:

33 of 33 people found the following review helpful. Fashion and NourishmentBy MaeThe Thoughtful Dresser by Linda Grant explores both the dark side and the light side of clothing and fashion. In many ways she makes the point that the attraction of fashion and beautiful clothing is not rational, but is based on pleasure. She says: "... we do not choose to eat, say, a chocolate eclair, with the aim of fulfilling our daily calorie quota." Grant compares the pleasures of food and clothing, and various attacks on those who enjoy them: "We fall victim to a cake because it is delicious. Interestingly the angry rages against unnecessary clothes are seldom replicated in moral campaigns against flambeed cherries or steak au poivre. No one pickets restaurants or rails against the conspicuous waste of unnecessary calories in a three-course meal.... It is pointless fashion, not pointless cuisine, that gets the moralists's goat, and you would have to be pretty dim not to sniff the stench of misogyny that surrounds their outrage." (p. 99)Do you think you have no interest in clothing and fashion? Linda Grant will show you that there is much more involved than you might guess. All people wear clothes almost every moment of their lives, and make some type of choices of what those clothes are. Clothes, she demonstrates, are never without meaning. She describes how the victims of some of the twentieth century's most horrifying outrages managed their pain by enjoying the beauty of well-made clothing: we can't have depths, she points out, without surfaces. One subject of the book is a woman named Catherine Hill, who survived Auschwitz and became a leader in bringing European high-level fashion to Canada. The depths and surfaces of this woman provide insights into what Grant is saying about the meaning of clothing.I enjoyed the descriptions of the author's mother, who loved shopping and good clothing. It contrasted so much with my memories of my own mother, who hated shopping and would gladly wear hand-me-downs if she could avoid going to a department store to buy something new. Grant's interest in owning designer clothing and shoes contrasts enormously to my approach. I sit here wearing L.L.Bean jeans, sweater, and turtleneck; Birkenstocks, and cheap socks from Target. I never wear high heels and never have. She wouldn't approve of me at all. But I approve of her: she offers a view of what makes so many people what they are.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A thoughtful discussion about clothesBy Inna TysoeThis is one of those books I kept meaning to read but stuff just kept getting in the way. Dont get me wrong; at 210 pages, this isnt a long book. But it is a packed book. This is a book about clothes but, in an important way, that is only part of its theme. The bigger theme is about us. Clothes, Linda Grant argues, are about how we present ourselves to the world and clothes are also and at the same time about pleasure. This, as Linda Grant points out, a relatively new phenomenon. Or, as she puts it, Until the thirties, the working class were used to having only two sets of clothing, one for the weekday, worn literally day in and day out (including underwear), and Sunday best. Even the middle classes had fewer suits and dresses than we do today. But that changed. And part of that change was driven by immigrants. Immigrants (like Linda Grants grandparents) did not belong to a caste but instinctively saw that clothes could be the ticket to a better life. Or, as Linda Grant remembers her Grandfather teaching, The only thing worse than being skint is looking as if youre skint.So clothes are clearly part of how we present ourselves to the world. But they are also pleasure. There is true pleasure in finding that perfect clothing. Ultimately you will find a chocolate brown coat. And in the years to come, photographed on a cold day in early February beneath the Eiffel Tower you will say I remember that coat. It took me a week to find it but it was perfect. Ill never have another as nice. Thats only a part of the joy of shopping and wearing the right clothes.Conversely, genuinely not caring about what you wear is a sign pf genuine trauma. OrLinda Grant puts it better: The only person I have ever come across who genuinely appeared to have no interest at all in how she appeared to others was a woman whose jacket hung loose off her shoulders as a result of weeks of not eating properly or sleeping. Her son had been killed.So clothes are many things at the same time and this little book describes at least some of them. And it is beautifully and thoughtfully written to boot. I highly recommend it.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. The Thoughtful DresserBy dolores3bLinda Grant's book is a wonderful trip about clothing our bodies. The title really says it all. If you enjoy shopping and wearing clothes, have a "shoe thing" or some other fixation adorning your body, you'll love this book. I was a model in the 60's and saw the inception of the mini skirt, lived through the classic clothes, the trendy clothes, the Pucci's, the Chanel's(my forever fave), the Rudi Gernreich, Halston, John Kloss, the Kelly bag,...the list is endless. What fun!The memories that pop up are wonderful. My older sisters had the classic type of clothes, cashmere sweater sets, pearls. Stockings with seams, garter belts. I myself has a "poodle skirt" with lots of crinolines underneath. The fuller, the better.If you're a fashionista, this will give you some history so you get a feel for the evolution of fashion. What a trip!I will be passing this book on to my granddaughter who was born into "fashionista-dom." She is 12 and has been interested in fashion since she could talk. There exists a great possibility that her career will be a fashion designer so this book is a necessity for her.

