

Top 10 best-dressed characters in fiction

Authors from Charlotte Brontë to Suzanne Collins have imagined clothes for their characters that are almost as expressive as their wearers

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The first clothes in western literature, Adam and Eve's fig leaves, performed their essential fictional function in drawing attention to the protagonists' moral failings.

Clothes in contemporary fiction seem to me to be an underused trope, perhaps because fast fashion has made individual garments less emblematic. When my own heroine Hannah is persuaded into a double murder plot by the rich Jinni on the London to Penzance train in *The Golden Rule*, it is no accident that her co-conspirator is wearing green.

Jinni's exquisite emerald garb is alluring, but she is not what she seems. Hannah, a millennial Cinderella and single mother who has attempted to escape her impoverished Cornish background through a university degree, spends most of the novel in old jeans and T-shirts. Only when loaned a Dior dress can she step out of failure and despair – though she reduces it to shreds.

1. The Silver Chair by CS Lewis

This novel is packed with clothes, but especially green ones symbolising nature, lust, magic and death. The seductive Lady of the Green Kirtle who bewitches and kidnaps Prince Rilian first appears to him in “a thin garment as green as poison”. It's a great quest story, both funny and touching, and it takes two bullied children from a progressive public school in our world into the frozen north of Narnia, climaxing underground in a struggle that dramatises the nature of religious faith in a Platonic cave as the witch's green dress turns into the coiling body of a gigantic serpent.

2. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

Jane is so fiercely attached to her Puritan dress that even when about to marry the rich Mr Rochester she rejects bright colours for “sober black satin and pearl grey silk”. Paradoxically, this makes her passionate originality flame brighter to him – and us – an original touch that makes this poor, plain, intelligent and brave young woman eternally beloved by readers. When happily reunited with Mr Rochester, we learn through him that her dress is blue – the colour of heaven and happiness.

3. Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy

Anna's sumptuous black velvet ballgown, though revealing of her arms and bosom, is understood by the admiring Kitty to be "just a frame" because her "loveliness consisted precisely in always standing out from what she wore." Tolstoy hardly describes Anna's looks but makes us see her beauty and femininity in describing her ballgown, whose seductive colour foreshadows her eventual fate. She is the greatest tragic heroine in literature, and one I return to repeatedly.

4. Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien

The greatest fantasy novel of the 20th century uses clothes to both reveal and conceal the true nature of protagonists. Frodo's hidden mithril coat, "harder than steel ... like moonlit silver", is important not just because it is a gift that saves his life but because it represents the indomitable purity of his soul and will. When Sauron taunts the allies by bringing his coat out as a trophy before the Black Gate, they believe him to be dead; but snatch it back to remember him by. It saves his life a second time in the final return to the Shire.

5. The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald

Daisy's "rippling and fluttering" white dress gives an airy impression of her essential lack of gravity when the narrator first sees her at home. The ultimate Jazz Age novel about doomed passion and the love of money, written in matchless prose, we soon see that the only thing that makes Daisy weep are Gatsby's tailor-made "beautiful shirts", possibly because they underline the materialism that has led her to marry a less rich man.

6. I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith

The impoverished teenage Mortmain sisters are obsessed by clothes (which their eccentric ex-model stepmother, Topaz, often forgets to wear at all). One especially farcical scene occurs when Cassandra's beautiful sister Rose is so embarrassed by her inept flirtation with the rich Cotton brothers that she runs away from them in a "long shaggy black" fur coat and pretends to be a bear. Dressing in furs often symbolises the truth of our animal nature, and it later transpires that the bearskin coat escapade has given Rose a secret opportunity for more serious courtship in a delicious romp about innocence and youth.

7. Monsieur Ka by Vesna Goldsworthy

The ache of poverty is keenly conveyed in this outstanding novel making deft use of an earlier novelist's characters. Set in freezing postwar London, its Jewish heroine Albertine is the daughter of a tailor. She becomes drawn to Anna Karenina's son Sasha, now an elderly emigre with his own family. As a refugee herself, Albertine has just one respectable dress whose silk can change in the light from grey-pink to red. Its ambiguity recalls Madame Bovary's famous "gorge de pigeon" dress and slyly suggests that Albertine, too, is vulnerable to adulterous passion. Elegant, witty and sophisticated, Goldsworthy channels Tolstoy with complete assurance.

8. The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

The tomboyish Katniss must compete for her life in a dystopian TV contest. Her sympathetic costume designer Cinna puts her into "a simple black unitard... and a fluttering cape made of streamers of orange, yellow and red" that bursts into synthetic flames during the initial parade, instantly transforming her from dull representative of Panem's despised coal-mining

District to the public's "Girl on Fire" heroine. Collins's trilogy came to us before Trump's America, but its satire on the kind of cruelly divisive populist culture that led to his victory looks increasingly prescient. Katniss's costume is especially thrilling because she will indeed become the fiery rebel leader of a revolution against the Capitol.

9. American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins

A middle-class Mexican bookshop owner, Lydia has left "her good church shoes" in the shower cubicle where she hides with her small son after her family has been murdered. To flee, she puts on her dead mother's gold trainers, a magical detail because those shoes carry her as she jumps off bridges on to fast-moving goods trains going north. Only when finally crossing the desert into the US must she abandon them for tough, heavy boots and a grim new reality as an illegal migrant. A thrillingly propulsive, compassionate novel for our times.

10. The Secret Countess by Eva Ibbotson

Whenever I feel depressed, I reach for Ibbotson's peerless romantic comedies (a cross between PG Wodehouse and Nancy Mitford), but this is my favourite. Anna, its idealistic young Russian refugee heroine is determined to earn her living as a "tweeny" in the dilapidated home of an earl. He has returned from the first world war believing he is engaged to the rich and revolting Muriel, who has a wardrobe of magnificent clothes and the heart of a Nazi. Anna must conceal both her aristocratic family and her humble occupation; when her younger brother turns up as an unexpected guest, she pretends her maid's uniform is a fancy-dress costume and her roughened hands due to method acting. However, the earl first sees Anna when she is washing herself in his lake and dressed only in her gloriously long brown hair. In a novel that is all about looking beyond appearances, not even a fig leaf is needed.