



## NOTES

In a place where people seek to uncover answers,  
a son envisions his mother wearing a garment  
designed to cover her.

---

Taste is one of a number of tools writers use to create character. Because we live in a world of material things, we constantly make aesthetic choices and observe others making them. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that we engage in a “stylization of life” and privilege “manner over matter.”<sup>1</sup> According to Bourdieu, the interpreting, deciphering gaze that we bring to works of art we also bring to everyday phenomena, like cooking or dressing. The impulse to interpret is so pervasive that we sometimes believe what people select (to wear, to eat, to make, to purchase) reveals their true nature. This is especially so when we only know someone in a superficial way—what other evidence do we have? When aesthetics is one of the few clues of identity available to us, it can convince us that it serves not as an index of character but as character itself. If pressed into service, taste cannot only describe people; it can define them. Surface can stand in for substance.

Authors of fiction and nonfiction alike have plumbed the aesthetics of their characters in an effort to realize them. In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert devotes many sentences to Emma’s wardrobe, and in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf itemizes in detail the sumptuous meal the scholars at Oxbridge enjoy. With its mission of discovery, of self as well as other, memoir offers a particularly fertile spot for the work of taste. In contemporary memoir, the unknown or inexplicable parent is a familiar figure; for example, Donald Antrim’s *The Afterlife* (2006) and A.M. Homes’s *The Mistress’s Daughter* (2007) both feature adult children trying to understand mysterious, troubling parents (albeit for different reasons). Antrim and Homes examine their parents’ aesthetic choices, their “stylizations of life,” in order to make these perplexing people more comprehensible. The I-characters in their books make taste an instrument of inquiry, and these inquiries yield surprising, compelling results. Because we tend to conceive of surface and substance, form and function, and style and content as being separate, focusing on aesthetics in memoir helps to establish a character for the reader, yet, at the same time, it suggests to her that not all has been revealed. By using taste, Antrim and Homes bring their mystifying characters only partially into view.

In *The Afterlife*, Donald Antrim observes that recently orphaned adult children “find (our)selves reappraising their mothers and fathers... in the hope that we will one day truly know our parents.”<sup>2</sup> Antrim’s late mother Louanne is whom he truly wants to know. In Part IV of the memoir, he gives a picture of how Louanne’s

alcoholism dominated their home during his youth. On regular evenings, Louanne would get drunk, verbally assault Antrim's father, and pass out. The father would then apologize to Antrim and his sister, to no avail. The volatility, anger, and sadness that Louanne's drinking inspired warped her relationship with Antrim, yet her passion, her beauty, and her eccentricity made her an irresistible puzzle for him to solve. Confronted with this baffling figure, he looks to her career as a fashion and clothing expert as a possible source of information. He is particularly interested in her fashion design, and he focuses on a kimono she made, an item that comes to symbolize her as a whole.

Antrim describes seeing Louanne's ghost one night in the New York Public Library. The reader doesn't know the original purpose of this library visit, and the reason for this omission is apparent enough; it is not relevant to the matter at hand. Yet, Antrim provides details about it, mentioning the marble staircase and the specific street entrance. The place must hold some sort of importance, even for non-New Yorkers. A library is a foundry; it promises information, fantasy, and answers to inquiries. It might also contain observable artifacts. These qualities make it a fitting location for Antrim's meditation on Louanne. Descending the library stairs, he imagines he sees her floating above him wearing the kimono. Elsewhere, he has told the reader that while her designs were not couture, they were too fanciful for everyday wear, and he characterizes her work as "arguably original and defiantly antisocial," an evaluation appropriate for Louanne herself.<sup>3</sup> In a place where people seek to uncover answers, a son envisions his mother wearing a garment designed to cover her. Antrim wants the reader to understand that the kimono is an item of consequence, worthy of respect and perhaps a little fear. He concludes the paragraph in which he has recounted witnessing the ghost with phrases that suggest the kimono's dazzling awfulness: "I see these things, and then I see the rest of the picture. I see what she is wearing. I see, for one dreadful moment, my mother's clothes."<sup>4</sup> His amusing, melodramatic tone primes the reader for a spectacular, surreal sight indeed.