You cant have depths without surfaces, says Linda Grant in her lively and provocative new book, The thoughtful Dresser, a thinking womans guide to what we wear. For centuries, an interest in clothes has been dismissed as the trivial pursuit of vain, empty-headed women. Yet, clothes matter, whether you are interested in fashion or not, because how we choose to dress defines who we are. How we look and what we wear tells a story. Some stories are simple, like the teenager trying to fit in, or the woman turning fifty renouncing invisibility. Some are profound, like that of the immigrant who arrives in a new country and works to blend in by changing the way she dresses, or of the woman

whose hat saved her life in Nazi Germany. *The Thoughtful Dresser* celebrates the pleasure of adornment and is an elegant meditation on our relationship with what we wear and the significance of clothes as the most intimate but also public expressions of our identity.

About the Author Linda Grant is a novelist and journalist. She won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2000 and the Lettre Ulysses Prize for the Art of Reportage in 2006. Her most recent novel, *The Clothes on Their Backs*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. She writes for *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, and *Vogue*. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. *The Thoughtful Dresser* Dress has never been at all a straightforward business: so much subterranean interest and complex feeling attaches to it. As a topic, it is popular because it is dangerous it has a flowery head but deep roots in the passions. On the subject of dress almost no one, for one or another reason, feels truly indifferent: if their own clothes do not concern them, somebody else's do. ELIZABETH BOWEN IN WHICH A WOMAN BUYS A PAIR OF SHOES TWELVE YEARS AGO I saw a red high-heeled shoe from an earlier era. Glorious, scarlet, insouciant, it blazed away amid the rubber soles and strong cotton shoelaces as if to say, Take me dancing! At night, when I cannot get to sleep, I sometimes distract myself by inventing its imaginary owner. I see her waking one morning in a foreign city, and as she raises the blinds on a spring day, the sun striking the copper rooftops, she realizes that she must go out this very moment and buy a pair of red shoes. A wide-awake girl in a white nightgown parting the shutters on a Paris day, drinking a cup of coffee, lighting a cigarette, thoughtfully smoking it before she quickly eats a roll, puts on her lipstick, and leaves the house. Or I wonder, instead, if she is somewhat oldersay, thirty-eight in a gray wool coat and lines descending each side of her mouth, a small ruddy birthmark on the side of her right cheek, which she fruitlessly tries to cover up by curling her hair in waves below her ears, but the wind always catches it and exposes the strawberry stain. She is walking down a Prague street, a shopping basket over her arm, to the market to buy carrots, leeks, mackerel, and passes by chance a shoe shop, and there are the red shoes in the window by themselves on a little plinth raised above the lesser footwear, the price tag coyly peeking out from the base and she has such a powerful urge to go in and try them on that that is what she does. Even though her husband, who is a little mean, would go mad if he saw how much they cost. He married her because of his jealousy and her birthmark: he could not stand another man to look at his wife. The shoes fit. She empties the contents of her purse, counting out the coins and notes, and flees home with them tied up in a brown paper parcel, and hides them for several days at the back of the wardrobe. Not once does she think about her birthmark. Or is she the Imelda Marcos of Central Europe, a rich, bored woman with countless pairs of shoes, a widow with a younger lover whom she will never allow to see her without a full face of powder, rouge, and lipstick? Or I think of a humble shopgirl or secretary who saved her wages for weeks circling past the shop, always fearing that by the time she had the money to pay for the shoes they would be gone. I have tried to imagine the transaction in the shop in dozens of ways, and then the figure of a woman walking home (or driving, or taking a bus, a tram, a taxi), but whatever her station in life, her age, her figure, and her marital situation, the one thing I can be sure of is what she felt: that pleasurable frisson of excitement and delight when a woman makes a new purchase in the clothing department, and particularly an item as nonutilitarian as a pair of red high-heeled shoes. Whatever her identity, I am certain she would have loved those shoes, or they would not have ended up where they did. She would have left them at home at the start of the journey if she could not stand in them. The red high-heeled shoe exists. You can see it for yourself if you travel to Poland, drive a couple of hours west from Krakow, and visit the museum which is what remains of the main camp at Auschwitz (not Auschwitz-Birkenau, an extension, which is a couple of miles away, the site of the Final Solution against the Jews). Auschwitz I was the administrative center of the death camp. It is a popular excursion for tourists and Polish schoolchildren who are taken there by their teachers to learn about history. I don't know if they do or not. Behind one of the glass-fronted display cases lies a great mountain of footwear, found by the liberating army in a part of the camp known as Kanada, in January 1945. The goods collected from the deportees, when they arrived by train, were placed there to be sorted through and distributed to the civilian population of Germany. The pile of shoes is designed to be symbolic, representing the footwear of twenty-five thousand individuals from one day's activity at the camp, at the height of the gassings. So someone arrived at Auschwitz wearing, or carrying in