



The Measure of a Man: The Story of a Father, a Son, and a Suit

J.J. Lee

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Taking as its starting point a son's decision to alter his late father's last remaining suit for himself, this is a deeply moving and brilliantly crafted story of fathers and sons, of fitting in and standing out -- and discovering what it means to be your own man.

For years, journalist and amateur tailor JJ Lee tried to ignore the navy suit that hung at the back of his closet -- his late father's last suit. When he decides to finally make the suit his own, little does he know he is about to embark on a journey into his own past.

As JJ moves across the surface of the suit, he reveals the heartbreak tale of his father, a charismatic but luckless restaurateur whose demons brought tumult upon his family. He also recounts the year he spent as an apprentice tailor at Modernize Tailors, the last of Vancouver's legendary Chinatown tailors, where he learns invaluable lessons about life from his octogenarian master tailor. Woven throughout these two personal strands are entertaining stories from the social history of the man's suit, the surprising battleground where the war between generations has long been fought.

With wit, bracing honesty, and great narrative verve, JJ takes us from the French Revolution to the Zoot Suit Riots, from the Japanese Salaryman to Mad Men, from Oscar Wilde in short pants to Marlon Brando in a T-shirt, and from the rarefied rooms of Savile Row to a rundown shop in Chinatown. A book that will forever change the way you think about the maxim "the clothes make the man," this is a universal story of love and forgiveness and breaking with the past.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Measure of a Man: The Story of a Father, a Son, and a Suit Details

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Lee

From Reader Review The Measure of a Man: The Story of a Father, a Son, and a Suit for online ebook

Srividya Rao says

This book is on the CBC Canada Reads 2018 long list and this is why I love Canada Reads. This is a book I would never have picked up on my own - I am not a fan of memoirs and have no interest in men's fashion. But I could not put this book down. I learnt a lot about a suit jacket and its history. But it is the personal story which is compelling. It is a wonderful exploration of the complicated relationship of fathers and sons. I don't know how it will hold up against some real heavyweights in the long list, but I did find it 'eye-opening' and will never look at a man wearing a suit the same way again.

Lydia says

This book surprised me.

I didn't expect to like it. I picked it up because I gravitate towards immigrant stories, being an immigrant myself. There's something about the dual-identities that draw me in, and then a deeper realisation, that immigrants are not Chinese and Canadian, or, in my case, Australian Canadian, but Chinese Canadian, as its own separate entity that I adore and come to terms with on a daily basis.

And then I started reading it, and it completely blew me away. JJ's passion for menswear is infectious. He would pick an article of men's clothing, such as the pocket square, or the tie, or the lapel and I would be passionate about it. He weaved intricate tales about how the frock coat came into being, how Oscar Wilde defied all of England's fashion conventions, how knights in armour defiantly raised their skirts so they could move better in battle. He told stories of James Dean, of Sean Connery, of Frank Sinatra, all from their pant hem, from their upturned brims of their hats, from their tie pins.

JJ Lee is a sentimental, romantic, admirable little nerd and I adored all of his Star Trek, Star Wars and comic books references.

He challenges masculinity as much as he welcomes it. Through these stories, he tells the story of the fraught relationship he had with his father, how he aspired to be him, his father's alcoholism and his resolve never to be like him. He becomes a tailor for a short time, and in a moment of inspiration, decides to alter his father's suit.

Though the sections about his father's alcoholism were hard to read, the author used micro-histories about clothing between each emotional chapter. As a mechanic of writing, it helped me to keep reading and not get swamped with miserable detail. Lee does what I think is difficult to do when recounting a story of someone who suffers from substance abuse, and that is that he wrote about the good times as well as the bad.

This book is layered without being difficult. It is emotional without being draining. If Lee could be sure of one thing, it is that he can write. Not only that, but that he can write and make the reader care.

tw: alcoholism, domestic abuse

Linda says

For me, the best memoirs combine several storylines - several threads, if you will - into one cohesive story. This is the style of book I would like to one day write: a memoir, an unrelated topic that is nevertheless dear to me, smatterings of history, and a few unexpected asides, just to mix things up, all pulled together into one great story. JJ Lee's memories of parts of Canada brought me home again, and then, while I was there, he taught me previously unknown knowledge about the secretive world of men's tailoring. I'll never look at a fully buttoned suit jacket the same ever again.

Lorraine says

The subtitle describes the book perfectly. As Lee works at remaking his only legacy from his father, a suit, he unravels his past. He comes to understand his father's demons in some aspects and also comes to understand himself. Lee takes the book to another level by including fascinating info about the origins of men's suits and their stylistic components. He ranges from medieval knights to the French Revolution, Beau Brummell to the Duke of Windsor (Edward VIII), pre-revolutionary dandies to 60s "peacocks". I learned so much about how suits developed and changed over centuries. Who knew that men's fashion could be so interesting?

Joanne-in-Canada says

I'm tempted to say that you don't need to have sewing experience to enjoy this book, but realistically an interest in sewing, fashion or fabric will keep you more engaged. For sure, you'll never look at a suit the same way after reading this book!

