

Susan Juby, an ex-fashion design student and author of bestsellers *The Truth Commission* and *Republic of Dirt: A Return to Woefield Farm*, is really excited about her new novel. ***The Fashion Committee*** publishes (9780451468789, HRD, \$18.99) this month and has already received starred and other glowing reviews. She has shared her experiences, ideas, and more in writing this humorous take on a fashion competition.

Q: What inspired you to write *The Fashion Committee*? Was there any particular source you drew from for a favorite element, character, or theme in the story?

A: The book was born out of two main inspirations. First, I wimped out of fashion design school when I was in my early twenties and I have some regrets about that. I'd wanted to be a costume designer for film and TV, but I didn't have the required focus or the maturity. Still, I remain fascinated by how people use fashion to create identity. Fashion is one of humanity's oldest and most intimate art forms. It can be stunningly beautiful and tell us about our values, or social structures and our economies. It can also be brutally destructive for people and the planet. I wanted to create two characters that were at odds about whether fashion is a force for good or for evil.



The second inspiration helped me to create Charlie Dean, one of the narrators. I once met a former drug dealer who told me about going into a drug house. She was looking for a bathroom and accidentally opened the door to a preteen girl's bedroom. The girl was sitting at her desk, doing her homework. Her bedroom was immaculate and as orderly and calm as the house outside was chaotic and dangerous. That little story stuck with me. It's astonishing how some kids manage to overcome their difficult lives through order and discipline and, sometimes, a bone deep refusal to give up hope. Charlie Dean is my ode to those kids.

Q: What role did art, identity, and love (romantic or otherwise) play in *The Fashion Committee*?

A: Art often shows humans at their best. Not the art world which can be cutthroat and pretentious, but the process of creating works that speak to the full range of human experience. Many kids can't afford art schools or even art supplies. That is a major part of



the tension in *The Fashion Committee*. Two poor kids are vying for a single place in an exclusive school that will give them a shot at being artists.

As for identity, that's the big preoccupation of mine. It's unbelievably hard work to figure out who you are, who you want to be, and who and what you don't want to be. Too bad we have to work out our identities when we're also learning about romance, and driving, and the myriad other coming of age tasks. It's too much to ask! In *The Fashion Committee*, the characters are trying out new identities using fashion.

Speaking of love, I have a thing for characters who are passionate about their interests. Fashion, needlework, writing, social justice, books, fruit flies -- it's all fascinating. (You wouldn't believe how interesting fruit flies can be!) I wish everyone could fall in love with developing a skill or fall in love with knowledge. Romance is wonderful, too, but I think we're sold a bill of goods when we're told, often when we're teens, that we can't be complete or happy if we're not experiencing romantic love. Supportive relationships of all kinds and an abiding curiosity about life are just as important as falling and staying in love. If we all spent as much time getting good at something as we do worrying about romance, we'd all be better off. I suspect this makes me sound like a drag.

Q: Your novels have such a fun, smart voice, and dialogue. Is this something that comes naturally for you, or have you found certain methods that help hone this element of your writing?

A: A distinct voice is what I look for when I read and something I try to give all of my characters. I guess I emphasize it because it's such a key thing in my appreciation of books.

Q: What contributed to your decision to have this book illustrated? And how did you come upon Soleil Ignacio?

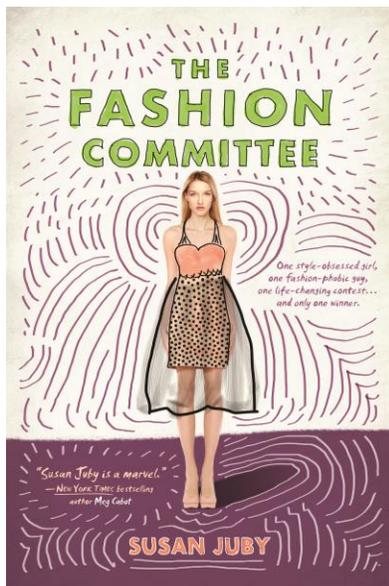
A: The two main characters have to keep a fashion diary as part of the competition to win the scholarship to art school and they've been instructed to include sketches and drawings as they develop their projects. I believe that my fabulous editor, Kendra Levin, found Soleil and I'm so glad she did. Soleil did a stunning job with the illustrations and she also gave each of the characters a distinctive visual style. I teach creative writing to university students, some of whom are studying the visual arts. The art students all seem to sketch constantly.

Q: If you could pick one character from *The Fashion Committee* to meet a character from *The Truth Commission*, who would it be and why?

A: I think Neil would be a good friend for Charlie Dean. He's generous and open and would adore her. Charlie Dean needs that.

Q: Charlie Dean is strong, determined, unstoppable against seemingly all-odds. Is she based on a real life person?

A: As noted, she was born out of an anecdote told to me by a drug dealer. She's also an amalgamation of some of the hardcore fashion people I've met. They experience the world through a purely esthetic lens and that is fascinating, inspiring, and sometimes problematic.



Q: What inspired you to include the competition between Charlie Dean and John Thomas-Smith in *The Fashion Committee*?

A: My own divided feelings about fashion led me to create the two opposing views of fashion in the book. I wanted to include two contestants who come from the same underfunded school, one of whom lives for fashion and uses it to create a more beautiful reality than the one in which she lives. The other doesn't like or respect fashion. He has some valid arguments, but he also hasn't thought deeply about fashion or the skill that goes into creating gorgeous clothes.

Q: You are drawn to such fun formats and points of view for your novels: *The Fashion Committee* alternates between Charlie and John's art journals, complete with sketches, and *The Truth Commission* is told as if it's Normandy's delightfully meta, footnotes-laden creative nonfiction assignment. Where do you get your ideas?

A: My undergraduate degree is in English literature and I studied postmodern literary theory and became smitten with all the innovative techniques writers can use to create layers of meaning and experience for the reader, including meta narratives and footnotes and intertextuality. Deciding why my first person narrators are telling their stories helps me figure out the plot and develop their voices. As for the conceit that my characters are writing creative nonfiction, I love to read true stories, engagingly told. Real life stories get away with things fictional stories dare not attempt.

Q: Your characters, adults as well as teens, in your two novels *The Fashion Committee* and *The Truth Commission* are genuine, imperfect, set-backs and flaws. What do you want readers to take away from this?

A: I have tremendous affection for all of my characters, in spite of their idiosyncrasies and failings. We're all fallible, and I think a true sign of maturity is developing a clear but gentle sense our own weaknesses and strengths. Compassion is a radical approach and a challenging one. I'd like to be a more compassionate person and that process starts with imagining all sides of my characters.

Q: What did you like to read as a teen, and how do you think that has influenced your own writing?

A: I read everything from *Catcher in the Rye* (I know, I know!) to *Cold Comfort Farm*, *Lord of the Rings* to *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* to *Watership Down*, and *The Stand* to *The Secret Diaries of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 3/4*. My reading habits destroyed any notion I had that great writing was only found in literary fiction. I love me some genre fiction.

Q: Librarians from all over the world will read this interview. Is there something you'd like to tell them?

A: Thank you for the work you do. Libraries are the most democratic and public-minded institutions left in many countries. That matters at the deepest level. Also, feel free to order *The Fashion Committee* for your branch.