her luggage, red high-heeled shoes, and this shoe is all that is left of her. When I visited Auschwitz, I was transfixed by the shoe, for it reminded me that the victims were once people so lighthearted that they went into a shop and bought red high-heeled footwear, the least sensible kind of shoe you can wear. They were human, fallibly human, and like us; they took pleasure and delight in the trivial joys of fashion. This anonymous, murdered woman, who died before I was born, would surely have bought her shoes in the same spirit that I bought mine. Apart from underwear, more fragile and temporal, shoes are the most intimate garments we wear. They are imprinted with the shape of our bodies. Looking at the shoes in the artfully arranged pile at Auschwitz, I saw not a monument, but fashion. The fashion in the late thirties for red high-heeled shoes. So you have genocide, and you have fashion, and genocide could not be more awful and serious and fashion could not be more superficial. Yet the woman who bought the shoes was not only a statistic of the Final Solution. Once upon a time, she liked to shop for stylish footwear. Whenever I have bought expensive, painful, unnecessary shoes, I have thought about her, the now anonymous woman who arrived at the camp wearing the shoe (and its partner) or carrying it in her

luggage. She was not anonymous then. She had a name, a life. Freedom, in its way, was the right to buy expensive luxuries, to own nice things. Fashion exists, whatever you think about it. Its everywhere, even in the gruesome relics of an extermination camp. You cant have depths without surfaces. Its impossible. And sometimes surfaces are all we have to go by. In the case of the shoe in the camp, thats it, theres nothing elsenot whether she was a good mother or a dutiful daughter or a medical student or a keen reader or a skilled chess player. The shoe is all there is, and it has its own eloquent language and says a great deal. When, several months ago, I started to write about the red shoe in the pile at Auschwitz, I had a doubt about its authenticity. It was known by architectural historians that the displays at what is now the museum had been the product of tinkering by postwar Polish communist ideology, designed to illustrate the great antifascist struggle. The camp you enter as a visitor in 2009 is not the same camp that was liberated by the Soviet troops in January 1945. A lot of things have been moved about (to create a cafeteria, toilets, and gift shop), and it was always possible that the red shoe had been bought at a shop in Krakw sometime in the sixties and added by the museums curators to create an effect. A friend suggested that I ask the expert, Robert Jan van Pelt, who had written the definitive study of Auschwitz and its satellite camps, a book I had read several years earlier, before my own visit to Poland. Extremely nervous, I e-mailed him in Toronto, tentatively explaining that I wanted to check whether the red shoe was what it was purported to be and not a postwar fake. Expecting a dusty answer. How dare I reduce and trivialize the greatest crime of the twentieth century to a thesis on stylish footwear! But almost at once I received a reply. Yes, he said, the shoe was indeed kosher, so to speak. But his wife, Miriam Greenbaum, had an additional question. Was I that Linda Grant who wrote sometimes about fashion, and if I was, would I like to meet a woman who had survived Auschwitz to become the great doyenne of Canadian style, the retailer who had introduced to a conservative female market such designers as Versace, Armani, Ferre, and Missoni? Indeed had survived because of her own vanity, out of a young girls desire to, as she says, look pretty? And because she knew how to take one piece of clothing and turn it into another? I traveled to Toronto to meet Catherine Hill, a woman who understood fashion and who understood darkness. For many days I sat with her in her apartment while she, with great courage, revisited places in the past so painful to be forced to remember, but always shared with me her stupendous insight into fashion and the great designers she knows, throwing a great searchlight on the questions I had been thinking about all those years. What fashion is, its significance, and why clothes matterwhat happens when even clothes have been taken away from you. For as Catherine Hill revealed to me, it is in the pleasure that we take in clothes that we are at our most elementally human. In clothes the story of the human race begins. In my own life, thank God, there has been no such suffering, only the usual disappointments and sadnesses we can all expect. Nothing truly terrible has ever happened to me. When I look back I can detect the various periods through what I wore. I see myself at fourteen, wearing hideous clothes because I am both fashionable enough and conformist enough to have to have what everyone else is wearing whether it suits me or not. At nineteen, Im a hippie, in maxidresses and a curtain of long hair, parted in the middle. At twenty-two, I exclusively wear clothes which are now called vintage but were then just secondhand or even old1930s crepe de chine evening gowns, puff-sleeved blouses from the war. I bought them at Kensington Antique Market in London and scorned the browns, oranges, and huge collars of the era. At twenty-seven, a feminist, Im in dungarees. In my early thirties, I have, briefly, a real job and a suit. In my forties, I gain weight and wear far too much black. In my fifties, I have rediscovered color and am starting to buy designer labels. This potted history is a time line of how I appeared to others and how I felt about myself. For as I had been brought up to believe, clothes matter. They matter for many reasons: because as you look, so will you be judged. Anyone arriving at a job interview wearing torn jeans and flip-flops should have learned that lesson when they received their letter