Nice blend of three stories: the relationship between Lee and his father, Lee's time "apprenticing" for a tailor, and the history of suits and men's fashion. I make my usual complaint of some unnecessary repetition, in this case, of how to button (or not) a two-button jacket. I got it already!

Patricia says

If you have a less than perfect relationship with your dad - and I don't know many who haven't - then this book is for you. Plus you get to learn a lot about sartorial history and men's fashion, like - something that's oft repeated throughout the book - never button the last button on your suit jacket. I do have to admit though, that the fashion history elements were a little head-spinning for me, even with the hand-drawn illustrations. I also had to sometimes grasp at the connection between the history of the suit lapel and the stages of JJ's painful relationship with his dad (with some transitions being smoother than others). However, in the end, this was an emotionally satisfying book. The journey felt as real and authentic as my own relationship with my father; JJ didn't completely absolve his father for his childhood but in the end, he does come to a deeper understanding of his father and JJ's relationship with him.

Favourite scenes in the book: the department store scene; the boxing scene (which JJ talked about at the Word on the Street in Vancouver and which brought many in the audience to tears). Read it and you'll know what I mean.

Mj says

The Measure of a Man: The Story of a Father, a Son, and a Suit is the first full-length book written by J.J. Lee (the son in the story.) Nominated for a number of non-fiction literary awards, I was expecting to enjoy a well-written book in one of my favourite genres - memoirs of a personal nature.

It turns out I should have taken the “complete” book title literally. It is not just about a Father and a Son; it is about a Suit as well. I was anticipating that the suit would be a supporting actor, sort of a prop in the father/son relationship. Instead, the author featured the suit in a starring role with what felt like equal time for the suit on its own when compared to the time spent on the father and son combined.

Lee writes very well. For a debut work, I was impressed. His word choices were judicious without being pretentious and I am grateful to have easily expanded my vocabulary by reading this book. However, for my tastes, this book had a bit of a split personality so I did not appreciate the book to its fullest potential. Lee has written a history/biography on the history of men’s fashion, by treating the suit as a major character and expanding on how it changed over the years. In addition, he writes a memoir about his own life growing up with a father whose choice of suits and exterior impressions presented to the world were important to him.

Lee’s approach to writing the book was original and unique. He weaves the history of the development of men’s clothing over hundreds of years, particularly the suit, with his own personal story of his father/son relationship, primarily because the suit was of such strong importance to his father. Also Lee held strong memories of his father. Upon his father’s passing he inherited his father’s suit after the family selected cremation rather than open casket. Lee kept the suit for many years in a closet before deciding to alter it to fit himself. It seems the suit became a big part of Lee’s grieving process and also his coming to terms with his father and their relationship and letting to and moving on.

As mentioned, I found the writing excellent in the suit portion of the book. It is well researched, and with an extra feature of interesting illustrations of fashion changes done in black ink line drawings by Lee himself. Lee’s referencing of resources is also well done and he provides some excellent reading suggestions for readers interested in learning more about developments in men’s fashion industry.

J.J. Lee also wrote a memoir in the book about his personal life and growing up years as the son of Japanese immigrants. Living with an absent and alcoholic father who abused his wife physically and emotionally was particularly influential on Lee’s development. Though his father did not seem to abuse Lee or his three siblings physically; he was emotionally abusive and physically absent. None of the children received their father’s love, attention and guidance so important to flourishing and growing up to achieve one’s fullest potential. Typical of alcoholics, Lee’s father often changed jobs, moved his family frequently and had his family living in poverty due to his extensive spending on alcohol and unnecessary risk-taking in his numerous failures in his many get rich quick schemes. Lee and his siblings’ formative years were totally lacking in any sense of stability. This part of The Measure of a Man was where I experienced my connection and engagement with the story the most. Lee really drew me into the moment and had me feeling what he was feeling. I thought Lee’s insight was excellent and while he did not share as much as I would have preferred (I sense that Lee is very reserved by nature); I definitely experienced the pain he felt. His many

dashed hopes and longings strongly came through. This part of the story was very powerful and I only wish he shared more of it with us.

Lee took a unique approach to writing the story. He tied in the history of the development of men's clothing over hundreds of years, particularly the suit, with his own personal story. He did so because part of the story was about his attempt to take apart a suit of his dad's that he received after his dad's death that he wanted to re-cut it due to the large size differential between his father and himself. Lee mentioned that the purpose for this process was to figure out what he would have learned from his father had his father been there for him. His dad was big into suits and looking good and Lee wanted to understand more of what motivated his father. He also wanted to understand himself more and how as an adult, he measured up as a man and how he might fare when compared to his dad. He wondered if he could fill his dad's shoes/suit given the chance, despite being so lacking in direction and instruction from his father growing up.

Perhaps if I was a suit or even a fashion aficionado I might have enjoyed the book more. Don't get me wrong - I did enjoy the suit portion of the story and felt Lee did a good job of making the suit story informative. It just didn't really grab me and absorb me into the suit's story. It is not what I was expecting.....and honestly I don't think I would enjoy any stand-alone story about the transition of men's clothing and suits in particular over the ages. It's just not something I am interested in or would choose as a stand-alone book.

