

# the reader's shelf

By Neal Wyatt

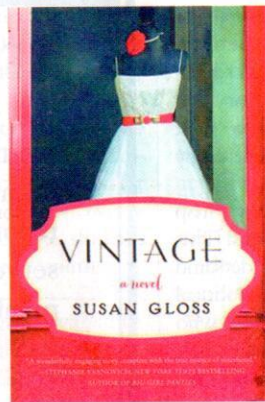
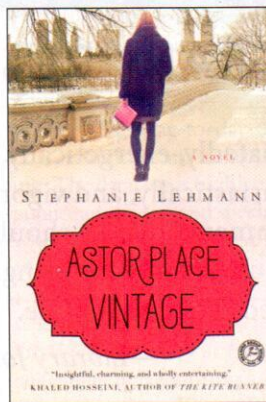
## Books by Design: Vintage Fashion in Fiction

Period Pucci dresses, Bobbie Brooks, and classic Coach pocketbooks are all the rage again, as new buyers discover the delights of 60s swing dresses, 50s shirtwaists, and the retro-cool shapes of 70s handbags. However, tag sales and thrift shops are not the only places to discover such vintage finds. Authors have unearthed the delights of dressing from the past as well.

Charming details of vintage dresses, hats, and bags form the backdrop of Isabel Wolff's romantic and melancholy **A VINTAGE AFFAIR** (Bantam, 2011. ISBN 9780553386622. pap. \$15; ebk. ISBN 9780553907704). Londoner Phoebe Swift is beset with guilt over the death of her best friend and her now defunct engagement. Finding purpose and solace in her job as the shop owner of Village Vintage, she soon meets Mrs. Bell, a client who will help her discover far more than pink silk cocoon coats and orange velvet tunics. Mrs. Bell has a painful past herself—one connected to the Holocaust—and a carefully tended child's blue wool jacket. Romance, history, and friendship deepen Wolff's leisurely paced story about making peace with what has come before.

Karen Nevitt's life is in tatters. Her husband has left her, she feels out of shape and unwanted, and all around her are examples of others with lives just as they should be. Karen finds new focus from an attic full of period dresses and petticoats and decides to open a vintage shop. Little does she know that among her finds are clues to an unsolved crime—one that the still living killer is determined to keep hidden. Barbara Michaels blends contemporary gothic with romantic suspense in **SHATTERED SILK** (HarperCollins, 2007. ISBN 9780060878221. pap. \$7.99; ebk. ISBN 9780061860409), delivering an engrossing and tense read supported by an engaging mix of courtship, mystery, and, of course, dresses.

**GLACIERS** (Tin House, 2012. ISBN 9781935639206. pap. \$10.95; ebk. ISBN 9781935639213), Alexis Smith's slim and lovely debut, features book conservator Isabel and her library colleague and Iraq war vet Spoke, who fuels in her a deep and awkward longing. Set in a single day,



In fashion: two women across time; three women seek solace

the story finds Isabel shopping for a dress in a vintage store and dreaming of that evening's party, which she hopes Spoke will attend. The chosen creamy cotton frock (printed with teal and sapphire umbrellas), the fabulous thrift store in which it was found, and the vintage postcards Isabel also collects—and spins stories about—inject layers of richness into the precisely structured tale. Sharp dialog and Isabel's imaginings and memories infuse the novel with grace and wit. However, it is Smith's lyrical and subtle prose that is the true find here.

Erin McKean's bright and slightly zany **THE SECRET LIVES OF DRESSES** (Forever: Grand Central, 2011. ISBN 9780446555722. pap. \$13.99; ebk. ISBN 9780446575157) charms with its sweet take on the vintage theme. Dora rushes home from college when she learns her beloved grandmother Mimi has been hospitalized. The prognosis is not good, and Dora, looking for connections and something to sustain her, becomes reacquainted with Mimi's vintage dress shop. She unexpectedly discovers a spare room her grandmother set up as a closet, filled with special finds. Crazy family complications, the attractions of a handsome local, and the lovely tradition Mimi had of giving away a specially composed story with each dress sold round out this gentle and cozy blend of women's fiction and romance.

Stylishly crafted and authentically set, Stephanie Lehmann's **ASTOR PLACE**

**VINTAGE** (S. & S. 2013. ISBN 9781451682052. pap. \$16; ebk. ISBN 9781451682069) fuses the lives of two New York City women across time. Character-centered yet story-rich, it begins with Amanda Rosenbloom, the owner of Astor Place Vintage. Interested in all things period, Amanda is attracted not just to retro clothing but also to the historical heart of the city itself. One day, as she sorts through a new set of potential buys, she locates a 1907 diary written by Olive West-

cott, a determined young lady who wants to be a department store buyer in the face of great opposition to women in the workplace. Lehmann allows both women's stories to be fully told and in so doing completely captures two eras supported with authentic details.

The intertwined stories of three women—Violet, the owner of Hourglass Vintage; April, a pregnant teenager; and Amithi, who has a cheating husband—converge in Susan Gloss's intimate and uplifting **VINTAGE** (Morrow, 2014. ISBN 9780062270320. \$25.99; ebk. ISBN 9780062270344). From old Frye boots to a 1950s straw handbag, each chapter begins with a brief description of a period item while Gloss explores the tribulations of the central characters structured around a threat to Violet's store and the ways April and Amithi both establish homes within its walls. Rich in female friendship and supported by a relaxed pace and tiny moments of revelation, Gloss's novel mines themes of second chances and new beginnings—eminently suitable for a story set within the fanciful world of secondhand treasures.

Neal Wyatt compiles LJ's online feature *The Reader's Shelf* and is the author of *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Nonfiction* (ALA Editions, 2007). She is a collection development and readers' advisory librarian from Virginia. Those interested in contributing to *The Reader's Shelf* should contact her directly at [Readers\\_Shelf@comcast.net](mailto:Readers_Shelf@comcast.net)