of rejection. But clothes are also about pleasure, as Catherine Hill so deeply understood from the word go. One day last summer, at the moment of waking, I knew that I had to go out at once and buy new shoes. Shoes which fulfilled a function apart from walking. I wanted high-heeled shoes. Ridiculous, sexy, I dont care how much they cost, I have to have them shoes. It is my habit always to trust the thoughts that flood my mind as I rise up out of sleep. The closer you are to the dream state, the more likely you are to receive the correct messages. The unconscious knows what its doing and what its talking about. If it tells you to go out and buy high-heeled shoes you cant walk in, there has to be a reason. I never pay any attention to those deceptive lightning flashes of brilliance from the lurid world of tossing-and-turning insomnia. They are worry thoughts, unlikely to enrich your existence. As it happened, I had a hairdressers appointment that morning. When it was over, I walked quickly down the street, full of the excitement and apprehension of the shopper who knows she is going to make a significant purchase. I was anxious because shoe shopping is no great pleasure for me, not compared with dresses and bags. I have inherited from my Eastern European immigrant ancestors wide feet, thick ankles, and heavy calves, legs developed in the womb to later hold up childbearing hips and bread-kneading arms. They are not my best feature, and no amount of exercise will ever fix the problem. A woman is born with good legs; if you dont have them, you cant get them however long you spend doing Pilates. There is no cure for dimpled knees. Growing up, finally, is about understanding that we are limited by our fate. There are unfulfillable dreams. So shoe buying is always for me work, an ordeal. I go into the shop and see a pair of shoes I like and ask for them in my size, and of course they do not have them, or if they do, they dont quite fit, or the heels are so high I cant stand up without wobbling. After working my way down all the shoe shops of the street with no luck, at last I came to a department

store, which, like all large shops, feels to me when I enter as if I am pulling a building-sized fur coat around my shoulders, embracing and encompassing. A willowy Lithuanian salesgirl approached me and, appraising my terrible legs, silently handed me a shoe. She gazed in sorrow at my horrible ankles. Some time later, I descended the escalator carrying the shoe and its other half: high-heeled, black patent, peek-toe shoes by Dolce Gabbana, with an oversized faux buckle. They lay swaddled in individual black cotton bags wrapped in black tissue paper, nestled in a lacquered black box. For a whole day they sat like a pair of queens on a chair in my living room burnished reflective leather monarchs. I couldn't take my eyes off them. Did I even deserve to wear them? They were the most expensive shoes I had ever bought, but I was prepared to measure them by a different scale of value: the amount of pleasure which I anticipated they would bring me, knowing that they were the right shoes. Several days followed in which I waited for their first outing, when they would reveal their many secrets, such as whether they actually fit (or had I deluded myself in the shop, as I had done with a pair of Marni shoes the previous year, which cruelly cut into the instep after five minutes) and how long I could stand in them, given the height of those four-inch heels. I would learn that the absolute maximum amount of time I can stand in my DG shoes is about two hours, after which I have to sit down. I can only walk two or three blocks in them, but that is hardly the point, is it? I did not buy them to go walking, I have other shoes that fulfill that particular function. The DG shoes possess a spectacular pointlessness. Aesthetically, they rise, soar, above their mundane purpose of protecting the soles of the feet from dirt and stones. They give me the self-confidence to look tall people in the eye. The black patent gleams and winks. The high heel makes a sexy arc. My back is straighter, my clothes hang better. But above all I'm making a statement, and that statement is, Look at me. Because when you are my age, born in the 1950s, there is nothing that people would like better than to pretend you are invisible. And perhaps this is what my subconscious was trying to tell me when I woke that morning and knew that I had to have a pair of high-heeled, difficult, indeed impossible shoes. That the message was: Be seen. Be a presence in the world. For there is nothing worse than being a beige person, leading a beige sort of life. I mean, nothing worse for me. Others do not mind blending into the background; they crave anonymity. It suits them down to the ground. I have another point of view. My unconscious did not warn me that it was reckless to spend so much money on a pair of shoes with the coming recession. It did not advise me to pay off my debts. It did not lecture me about making do, and mending. Although I don't follow the financial pages of the newspapers, and mentally switch off when I hear the words Dow Jones or FTSE, my unconscious pays close attention. It must be listening to the news on the sly because it knew that if there were dark times to come, at least I would have one pair of beautiful shoes to cheer myself up. For if you are poor, it's always best to give the appearance of the opposite, to inspire confidence in oneself and others. If we were heading into the Great Depression, I wanted to arrive there well dressed. For a long time I have been trying to get to the bottom of this relationship we have with our clothes and why we love or hate them and what they mean to us and how we are linked to them in all their intimacy with our own bodies. I have been thinking these thoughts not as a fashion historian or as someone capable of making pronouncements about style, or who can explain