

When men write about what women should wear

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Lindy Alexander

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Australian actress Isabel Lucas is known for her "hippie" sense of style.

As a mother of a young son I often find myself thinking about his future. Not wondering whether he will be a doctor, a lawyer, a plumber, or an artist, but rather I tend to think about the kind of person he will become, and most importantly to my mind, how he will perceive and treat women.

I attend a story time session for young children at my local library once a week. Each time I go I see two little girls, who obviously put special effort into their appearance. There are homemade wands, sparkly sticky things on their faces, tiaras, fairy wings, and skirts that go up as they twirl around. And each week they stand in front of us adults, stubbing their toes into the

floor waiting for comments. I usually say something about the effort they have gone to in making their accessories because I want my son to hear that females can be described in ways other than for their appearance. "You look like you've lots of effort into that wand," I say, or "What book are you going to read today?" but the girls always seem disappointed by my comments, and quickly move on to someone else. When they hear that magic sentence, "don't you look beautiful today," they settle down happily and wait for story time to begin.

On Saturday in *Good Weekend*, food and travel writer AA Gill left me in no doubt of the privilege we still give to people willing to talk about what women look like. Gill, known for his erudite writing about far-flung places and exotic cuisines, trod an all too familiar path in an article he penned about what men really want women to wear. In his usual forthright manner, Gill tells women that "the gypsy, floaty, layered kaleidoscope thing with home-made jewellery might impress your mates, but it doesn't do it for blokes. Really, you look a mess."

That underneath the "hippie" clothes might be a woman of great mind, strength and importance doesn't wash with Gill. Regardless of what you might be like on the inside, "Men like women who look controlled, together and stable," he says. This starts to get into uncomfortable territory, where women who are, for want of a better word, 'tamed' (both by their clothes and lack of body hair) are seen as appealing to the opposite sex, and those whose clothes are layered start to become unmanageable, unhinged, wild even.

Gill also tells us that "most men look at women in chunks: face, eyes, hair, chest, legs height. It's how a hyena looks at a wildebeest". By evoking imagery of a scene in nature, Gill shrewdly gives rise to the old argument of biology, that it's in most men's nature to look at women as if they are prey, ready to be hunted.

He leaves no stone unturned. He tells us what colour combinations to wear (navy and white), the style of clothes (tailored clothes in, hippie clothes out), and to walk confidently, in a way that is "deeply attractive". Gill tells us we should never wear shoes that we can't run in; presumably for situations where we may bump into a sharp-tongued travel writer and need to make a quick escape. But if you're not ready to change your wardrobe, never fear. Gill tells us that things will be okay in the end because "it really is all about how you look naked."

I actually thought that in 2012 we might be past this old gem. But yes that's right. Ultimately girls it's not actually about what you bring to the world, in terms of your words, your arts, your passion, your brains. No, it's about your body.

If Gill wrote his food and travel reviews the way he writes about women he'd have no readers. Dishes described only for their beauty and presentation but not their taste would leave people dismayed. So how come it's okay to reduce women to superficial, one-dimensional characters that really need to take heed of a middle-aged man's advice about what they should wear? What has me surprised though is the lack of commentary about Gill's comments. Are we becoming complacent, and accepting that women's value and worth lie in how we are perceived by men?

We already have the highest rates ever seen of women dissatisfied with their bodies, shops where girls still in single digits can try on push up bras and numerous girls begging their parents for 'designer vaginas', breast enhancements and Brazilian waxes.

Of course, Gill is seen as just one spokesperson for what many are thinking. We have long had the idea that men are to be useful and clever, and women need only to look good. However there is hope. A recent study published in the journal *Psychological Science* surveyed around 12,000 people in over 30 countries, asking participants to state what they valued in a potential partner. One of the researchers, Dr Marcel Zentner told The Australian newspaper, "in societies like Britain, or especially Scandinavia, men place increasing value on other qualities, like intelligence, rather than curvy figures ..."

I am not silly enough to think that these things will change quickly, but perceptions of women as mere decorations start early. My hope is that by the time my son is old enough to take his children to story time that all of us will be able to see little girls and not need to remark on their

looks, but rather on the book in their hand.

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