Antrim proceeds to explain how Louanne had festooned the kimono with cloth animals, patches of vibrant green and blue silk, bamboo, seashells, flowers, tassels, ribbons, novelty coins, sachets of potpourri, Christmas tree ornaments, and a large, three-dimensional butterfly. His description lasts for three and a half pages. He acknowledges his potential for overwhelming the reader, beginning one paragraph with "There is more," and another with "One more feature needs description." After dedicating several paragraphs to the kimono's front, he gives droll, aesthetic direction to the reader: "In order to see the real action taking place on this garment, however, one must carefully turn it over, lay it flat, and study the back."<sup>5</sup> Although his tone is playful, he seems to want the reader to feel as exhausted reading about the kimono as he had felt looking at it. If this garment is vertiginous and frightening in its bounty, he implies, so was its maker. He also finds it symbolizes his mother's extreme naïveté, a jarring quality for an adult to possess. The kimono communicates to him a "naked innocence" that "(defies) empathy."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the garment and the person who made it are so otherworldly that they can offer their viewers (including Antrim himself) nothing with which to relate.

Louanne's kimono offers Antrim a collection of cultural citations that he suggests are inseparable from her personal essence. He tries to discover her genuine "being through (her) citing" of specific social references.<sup>7</sup> He labels the overall flavor of the kimono as pastoral, calling it both a "nursery picture" and a "peaceable kingdom."<sup>8</sup> He reflects how Louanne had never seemed to stop being a child and how "The world depicted on the kimono is the world inhabited by that child, a world full of storybook animals waiting to accompany the heroine on her journey to forever."<sup>9</sup> He has previously mentioned his mother's zeal for New Age philosophy and her firm faith in finding life after death, and because of this strand in her nature, he concludes that "Stitched on to her silk kimono were provisions and companions for her winged journey to eternity."<sup>10</sup> He is speculating—neither he nor the reader can be entirely confident that this is what Louanne intended the garment to

communicate. All we can know for sure is that she made specific material choices that Antrim's I-character attempts to decode in a meaningful way. Fashion and style offer "a perpetual test of character"<sup>11</sup> and Louanne has provided her son with a diagnostic. The kimono's tangibility proves seductive.

---

Father and daughter have truly met in a clash  
of "symbolic aggressions." ...Homes retaliates against Norman's snobbery with her own; she reads his cultural  
position via his tastes and social conceptions  
and concludes with relief that she outranks him.

---

Antrim says that "(Louanne's) inner life has been transferred to the surface of the kimono."<sup>12</sup> In contrast to this conviction, elsewhere in the chapter, he speaks with uncertainty regarding his memory. He cannot recall how many mannequins she kept in her studio or whether he had ever actually seen her wear the kimono. If he does not trust his memory, he trusts his ability to analyze a piece of clothing. Because of our sensory culture of "look and feel,"<sup>13</sup> Antrim's I-character decides that yes, he can make aesthetics matter. He tries to persuade the reader and himself that Louanne's artistic creation holds a key to understanding her as a whole.

If Antrim examines his mother's aesthetics in an effort to move closer to her, in *The Mistress's Daughter*, A.M. Homes evaluates her biological parents' tastes in order to keep them at arm's length. In her memoir, Homes describes entering a period of turbulent self-realization. With the unexpected return of her biological parents, she must revise her personal history and negotiate relationships with these two overbearing strangers. Thirty years after giving Homes up for adoption, her birth mother, Ellen, finds her, and meeting Ellen inspires Homes to contact her birth father, Norman. Homes soon learns that Ellen is an unhappy, irrational woman who wants her long-lost daughter to fulfill emotional needs; she stalks Homes and pressures her to "adopt" her. Homes portrays Ellen as "unrelenting—she could take over my life, swallow me whole."<sup>14</sup> Ellen's excessive attention unnerves Homes and leads her to break their new tie. Her contact with Norman proves just as difficult. Ellen and Norman had met when Ellen was an adolescent and Norman was in his thirties; he was the married owner of the dress shop where she worked, and Homes is the product of their affair. When they meet in person, she experiences a perplexing desire to please him. To add to her unease, it becomes clear that Norman and Ellen are still drawn to one another and that they use her to prolong their connection. She resents their actions and declares to the reader, "All of this is a game, a game that Norman and Ellen are playing, and I'm the object in the middle, the thing tossed back and forth."<sup>15</sup> In addition to these struggles, some aspects of Homes's newly unearthed family story embarrass her. She learns her adoption was unofficial—it occurred with no oversight from agencies or from lawyers, a scenario that hints at illegality. Norman insists upon meeting her in nondescript hotel bars as if they themselves are having an affair.