how Alexander McQueen cuts a jacket or how to put together a look. I once went to the Paris collections and gazed in incomprehension at the Dior show, the models lifting their feet like hooves, galloping along the runway at top speed like racehorses, and had to wait until the next day to buy the International Herald Tribune and have it all explained to me by fashion journalist Suzy Menkes. The pleasure of the Dior show my own name in beautiful copperplate inscribed on a card actually glued to my numbered seat, the massed photographers with their lenses glittering under the lights, the intense beauty of the clothes all suffused me with profound wonder, like a man who has been looking at the stars in his background through a pair of binoculars and is suddenly allowed to gaze at the universe through the Hubble telescope. But I didn't actually understand anything. I am not a fashion writer, just an amateur enthusiast. I think about clothes and fashion in two ways. With the attention of the average person who simply wants to know what to wear next (no! not high-waisted pegged trousers!) and also with the interest of a writer who is curious about all our human dimensions, our comedy and our tragedy, our modest weaknesses and our occasional unexpected heroisms. Writing and thinking about clothes is generally relegated to the fashion pages of newspapers and magazines or to the scholarly works of the costume historians. You only have to say the words fashion pages and you can see the mouth form a contemptuous expression. Fashion is lightweight, trivial, and obsession with appearance the sign of a second-rate mind. So you might think that clothes are optional marginal and irrelevant to the lives of most of us, something we can easily live without, as I can pass through my entire existence untroubled by the desire to go rock climbing, watching films starring the late Bruce Lee, making my own jam, or playing whiz-bang kill-the-baddies games on a console. Or reading a book by Terry Pratchett. I consider it to be absolutely normal to care deeply about what we wear, and detest the puritan moralists who affect to despise fashion and those who love it. Who shrilly proclaim that only vain, foolish Barbie dolls, their brains addled by consumerism, would wear anything but sensible clothes made to last. As if appearances don't matter when, most of the time, they are all we have to go on. Or sometimes all that is left in the ruins of a life. So I no longer take seriously those derisory accusations leveled against those who are interested in clothes. You might as well level them at Proust, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot all of whom wrote about clothes and thought about clothes. I certainly won't take it from those men who judge and condemn women for the various failures of our appearance while simultaneously barking that only feeble shallow creatures such as women would pay any attention to

how they look. That is the great misogynist trick. There are no known societies who do not adorn the human body, whether with clothing, jewelry, or tattoos. It's a given about the human race. You can even read the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, as an exercise in decoding the styles prevalent among Bronze Age men and women, the use of gold ornamentation, and the frequent futile demands by the prophets of women to spend less time thinking about what they wore. The great experiments of Puritan dress, in seventeenth-century England and its export to the new American colony, and China's utilitarian Mao suit collapsed within years of their introduction. Doomed to failure. People like variety in their clothes. They want the latest fashions. This is to do with the twin desires for pleasure and for change. Clothes have been a constant in our lives since we lost our fur. We are born naked and stay naked for only a few moments until we are wrapped in our first clothes. In our small shoes, our little trousers and tops and shorts, until we grow out of them in leaps and bounds, and begin to develop our own ideas about what to wear we have always got something or other on. Though we may be in rags, no one is ever totally naked. Mother Teresa said she could manage with a bucket and two saris. But not without any saris. Looking out of the window, I don't see anyone who is undressed. There are only a few moments in the day when we are naked. We are naked in the shower and (but not even necessarily) when we have sex. The rest of the time we are always wearing something or other. I could spend all morning looking out of this very window, onto a main road and bus route, and examine what people have on, and speculate on why they have chosen those specific garments. Because they are on their way to work? Because they are delivering my mail? Because they are walking their children to school? Because they have a job interview or a hot date? Because they have absolutely no dress sense whatsoever? Clothes matter; we care about what we wear, and not caring is usually a sign of depression, madness, or the resignation to our imminent death. When the average woman looks in the mirror and sees herself more stylish, more beautiful, slimmer, her skin tone enhanced by the right colors, she can sometimes find it hard to live up to this person. The divide between the inside of your head with its private spaces and how you are seen by others can be intimidating. But not because you don't care. You care. We care about what we wear. I don't believe people who tell me that they are not interested in clothes and do not care what they look like. I think they mean that they are not interested in fashion, and believe that following the trends is a waste of time. They look for comfort and a reasonable fit in the clothes they buy, and that will do. But such an attitude lies on the surface. There is something shallow about asserting it doesn't matter how you appear to others, because in