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DRESSES AND DRAPERY: THE MATERIAL ESSIE SUMMERS

Karin Warnaar

Adapted from a presentation at the 2023 Costume and Textile Association of New Zealand symposium

When this paper was presented at the Costume and Textile Association of New Zealand symposium in May 2023, the audience responded unsurprisingly tentatively when asked whether they were familiar with or would admit to having read Essie Summers novels. Though many weren't abashed, others were clearly aware of the stigma attached to reading Mills & Boon and generic romance novels. Even when the Mills & Boon writer was New Zealand's Queen of Romance, Essie Summers. One of the publisher's biggest names worldwide for around 30 years of the mid-late twentieth century, Summers sold close to twenty million copies of her around 50 Mills & Boon titles. The number, which features on her Dunedin Writers' Walk plaque, is eye watering, particularly if you're a literary novelist who can only dream of selling in the thousands. It's also only the sales number, and doesn't count reselling, library or shared copies, so the readership is considerably higher.

Several factors underpinned Essie Summers's popularity. The novelty of selling New Zealand as an exotic location to international readers was balanced by the novelty of a local mass audience seeing their own place and time reflected in popular media. Enhancing this, the timing involved in first being published before the advent of television as a mass medium for leisure entertainment. Most of all there was her distinctive voice, centring on lively, affectionate, independent but family-oriented women, working class but also with a keen eye for art, music, theatre, literature and clothes.

The voice clearly suggests the writer; there's a lot of her in her books. Ethel Snelsen Summers was born in Christchurch in 1912, exactly a year after her parents Ethel and Edwin migrated from the north of England. Once she could talk, their precocious daughter renamed herself Essie; succeeded in starting school aged just four; had read her way through the local children's library by nine; aspired, as her mother had before her, to become a teacher, but ended up leaving school at 14 for a year's technical school and a job in a drapery, where she progressed to writing advertising copy. She wrote through her teens before selling her first poem at 18 and continued to write and sell poems and short fiction for years. In her mid-twenties she married Reverend Bill Flett and became a minister's wife, a mother and sometime newspaper columnist while living, often rurally, mostly around Otago. She aspired to have her first novel published by her 45th birthday and achieved this in 1957 when Mills & Boon accepted *New Zealand Inheritance*.

Long since sold on and now considerably racier, 1950s Mills & Boon was a highly successful English-based publisher of popular fiction which specialised in chaste romance. The Mills & Boon brand was specific: it believed in love. It is a genre of heroes and heroines. The former are tall, dark, handsome and pompous. The latter can be surprisingly varied, but are mostly young women working at traditional female jobs: nurses, teachers and secretaries, who are about to have a bumpy path to true love. The genre conventions were contained within the books. To be able to write them, the author needed to have read them and to believe in happy ever after. Equally, the author needed to understand what the readers required in description, dialogue, decorum, all the while building an individual style and tone. Essie Summers's first book offers a rural setting, with a heroine who worked as a semi-freelance graphic artist and a grumpy neighbour as love interest, and variations on this theme abound right to her last Mills & Boon title, *High Country Governess* (1987).

Because the current romance genre tends to be quite glamorous and label conscious, it can be surprising that appearance and clothes are often almost invisible in the earlier incarnations of the genre. The progenitor of the brooding, high-spirited heroine formula, Jane Austen, was deliberately wary of avoiding femininities that might make her work seem trivial. Dress just is not a subject for serious literature. Virginia Woolf used the phrase “frock consciousness” in her diary, observing that “my love of clothes interests me profoundly only it is not love; and what it is I must discover” (Cohen, 1999). A practising intellectual, feminist and bluestocking, Woolf seems to see her interest in clothes as a bit of an aside.

Summers acknowledges many writers throughout her novels, but not Woolf. The concept of frock consciousness may not have been articulated in her books, but it is a striking part of the Summers style. While pictures famously paint a thousand words, the reverse is also true, and a few well-chosen words can evoke vivid images. Essie Summers was a very visual writer who showed by telling. The reader notices the clothes and who wears what. Summers is also often explicit about the psychology of appearance, sometimes in dialogue within the context of the drapery industry. The word cloud representing the language used around dress and textiles in a sample of her novels highlights the prominence of colour foremost, and fabric close behind (Figure 1).

It only takes reading a few of her books to conclude that the author might have had green eyes; she confirms this in her autobiography (Summers, 1974). Green ensembles abound, with several green or green and black suits and trouser suits. In her early novels, clothes are generic, in line with a convention recognising how too-specific fashion can date fiction. A green cotton skirt and light blouse with a scarlet cardigan could be from any time from the early sixties onwards, but Summers became more detailed as her confidence as a writer grew. In *Revolt – and Virginia* (1969), Virginia's life in Dunedin gets complicated – she decides to move to Christchurch and get a new job there. So her mum buys her a small vanload of new clothes, the pièce de résistance being “for travelling – a hunting green suede coat, half-belted at the back with a matching tweed suit and suede jerkin, fittingly called Sherwood motel.”

