

Judge This Book

One of the most typical lessons we are taught in our adolescence is, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” However, as we grow up and grow into our own personal styles, we actively send a message with every outfit we put on. Some of us are more intentional about it, of course. I find that I, myself, resonate with the more intentional crowd. That said, this book *wants* you to judge it by its cover (it is I, I’m the book). In fact, I believe that the better our understanding of how clothes tell a story, the more we manipulate what we portray and the more we want people to pay attention to it.

Let’s talk about color. Color is a one-dimensional concept. Each color we see is actually the only wavelength of light that is not absorbed. What we observe is the rejected light at its core. In our Western society, whether we consider ourselves involved in fashion, some other branch of the visual arts, or none of it at all, we all share similar associations for what different colors mean. It is interesting that on a scientific level, how we process the color we see is all about perception; on an abstract level, how we interpret the meaning of color is still all about perception. Not everyone knows how to *use* color to enhance the statement their outfit is meant to make. Everyone will have a subconscious *understanding* of what the colors you choose to wear mean. My childhood neighbor and best friend has a mom who moved here from Japan. My friend can understand Japanese when it is spoken to her; however, she can not respond in the language. In this analogy, her mom is an example of an intentional, aware dresser. She knows how to put words (clothes) together to make a point (send a message). My friend represents the fraction of society that, while she does not have this communication skill herself, she still understands the message being sent. If my analogy is hard to follow, let

me just make this point: we all see red as fiery and passionate, blue as cool and serene, yellow as vibrant and energized, orange as enthusiastic and warm, purple as power and dignity, and so on. These unspoken associations we all make are learned through the contexts we have in common, such as art, television, and advertising, and they shape our judgments of what people wear.

One of my favorite methods for manipulating the story my look tells is the subtle details I use when making styling decisions. My greatest styling epiphany struck me in my sophomore year of high school, and I have not changed my ways after this discovery—nor will I ever. I've always enjoyed classic staples. The little black dress, the perfect pair of jeans, you name it. Well, one piece that I could never get right was the button-up shirt (which is like a button-down, without little buttons to hold down the collar); they are comfortable, and a somehow casual yet elevated option. After years of frustration with button-up shirts, my desire for an airy, white linen beach shirt grew too great to suppress any longer. When the lucky day came that I saw a Charter Club shirt on sale in Macy's, my work had only just begun. I had that shirt for months before I finally figured it out. I started to believe something was wrong with me. I didn't know if it was my face, my body, or my height— all I knew was that it looked horrible on me. Tucked in looked so nerdy. Untucked looked sloppy and made my upper body disproportionate in comparison to my legs. The sleeves were long. The cuffs were just plain annoying. And the collar of the shirt, that stupid collar, made me look like a little boy. No way was I, a teenage girl, going out into the world looking like a little boy— the *last* message I was trying to send. The goal was really to front the illusion of composure and convince the world, and myself, that I had reached a level of maturity. One day, I

finally found it. Here is my go-to way of wearing a button-up shirt: First, unbutton the cuffs and roll them up twice. Then, unbutton the top two buttons. Let your chest breathe. Let the collar relax. Next, unbutton from the bottom of the shirt all the way up to the waist of your pants, however many buttons that may mean. Tuck the side of the shirt with buttons into your pants, then play around with it to loosen it up. Let it drape over your waistline. Leave the other side untucked. Perfection. A breezy, relaxed, not-so-awkward way to wear a shirt while simultaneously telling the world that you have a great work-to-life balance.

Let me take this opportunity to be transparent. I am a nineteen-year-old girl who is surrounded by people whose opinions she cares a lot about (friends, family, peers, professors, teammates, coaches, etc.). Half of the effort of getting ready in the morning comes from knowing that when I step out of my dorm, there is a one hundred percent chance I will see someone I know. The other half of my effort is knowing how much what I wear motivates me to get stuff done. Now, as I have already stated in the first paragraph, I resonate with the intentional dressers– a group who know how to manipulate clothing to get a point across and therefore *want* the world to judge them by their cover, which they have worked so very hard to put together. After considering this, you might wonder, “What about intentional dressers who don't care what others think?” I believe that even those who do not care what others think of their style or their story still would like to be judged by their cover. Seems a contradictory statement, I know. Simply put, I believe that sending the message that you don't care what other people think is still a comment that you want people to recognize when they see you.

And if so, this means that you want to be judged by your cover, even if the final judgment by other people is that you don't care what they think of you.

Something incredible about manipulating other people's perception of you with your clothes is that it really has nothing to do with fashion. I believe that when people think about clothes, fashion comes to mind, which ultimately evokes ideas of exclusivity and specificity. Something I did not realize until recently is that people are afraid of fashion. Now, I am not going to sit here and try to convince anyone afraid of the realm not to sweat it. However, I would like to share the good news that the absence of fashion does not have to mean the inability to speak through your clothes. All anyone needs is an understanding of what their closet has the potential to say. As we talked about in the second paragraph, using color as an example, we all have these shared associations and perceptions of what means what. What I am saying is that the task is easier than anyone could have hoped! The mere awareness— the conscious recognition of the possibilities for storytelling, is the only key. Once you can unlock that part of your brain that stores the files on all the unspoken symbols and meanings our society agrees on, you can actively use it toward your own manipulation tactics. Anyone who doesn't already know they have this ability really just needs a tap on the shoulder and a "Hey, did you know you could do this?"

People who have just now become aware of their power but are struggling to accept it may just need a slight attitude adjustment. The whole concept may seem abstract and might just need some time before it sinks in. For example, my talk about clothes sounded outlandish and vaguely laughable to my brother when he was still in

college. Now, my brother is twenty-five years old, living in a different city, and working his nine-to-five job. He is also a bachelor who goes out with his buddies from school on the weekends. His khaki shorts, Nike socks, and frat t-shirts were no longer going to cut it (not that they ever were cutting it). Once my brother came to that conclusion himself, he was ready to send a different message to the world. Before that, he had no idea he was even sending a message to the world. He used to get dressed because you have to wear clothes, and that is that. Now his closet is breathing with life and intention. He has polos for days now. I am talking corduroy, knit, patterned, buttoned, the list goes on. My point is that my brother is a real-life example of how great it was to accept and harness the ability to be intentional with the clothes he wears. He now gets dressed and asks the world to judge him to be approachable, intelligent, and trim.

We all have this exciting opportunity to reaffirm something about ourselves with each new outfit we put on. When we realize our power to manipulate other people's perceptions of us, we are likely to use it. And when we use our ability intentionally, we are asking for other people's judgment. Where there is intention, there is the longing for the acknowledgement of others; for their confirmation that our intentions were successful.