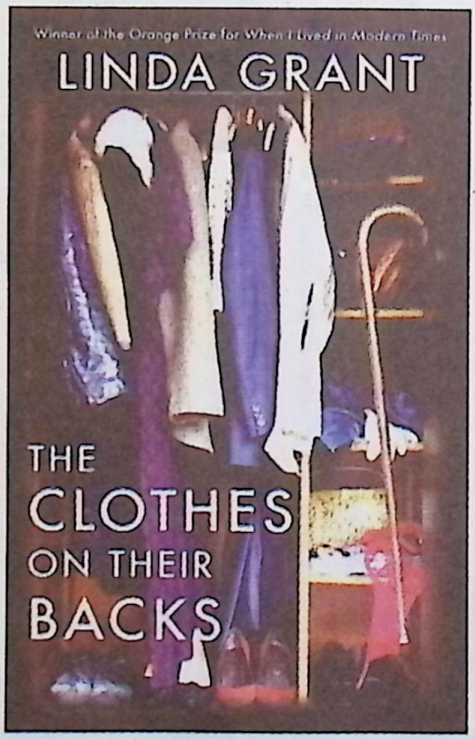
Are you really what you wear?

LUCY BERESFORD



Like money, clothes have real, symbolic and psychological value. Linda Grant understands these dimensions implicitly. Stitched beautifully into the fabric of her latest novel is an acute understanding of the role clothes play in reflecting identity and self-worth.

Sándor Kovacs, a refugee from Hungary, arrives in London in 1956 with just 'a mackintosh, a scarf and a leather satchel' - literally the clothes on his back. Over time he builds up a murky business empire as a landlord to immigrants from the West Indies, a career which eventually lands him in prison, sees him likened to the Kray twins and depicted in the media as the 'face of evil'.

The one image his niece Vivien has of him from her childhood is of his electric blue suit and suede shoes. Kept apart from this scandalous man by her hibernatory immigrant parents, Vivien's first present from him when she is in her early twenties is a green silk dress.

By this stage it's the late 1970s, the National Front is throwing its weight around, and Vivien changes her name to Miranda so that she can befriend her family's 'black sheep'. Gradually Sándor's stories about his early life act as a mirror, reflecting back to Vivien a stronger sense of herself.

Vivien's position highlights Grant's concern over how we validate ourselves. Is adopting the uniform of one particular gang (punks, skinheads, tango dancers) enough to forge our identity? For decades, British-born Vivien cannot get her bearings.

At university her eclectic wardrobe earns her an inaccurate reputation for self-possession. Clothes are Vivien's armour, hiding her insecurities. But if you judge only by the external (the well-cut suit, or the ill-fitting wig), who's to say your impressions are accurate?

And what if there are people out there, like Vivien's parents, who hide away and wish never to be seen? These are timely questions for Grant to be asking in this age of reality TV and its obsession with appearances.

Readers who are routinely tempted by the fashion pages of magazines will enjoy Grant's melting descriptions of a wrap dress or red snakeskin platform shoes. Her prose is careful, pointed: a drab brown waistcoat here, the creak of a leather jacket there - all we need to know about her characters and their attitude to life is told in what they wear.

Read on one level, then, her story is accessible, her characters neatly sketched. On a deeper level this is a coming-of-age story not only about insecure girls like Vivien, but about Britain in the 1970s, insecure about its evolving racial mix.

For a book to be publishable, Vivien tells Sándor, it must 'shed light on the human condition'. Grant's own particular beam reveals the way we acquire our sense of self from what gets reflected back to us, either in the mirror or in our relationships with others. She is as at home writing about the thrilling ripple of silk as she is charting social tensions.

So: Prada or Primark? Rather enticingly, Grant provides the best of both.

This review first appeared in The Telegraph.