your heart of hearts you know it isn't true. People want to look the best they can. They may not know how to find the clothes that fulfill this, they may regard the effort of doing so as too daunting, they might be frightened of the necessary expense, they might argue that they have no occasion to wear such garments or that the clothes don't go with their personalities. But it is simply untrue to say that if you take the average woman of average height and weight and income and wave a magic wand, fairy-godmother-style, and put her in a dress that makes her look beautiful, or a pair of jeans that fit perfectly, she will react with indifference. When I watch the makeover shows (sometimes disagreeing profoundly with the outfits the guinea pigs have been given), I examine the expression on the faces of the women who have been transformed. I have seen shock and joy. I have seen women weep with happiness and freeze with fear or react angrily because they have been so altered beyond recognition that they no longer feel themselves to be themselves a stranger looks back at them in the mirror. It is in the eyes of a woman who has been made over that you can observe at its most elemental the power of clothes and their capacity to unleash our emotions. In the worst circumstances of your life, if you are left with nothing, the last nothing you own are your clothes. I have nothing, said a survivor of the Chinese earthquake in the ruins of what was once a place, a town, a whole society. I don't even have a rice bowl, just the clothes on my back. And the perennial boast of the successful immigrant is how they arrived in a country with nothing but the clothes on their back. Society will allow you to starve to death and not lift a finger, you can die for want of medical attention, but you will not be allowed to go about naked. Public nudity is only one up from the incest taboo. You will even be dressed for the grave. Clothes exist to keep us warm, to shield us from the wind, rain, and low-hanging branches. They protect us from various forms of social and religious shame: shame that we are exposing our sexual places, and embarrassment that we are revealing the existence of low-lying stomachs, man-boobs, flabby buttocks, and bingo wings those waving appendages to the upper arms that attach themselves to middle-aged women. Clothes are also adornment, they are pleasure, they signal our place in the world and send out highly important messages about ourselves. On the street, they are part of the aesthetic landscape. Trees, flowers, architecture, clothes. The purpose of this book is to advance no thesis, to break no ground in the history or theory of fashion, but rather to explore what is already known but rarely thought about by the ordinary mass of humanity who is interested in fashion and might, quite wrongly, feel a little ashamed of this passion. Might fear that they are not going to be taken seriously. That in announcing this preoccupation they will have confessed that women are not really fully grown up; unlike our male counterparts, who have mature and adult preoccupations without which the human race could not survive, such as moving balls from one end of a grassy field to the other with the aid of the human foot. There has never been a time in my life when I have not been interested in clothes. Even if I dressed badly or couldn't afford to buy what I wanted. I would still look at other people and think, I wish I could wear that, but you should not look to me for a lesson in style and taste. I don't have the eye, that immaculate eye which knows how to put together an outfit, which understands that this color goes with that, or identifies a combination which makes a fabulous clash. I am more interested in how

clothes and fashion make us feel. Yesterday I went to see a man about a dress. The man was a designer, and the dress was to be worn at one of the most important occasions of my life, the black-tie dinner at which the announcement would be made of the winner of the 2008 Man Booker Prize. For which I was shortlisted. The only woman. I took a sea green dress and high heels to show him. The dress and shoes lay down and died under his derision, as if I had invited Saul Bellow to join a book club in which we were planning to discuss Bridget Jones's Diary. Nothing was right about the dress, including the haphazard stitching, he pointed out cruelly. He gave me another dress. This is what happens to movie stars at the Oscars. I thought I knew what I liked and what suited me, but apparently I hadn't a clue, not when in the presence of one whose whole world this is. I am a total amateur, but that does not prevent me from taking an amateur's interest and recognizing that the people who bring us beautiful clothes are no less great artists than the people who bring us films and novels and paintings. They give us pleasure and transform us, even though we don't know how, and do not understand the concealed magic in the cut of a shoulder seam. How my own interest in clothes came about is deeply embedded in my family's history and my upbringing; it was as much a part of my world, growing up, as the flour that dusts the clothes of the miller's children. I owe my superior private education entirely to the average woman's desire to have her hair shampooed, set, cut, permed, and tinted. This was my father's business, and the money he made from it paid for me to attend a bluestocking school established in the nineteenth century to provide an academic education for the daughters of gentlemen. Though by the 1960s they let anyone in who had the cash and whose offspring could pass the entrance exam. I was a great reader; I did almost nothing else but lie stomach down on my bed, precociously attacking books not meant for my age range, but because of my ambition to work my way through what I believed to be important (*Crime and Punishment* at age thirteen). I moved on to writing sensitive