For Homes, meeting Norman and Ellen means an awkward return to the vulnerability of childhood and a cynical revision of her origins, so she seeks ways to distance herself from them. To achieve this distance, she chooses to focus on Ellen's and Norman's consumer tastes.<sup>16</sup> As Homes gets to know them, she learns that they share a materialist, upwardly mobile view of the world. They like brand names, conspicuous consumption, and keeping up with the Joneses. In contrast, Homes has grown up in the environment of the intellectual elite—her adopted father is a professor—where it is considered shallow and potentially oppressive to show interest in finery and luxury (i.e., never mind how beautiful the dress is... whose labor was exploited to produce it?). Homes's I-character is fluent in the social language that material objects speak, and she uses this fluency to decode and evaluate Norman and Ellen.

When Homes describes Ellen, she draws attention to her consumer choices. On the evening the two first meet for dinner, she scrutinizes Ellen's attire and her meal order and observes her white fur coat and 1960s hairstyle. When Ellen orders a fancy liqueur, Homes remembers an advertisement from her childhood that featured suave, modish couples seated in front of a fireplace with cocktails. She decides that Ellen "looks like someone from another decade, someone who believes in glamour, who listens to Burt Bacharach and Dinah Shore to cheer herself up."<sup>17</sup> Since all Homes has to work with is Ellen's appearance and behavior, she absorbs these surface displays and reads the aesthetic signs she is given. The atmosphere of inquiry and the analysis of aesthetic clues in the passage underscore Homes's quest to make Ellen knowable. Ellen believes her evening with Homes should be celebratory, and so orders lobster, the epitome of luxury entrées. Homes orders nothing, and finds ghastly how Ellen scours her plate for any remaining trace of meat; to her dismay, her mother is a food fetishist. When she can no longer handle the intensity of the meal, she departs, "leaving the woman in the white rabbit coat alone with her Harveys Bristol Cream."<sup>18</sup> This proves to be Homes's and the reader's final image of Ellen alive.

After Ellen dies, Homes travels to Atlantic City to visit her apartment. This visit is the single time Homes will be able to see where/how Ellen lived, so she comes prepared to document, moving through the rooms taking photographs with a disposable camera. She continues to linger on material objects, counting, for example, thirty-two Chanel lipsticks in Ellen's bathroom. Later, she refers to Ellen as "the woman with thirty-two Chanel lipsticks," a nickname that underlines her faith in the power of consumer goods to communicate identity.<sup>19</sup> She and the reader can know Ellen by the cosmetic company she keeps.

Norman's tastes are similar to Ellen's, and Homes uses his material predilections to "read" him in a similar fashion. In the beginning, Homes hopes to cultivate a friendship, but he doesn't share her enthusiasm. His wife is uncomfortable with reopening this unpleasant chapter in their marriage, and he worries that associating with Homes will lead to associating with Ellen, a dangerous proposition. His rejection hurts Homes. On one occasion, she suspects that, in addition to her existence, her wardrobe offends him as well. He expresses a lordly disappointment with her attire: "I would have liked to take you for a nice lunch if you'd worn something better." Next, he observes that she doesn't wear jewelry, and Homes thinks to herself, "I am single, I live in New York City, I am not wearing a dress. I know exactly what he is thinking."<sup>20</sup> She figures that if she must use consumer taste to learn who Norman is, he must have to do the same with her, and she insinuates that he assumes she is a lesbian because she doesn't dress like a girl. That his assessment would be negative upsets her, and for a moment, she wishes she had, in fact, worn a dress.

---

In these memoirs, taste masquerades as identity  
while promising to expose it. A decorated kimono  
and a cashmere sweater can open up broad avenues for exploring character, and the magic of taking such  
an avenue lies in the way it preserves a character's overall mystery.

