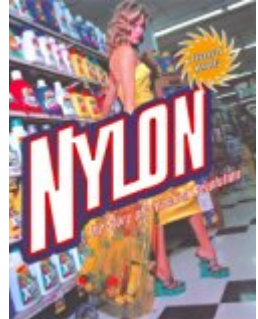


Susannah Handley. *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 192 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6325-7.



Reviewed by John K. Smith

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Nylon Reviewed

Handley takes on the task of incorporating synthetic fibers into fashion history. The major contribution of the book is that it attempts to connect the entire chain of textile processing and marketing from fibers to fashions. The author is most comfortable when discussing the world of fashion designers; at times, the narrative reads like a journalist's report on a fashion show. Following the fashion magazine format, the book includes over two hundred mostly color photographs, making it suitable for any coffee table. The first two chapters retell the pre-World War II histories of rayon and nylon, the first man-made textile fibers. Her treatment of rayon is rather superficial, while the chapter on nylon is quite thorough.

She really hits her stride in the third chapter where synthetic fibers, nylon, acrylic, and polyester, in the 1950s are discussed. After the war synthetic fibers benefited from a convenience craze. Synthetics offered to liberate women from the drudgery of ironing. In the 1960s young designers in England discovered synthetics as a

medium for making outrageous clothing intended to shock the stodgy establishment. The development of the boutique, especially in London, allowed fashion entrepreneurs like Mary Quant to sell directly to their clientele, eliminating the necessity of finding a buyer for their designs. By the late 1960s, however, American youth had come to see synthetics as boring at best, as evidenced in the famous remark in the film *The Graduate*, and toxic and polluting at worst. Yet, the author attributes the souring of the public on polyester, which had become the dominant synthetic fiber, on a new emphasis on comfort and the mass production attitudes of fiber producers.

After 1975, as Americans turned against disco, it also discarded its double-knit polyester leisure suits. The decade-long cultural exile of synthetics began to end in the mid-1980s. Madonna's provocative attire signaled another rebellion against staid conventions. The fad for fitness took spandex garments out of the gym and into the street. The first spandex leggings were marketed in London in 1986. Finally, Japanese designers now saw synthetics as *avante garde*, in the same

way that young British designers had done in the 1960s. Japanese fiber makers also discovered how to make microfibers that finally allowed synthetics to be as comfortable to wear as natural fibers.

But what is it that determines what we wear? Is it comfort or is it fashion? The author uses both explanations to account for trends in clothing without offering much in the way of supporting evidence. It also would have been nice to have had some tables on fiber use. Data from the Statistical Abstract of the United States indicates that polyester took away market share from cotton until 1975. For the next decade market shares were relatively stable. Then, after 1985 cotton began to make significant gains in market share. In the past few years stability has returned with about equal consumption of cotton and polyester.

Overall, the books succeeds as a history of the fashion industry and its complex chain of production from chemical companies making fibers to fabric designers to fashion designers to brand named mass produced fashions.

John Smith is working on technological innovation in the chemical industry. His latest publication is "Turning silk purses into sows' ears: environmental history and the chemical industry," *Enterprise & Society* (forthcoming).

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