Then there's this, from *The Gold at Noon* (1974):

A new frock, in the colour Murdo liked best on her; vivid light green. It was a crimplene pinafore with a long bodice ending in box pleats and beneath it was a white blouse, collared, with a big white pussycat bow of muslin. The sleeves were full and caught into the wrist with yellow and red and black braid, giving it a faintly Austrian air.

This outfit reflects various predilections: the green of course, but also a fondness for braid and a tendency for her heroines to dress to their heritage, most often Scottish or in this case Austrian. The combination also illustrates her preferred colour matching. Summers's green outfits are often accented with red, black, brown or yellow, but the conventions of the age are implicit. Blue and green are never seen together – aside from in the soft tones of puaa, a Summers favourite for jewellery. Other explicit colour rules include her redheads avoiding wearing reds or pinks, another truism no longer practised.

The author recognises that she uses a lot of green: in *Adair of Starlight Peaks* (1977), her heroine, Jane Esmeralda Gray, worries that she's overdoing the colours she loves, but the grumpy hero, Broderic Adair, remonstrates: “Anyone with eyes so green would dress up to them”

Essie Summers heroines wear cheerful, bright colours: initially, in greens, blues, yellows, with white, red and black accents. Dresses in more exotic colours can cause drama, because they're coupled with a clinginess that gets these nice girls misinterpreted. When friends drag Fiona Macdonald out on the town after she's been jilted on the eve of her wedding, she's reluctantly poured into a borrowed dress, and wishes throughout the evening she'd worn one of her own frocks: “she had never dared wear this colour before, thinking it would make her look insipid, with her delicate skin, she was rather intrigued by it, a vivid coral-flame, shot with gold. But it was a little too tight, too low, too cunningly swathed to emphasise curves.”

Summers uses colour on three levels. The cheerful, strong colours reflect her own cheerful disposition in her characters, while drawing the eye to the character as the positive central force within the novel. The changes in tone echo the changes in fashion colours through the decades, revealing a writer attuned to her society and becoming more confident about making the work contemporary as it depicts society and fashion changes.

Essie Summers puts her thwarted teaching ambitions to use in her writing. Just as she loved sharing her knowledge about New Zealand with her international readers, she constantly shares information that reveals the world in which she lived. Her fabric choices are indicative. Some are constant: corduroy for workwear, female and male; silk for good shirts, again male and female. Other things change by era: nylon is prominent in the 1960s; the crimplene pinafore is a 1970s giveaway; by the 1980s, more natural fabrics feature. Summers also enlightens on practicalities and textile development. A 1961 query about darning draws out the observation that between the housekeeper and the oldest daughter, and “nylon reinforcing these days,” the darning basket never seems to be overflowing (Summers, 1961). She uses Dacron for effect in petticoats. Virginia, of *Revolt – and Virginia*, has difficulty ripping one to make a bandage; no such trouble for Rowena Fotherington, whose petticoat ends in shreds when she is chased by a bull at the beginning of *The Master of Tawhai* (1959). (There are at least two bovine chases in the Summers catalogue.)

The novels also prove a source of potentially lost information about the drapery business. *High Country Governess* begins with discussions about triple-banked haberdashery shelves, departmental positioning for traffic and its result on sales, the right light and temperature needed for the cosmetics department. *Revolt – and Virginia* considers the philosophy and techniques of writing copy and includes an ostensibly romantic scene where the main couple are in a stockroom at night and wrestling with various racks and mannequins. Virginia’s boss notes that they need to get collars for the mannequins because the necks are chipping, the kind of technical detail that abounds throughout. The drapery business also allows for consideration of masculinity. Men in the trade use hand cream so their weekend farmer’s hands are smooth for handling fabric. A general reader might not have known this; once more, Summers is sharing knowledge.

The Essie Summers hero is personally a bit brusque, but sartorially suave. He is most often standardly good-looking, tall and bronzed (because he enjoys outdoor pursuits, as well as tans being de rigueur by the mid-twentieth century). Her men have more than a whiff of matinée idol and, later, James Bond, in their dress, which is mostly described in semi-formal social situations. Tussock appears strongly on the word cloud (Figure 1); mostly worn by men. A typical outfit is a “tussock coloured drill trousers and shirt, a green-spotted cravat tucked carelessly in at his tanned throat” (Summers, 1962). Even the men wear green, mostly in cravats, a long-forgotten accessory that appears on Summers heroes from the early sixties through to the seventies, by which time they are also wearing walk shorts. A particularly spiffing example of dashing dress comes from the early 1980s, worn by an antique dealer who has travelled back from London via a tailoring stopover: “Jonathan had on a suit he’d had made in Singapore overnight on his way out, a linen suit, safari style, buff colour, elegant and cool-looking” (Summers, 1982). Thus, we read him as a man of the world, travelled and sophisticated. Albeit in a safari suit.