teenage poetry, while all the while haunting the little shops on Mathew Street in Liverpool which sold A-line minidresses. Shops the size of parlors, some still with coal fires. Now utterly vanished, and over their bones have been built the WAGs Selfridges, Cricket. Or turning the pages of the Biba catalog, desperate for an orange feather boa. Or unevenly applying Mary Quant eye shadow, Max Factor pancake foundation, masklike, and Rimmel mascara. Or studying photographs of Jean Shrimpton wearing Young Jaeger. Or considering how much less I would have to eat to have legs with a space between the thighs, like Twiggy. Names clutter my recollection, shops and designers I never saw, only read about: Ossie Clark, Celia Birtwell, Alice Pollock, Jean Muir, Quorum, Mister Fish, John Stephen, Bus Stop, Hung on You, Granny Takes a Trip. When I was a teenager, in the sixties, not to be interested in clothes was farcical, for to follow fashion was to know that you were alive in that decade of revolution and newness. Clothes were more than what you put on; they were the means by which you situated yourself in the present tense, and perhaps more important, at the time, the way you could be guaranteed to annoy or even horrify your parents. For we understood that we were the generation that had been born young and would stay young forever; growing old, as one's parents did, was a bizarre, mysterious lifestyle choice they had once fatally made as if it had been their intention to have wrinkled skin and gray hair and spreading flesh, undiscussed illnesses and old-people's Crimplene skirts. The first clothes I chose for myself, the first real outfit, was a brown turtleneck sweater, a denim skirt, and round-toed green patent shoes. I wore this ensemble to lunchtime sessions of the Cavern Club a few months after the Beatles had stopped performing there. I concealed the garments carefully in my school satchel when I left home in the morning. Then I would make my dental appointment excuses to the school secretary, get on the bus, go into town, get changed in a public lavatory, and stand in the queue with other truant twelve-year-olds to enter a warehouse which smelled of damp, decay, and extremely cheap scent. I listened to bass guitars and echoey drums, the Hamburg Sound which came to us via the race records which black American merchant seamen sold in the pubs on the dock road and which were bought by the teenage John Lennon, who sat in his bedroom around the corner from my own, playing them over and over. The Mersey flowed hurriedly west, to join the Atlantic. You could smell and taste the salt air in the chords. Then back to school in the middle of the afternoon to droop over Ivanhoe. That was how it started. An expensive education paid for by the vanity of women, and a rebellious teenager who implicitly understood that clothes were the way she set herself up in opposition to her parents' wishes, the children of Eastern European immigrants. Content in the suburbs, they wanted nothing more than for their two girls to be dutiful daughters and wives. My mother was not an unfulfilled career woman. She liked shopping and gossiping with friends over coffee. Trailing around behind her through the shops, I received an apprenticeship in shopping and dressing. My mother knew what was in fashion and where you went to buy stylish clothes. On our annual visits to London there was always a visit to some little shop she had read about in a magazine where they sold handbags imported from Italy. She taught me that you had to keep your eyes and ears open, that you needed a strong visual sense and a good understanding of what did and did not suit you. I eagerly followed the instructions then rewrote them. In jeans whose hems I had deliberately frayed, barefoot, I looked like a beggar, a ragamuffin. It's all the rage, I raged. But my parents didn't understand a thing. I would move on to even more incomprehensible choices: the Laura Ashley milkmaid look, which involved getting the train to Shrewsbury to buy sprigged cotton dressed with piecrust collars and matching pinafores designed to make you look as if you were churning butter in a late-nineteenth-century Welsh farmhouse. I wore that look for years on end until its feyness dropped out of style and was replaced by the hairy black Moroccan cloak I found in the Lanes in Brighton, the velvet embroidered Afghan dress with the little round mirrors that winked in the sunlight, and the round John Lennon glasses

with the pink-tinted lenses. Yet despite my parents utter dismay at what I wore, despite my mothers fruitless pleas for me to just take a look at Young Jaeger, where they had fawn treads put together with a crocodile skinny belt and a coffee-colored turtleneck sweater (tending, already, you see, toward beige), they had wittingly instilled in me an innate understanding of the importance of how you looked and dressed. For as every immigrant knows, with the opportunity for complete reinvention, without a past, a history, in a strange land, how you look is what matters. But all I had done was to evaluate what a girl of my age, in that period, should be wearing, and wore it. I wanted to be taken for what I was, an artistic bohemian who was as at home in the library as she was shopping in Carnaby Street. When I try to look back at my life, when I try intensely to remember, and to understand who I once was, I find myself thinking about what I wore. Because these outer forms were a means of expressing something about what I wanted to be. I see years in which I dressed not to attract attention because I was so absorbed by writing that I wanted to be in a neutral zone. I see years when clothes ceased to be any kind of pleasure because of the fruitless struggle to find anything to wear. I see years in which I was a spendthrift, buying, buying, buying. I could write my autobiography in clothes from birth to present. But I am not just interested in