---

According to Bourdieu, a culture can have many schemas of class; in addition to material wealth, members of a society also appraise each others' intellectual wealth, and the elite of various classes often come into conflict. Intellectuals and the bourgeoisie are hostile to one another, and they communicate their antagonism through "symbolic aggressions"—negative judgments related to aesthetics and taste.<sup>21</sup> Upon taking Norman's feedback on her outfit, Homes reminds herself, "I come from a family that doesn't do that sort of thing (wear jewelry). I grew up boycotting grapes and iceberg lettuce because they weren't picked by union workers."<sup>22</sup> During another conversation, when Norman asks about her "people," she tells the reader, "My people are Jews,



Marxists, socialists, homosexuals. There is nothing about me, about my life, that he would understand.”<sup>23</sup> Father and daughter have met in a clash of “symbolic aggressions.” She matches his snobbery with her own; she reads his tastes and concludes with relief that she outranks him.

Throughout her memoir, Homes uses cashmere to show how she differs from Ellen and Norman. At the end of a phone conversation that occurs before their meeting, Ellen advises Homes to wear her cashmere sweater in order to stay warm when she goes out. “I don’t have a cashmere sweater,” Homes announces defiantly to the reader, giving the declarative sentence a paragraph of its own.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, Norman later gives her a cashmere sweater as a present, and she finds an identical one in Ellen’s apartment. “The infamous cashmere sweater,” she muses upon discovering it.<sup>25</sup> Her parents’ fondness for cashmere confirms for her that their idea of luxury does not coincide with hers. She and her parents do not speak the same material language.

Although Homes thinks Norman treated Ellen poorly, she cannot deny that the two made a good pair. When she pictures their affair, she conjures the “affluence of the early sixties, high-ball glasses and aqua party dresses, Cadillac convertibles and big hair.”<sup>26</sup> Even in her imagination, aesthetic items signify personal meaning. At the conclusion of a passage in which she has recreated Norman and Ellen’s relationship, she puts the two of them in a powder blue Cadillac—her second reference to this outmoded status symbol.<sup>27</sup> By having them depart from her mind in this manner, she suggests that they belong together in this particular material landscape. She has used their consumerism to keep them at a satisfying and self-affirming distance, and the concept of taste has made this possible. She can bank on the reader being able to read cashmere and lobster the same way that she does.

Both of these narrators make adept use of the aesthetic material available to them. But unfortunately for Antrim’s I-character, and fortunately for Homes’s, knowing surface doesn’t guarantee knowing substance. In these memoirs, taste masquerades as identity while promising to expose it. A decorated kimono and a cashmere sweater can open up broad avenues for exploring character, and the magic of taking such an avenue lies in the way it preserves a character’s overall mystery. *The Afterlife* and *The Mistress’s Daughter* illustrate how aesthetics and taste can help a writer construct one vision of a person while hinting at the existence of others.

## AWP

**Lauren Smith** has an MFA in nonfiction from Bennington College. Her essays have appeared in *New Madrid* and *Prick of the Spindle*, and she’s working on a memoir. She teaches English at Delta College in Bay City, Michigan.

## NOTES

1. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1984, 5.
2. New York: Picador, 2006, 190.
3. Donald Antrim, *The Afterlife* (New York: Picador, 2006) 93.
4. *Ibid.*, 91.
5. *Ibid.*, 94, 95.
6. *Ibid.*, 107.
7. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 15. In this text, Butler argues that individuals speak “citationally”—all personal gestures are referents to previously learned aspects of a culture.
8. Donald Antrim, *The Afterlife* (New York: Picador, 2006), 94, 100.
9. *Ibid.*, 105.

10. Ibid., 109.
11. Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (New York: Kodansha, 1994), 21.
12. Ibid., 108.
13. Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 43. Postrel discusses the emergence of what she calls "the Age of Look and Feel" in the second chapter of *Substance of Style*.
14. *The Mistress's Daughter* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 53.
15. Ibid., 61.
16. Coincidentally, many of the short stories in Homes's 1991 collection, *The Safety of Objects*, explore the impact of consumer culture on private lives.
17. A.M. Homes, *The Mistress's Daughter* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 84.
18. Ibid., 85.
19. Ibid., 130.
20. Ibid., 53.
21. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 12.
22. A.M. Homes, *The Mistress's Daughter* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 54.
23. Ibid., 49.
24. Ibid., 32.
25. Ibid., 102.
26. Ibid., 47.
27. Ibid., 141.