So far, few of the examples have mentioned shoes. Summers does have preferred accessories: cravats, obviously, but she often neglects footwear entirely. There are brogues for walking and boots for riding, an occasional thong sandal for summer but, mostly, men and women alike stop at the ankles. Other accessories come and go with fashion and custom: ‘60s heroines try on hats, but this stops in the 1970s. Virginia’s gifts from her mother include a quilted nylon housecoat of “pure turquoise” and shorty pyjamas; other mothers also give their daughters diaphanous negligee sets that are used for comic relief. Summers’s jewellery preferences are simple. She clearly adores paua for “the lovely blue-greens of the sea, iridescent, ever-changing, bringing up the green of her eyes;” greenstone is another favourite. Real precious stones appear only rarely and, when they do, they are uncomfortably out of place.

Perhaps unusually for the time, Summers heroines don’t make their own clothes. As noted earlier, they may do the odd bit of darning, but they’re more inclined to admit to being “not very fond of sewing, but I don’t mind little

things" (Summers, 1965). But they carry sewing kits in their bags and teach children the basics. Practically, there is little time for dressmaking, as many of them end up de facto or official housekeepers and tutors on remote estates, where they must feed families and staff and keep freezers stocked, help on the farm, ride out, climb mountains and ford streams.

The outside activity requires trouser wearing, still a subject for discussion in the 1960s. No *Roses in June*'s Fiona Macdonald says to her disapproving boss, the one who doesn't like bosomy women, "Yes, I've slacks. I was too afraid to bring them out in case you were hidebound in that respect and disliked women in trousers." *Sweet are the Ways* (1965) has a nosy neighbour tut-tutting about a vicar's wife teaching the children cartwheels: "'She was wearing – er- slacks,' she said in a tone that reproved Elspeth for conjuring up a picture of what would have happened had Mrs Richards been in skirts. 'But it goes against the grain to see a minister's wife in trousers!'"

By the end of the 1960s, however, jeans are standard and trouser suits are unremarkable and even worn for formal occasions. Summers does persist in calling them trews; occasionally slacks or pants or trousers but, more often than not, trews is the preferred term.

Over the course of her three decades or so writing for Mills & Boon, Essie Summers conducted conversations with herself and her readers about love, family, society. Through dialogue, characters explore their changing world. As the world changes, so does what she writes about and how she writes about it. To a literary scholar like the late Lawrence Jones, the novels can be "of extreme historic value because they tell quite a bit about a certain layer of society" (Munro, 2018), which is accurate to a degree. The "layer of society" in question is that of an author who was genuinely working class, largely self-educated. It is also a particular female layer that more serious local writers of the time knew nothing about. Dress and material culture are key aspects of this in Summers's work, and reading through the transitions takes us through 30 years, even if she is increasingly out of touch with modern romance and its style by the time she signed off from Mills & Boon in the 1980s.

While interesting, the social history aspect of Essie Summers's use of clothes is arguably incidental and coincidental. Her frock consciousness is more deliberate than this: she uses clothes for dramatic effect. The clothes she chooses to highlight are outfits that her characters understand at an emotional level. *Bachelors Galore* (1958) is an early novel in which another jilted heroine heads off from England to New Zealand. On the ship, for a dance, she wears a fancy frock, lilac nylon, sewn with brilliants, with a filmy stole. The hero patronisingly implies the gown is too grand for her station in life. She rebukes his criticism by telling him it was for the engagement party that didn't happen, and storms off to her cabin:

With one smooth movement she undid the transparent plastic zip, unclasped the circle of brilliants that had clipped the end of the fichu at her young rounded bosom. There was a flash of silver as she pulled the dress uncaringly over her head and another as she rolled it into a ball ... [S]he flung the crumpled mass far out on the waters; it undid like a parachute, settled into a shining circle, and sank.

Sometimes, it's about the clothes.

Karin Warnaar's interests in reading and visual arts merge in critical appreciation of how writers use fashion and clothing to convey character and progress plot. Karin lives in Ōtepoti, Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand; she is a longstanding member of the Costume and Textile Association of New Zealand and serves on their national committee.

Essie Summers titles cited, with first publication date

New Zealand Inheritance, 1958 (slightly dubious but full of action)
Bachelors Galore, 1958 (has its charms)
The Master of Tawhai, 1959
No Roses in June, 1961 (slightly radical and surprisingly modern)
The House of the Shining Tide, 1962 (not bad)
Sweet are the Ways, 1965 (Essie's favourite, vaguely bonkers but in a good way)
Revolt – and Virginia, 1969 (particularly good on drapery business)
The Gold at Noon, 1974 (approach with caution)
Adair of Starlight Peaks, 1977 (bit meh)
A Lamp for Jonathan, 1982 (antiques and indignation)
High Country Governess, 1987 (more good drapery business)

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