myself. Thinking about clothes, what we wear and what other people wear, allows us to travel through time and space, to penetrate the thoughts and feelings of those long dead, or whose lives seem so baffling that we can scarcely believe them to be the same species as ourselves. When we look at dummies in a costume museum on which have been fitted outfits carefully preserved from the eighteenth century, we can admire the lace, the beads, the embroidery, but seldom feel that this is the kind of dress we might wish to wear ourselves, though designers are always taking inspiration from the past, Vivienne Westwood decking us out in mini-crinis. Examining those bustles, whalebone corsets, hoopskirts, and ruffs, I don't see myself in a cloche hat, but I find myself thinking of the woman who once wore these garments, full of the passions I feel myself when it comes to trying on a new dress. The people of other centuries seem so different to us that I think we would scream and go mad if we were suddenly dropped from a great height into, say, Silver Street in sixteenth-century London, where Shakespeare lodged for a few years with a family of tire-makers makers of not wheel coverings but court headdresses. The stench of the streets, of the open sewers, would kill us. But through descriptive language we can make common cause with the past. For people have written and thought about clothes ever since we could write and think. The Old Testament begins its story with how we first got dressed, blaming, inevitably, the need for it on the duplicity of women, and later laying down numerous rules and regulations on what God wants us to wear and how we are constantly aggravating him with our sartorial transgressions. Descriptions of the heathen peoples that the Jews must not resemble indicate that in biblical times there was a prevailing fashion for what would, several thousand years later, be revived as punk, with Mohawks, earrings, and tattoos. In late October 2007, I started a little fashion blog. I had experienced the guilty pleasure, every morning, of logging on to my two favorite sites. Manolo the Shoeblogger, the extremely witty and intriguingly erudite website of an anonymous American whose tortured experiments with English syntax were a satire of both the Italian-born shoe designer Manolo Blahnik and the vacuous language of the fashion world. Manolo loves the shoes! he proclaimed. I took this Manolo, correctly, to be a persona (I would later enter an e-mail correspondence with its author in his nonfictional guise), but through his site, I started to awaken a hitherto dormant appreciation of what shoes can do for the personality, for the happiness of the moment, which led to the eventual purchase of my DG black patent four-inch heels. My other morning read was the Bag Snob, in fact two Chinese-American women of apparently lavish incomes, whom I initially believed to be fifty-something social X-rays, as Tom Wolfe puts it, Upper East Siders who sallied forth each morning to Bergdorf Goodman, followed by an extremely light lunch. It turned out one of them lived in a small town in Texas, the other in Boston, and they were old college friends now at home with young children, vicariously living through their handbag purchases, partly financed through their sites online advertising. Wow, they really knew their bags. Eventually, I would share and jointly consume two bottles of Veuve Clicquot with the Texan bag snob, in her suite at Claridges on a visit to London. I held, for a few exciting moments, her latest Chanel bag. On the Internet were thousands, probably millions, of women who were talking about clothes and about fashion. Some pored over photographs of celebrities, executing judgment on Paris Hiltons skirt and Victoria Beckhams shoes. Others scoured the shopping sites to put together whole outfits. Or they tried to give their readers the heads-up on the coming seasons trends. Or, sweetly, they put up photos taken in their bedrooms of themselves modeling their latest purchase, and like a magic eye, you could see into the homes of complete strangers, and watch them experiment with the shaky beginnings of an identity in formation. Eventually, I added a third site, that of the uncompromising Sartorialist, who simply took pictures of people on the street he considered to be particularly well dressed, and, usually without comment, allowed his readers to discuss what made their clothes work, or sometimes not. And so, after some thought, I began my own blog. I began it as a way of thinking aloud, about this book, which I had already planned to write. I put on it quotations I had found about clothes and fashion, items from the news that interested me, my own frustrating quest for a dress with sleeves, which fell below the knee. In time I acquired a partner, a sidekick, Harry Fenton, a friend with a sharp eye for middle-aged menswear and an almost perfect recall for the Mod styles of the mid- to late sixties. Over time, the readers of the blog became a small but quite devoted community, whose comments and discussion were always intelligent, thoughtful, and extremely funny. I solicited their help as I was going along, writing and thinking about this book. When I asked American readers to share their own recollections of fashion after 9/11,

they obliged with moving recollections of the days and weeks after those cataclysmic events, proving my thesis: that what we wear affects everything. So this book's modest intent is to liberate its readers from the doubts and uncertainties that beset them when they start thinking about clothes or, worse, talking about them, and someone pipes up that they should concern themselves with matters more significant, such as the fate of the planet. Or the war in Iraq. Or the collapse of the banks. We care about what we wear. If we don't we are fools. Only babies don't worry about what they look like, and only because no one has yet shown them a mirror.