While the combination of the two stories was unique, I think the author may have done a disservice to each story. The personal memoir portion I felt was 3 1/2 star worthy but could have been 4 star if written as the only memoir with more fleshing out and more meat on the bones. I would have liked to learn more about Lee's mom and his siblings and I also would have liked Lee to write more about some harder issues, and show more of his vulnerability. He seemed to be holding back, which of course is an author's prerogative.

I also suspect that people who would prefer reading about the history of a suit and are not too interested in a touchy, feeling personal memoir would have preferred more fashion information and less of the personal memoir. The suit memoir was 2 1/2 star worthy for me. I doubt making it any longer would have changed my rating. It was well-written, well-researched. I learned a lot, enjoyed the drawings and was impressed by the quotes and references. The rating is low simply due to personal taste.

Overall my rating is 3 stars. (2 stars for the suit portion due to my lack of interest and 3 1/2 stars for the personal memoir portion - a subject I was much more interested and therefore enjoyed the content more and made a much better connection with the story and the family members in it. I think there are excellent possibilities for separating the sections and publishing as is, or better yet, with the personal memoir in particular, possibly dig deeper and share more. The suit biography is possibly sufficient as is or perhaps could be flushed out more; although it would be best to check the views of people who are more interested in such a book than myself. I can see 2 books instead of 1 and possibly 2 4 star ratings rather than a hybrid 3 star rating.

Note: some future editing pending if more time allows

Alexis says

Absolutely loved this book. The author decides to alter his father's suit and this brings him to an exploration of his relationship with his father, a troubled and violent alcoholic. Interspersed with this is an exploration of the social history of the suit and menswear, and the author's apprenticeship with old school tailors. I was

amazed by the sheer amount of information in this book, and by how much I learned from reading it. The author is a good descriptive writer, and I was surprised by how emotional I felt while reading this story.

Highly recommended!

Sharon says

Funny, thoughtful, and moving, with tons of fascinating factoids about men's fashion, history, and culture.

Jack Beaton says

I'll never look at a suit the same way again. Really thoughtful.

Rick says

JJ Lee writes an autobiographical book about his relationship with his father. He frames the story around a suit of his father's which he decides he is going to modify. I like the parts of the book that tell the story about his relationship with his father. It is a real life account of the conflict between the love and hate that people experience when in a dysfunctional relationship with a family member. Lee does a masterful job of expressing the emotions he feels throughout his life. I do however, feel that Lee's account of his life in the tailor shop, his description of the alterations he makes to his father's suit and finally his brief forays in fashion history are too much of a distraction. I find the book disjointed and at times very dry. It's hard for me to recommend this book to anyone but those who are very interested in the fashion industry.

Phoenix says

3.5 stars in truth, for me. This book was a fascinating mix of memoir and fashion history. I'm not entirely sure it pulled together as strongly as I was hoping, but the author's writing was very precise and sincere. This one is worth your time, especially if you're mens fashion enthusiast. Part of me wants to say that it was the author's intention to have the seemingly disparate elements of his story remain somewhat separate even when it reaches its climax, where there is some unity admitted between the three stories of himself, his father and the progression of the suit they share across generations. However, another part of me wants to say that the separate elements, although each compelling in their own right don't string together as seamlessly (ugh two puns I didn't initially intend) at the end of the tale as they should have.

At the end of the day though, I enjoyed this book. I would even welcome a sequel to this, although I'm not sure what the subjects of that book would be.

Judith says

Quite a touching story about a father, his son and the memories the son relives while altering his father's suit. Definitely a worthy read.

Magdelanye says

After years of hanging in the back of his closet, JJ Lee's father's suit became part of a larger project. While carefully unpicking the jackets' stitches to tailor it to fit himself, he began to unravel the tangled history he shared with his glamorous, dangerous parent. Along the way he gives us history lessons from a less lofty perspective than an academic, but one somehow more reflective of the reality that prevailed as fashion changed to accommodate it.

Confession: I never planned to actually read this book. Drawn to it by the Canada Reads longlist, it seemed to me the least interesting. The title was unappealing to my feminist sensibilities, and I am not so interested in fashion. I have never thought a suit attractive on a man, I rather dislike them and their white collar connotations. Not only all that. It isn't even a new release but written over a decade ago. Alas, when I made my first raid on the library in search of longlist titles and to place my holds, this was the only one on the shelf, tucked away in the sewing section.

I took it home. The plan was to flip through it in a measured way and return it on my next trip, just to make an acquaintance. I was charmed by the little black and white drawings that illustrate the text. I found no other reference so I am concluding JJ did them himself. This, as well as his lively humility, curious nature and the ease of his writing, endeared him to me. I read the whole book and found it interesting and moving and surprisingly easy to relate to.

Fashion matters because every day people get up in the morning and, with the palette of clothes they find in their closets and dressers, they attempt to create a visual poem about a part of themselves that they wish to share with the world. p53

Measure of a Man skillfully weaves together his personal history and a history of fashion interspersed with an account of his apprenticeship at Modernize Tailor, an old Vancouver establishment. From Bill and the other tailors there he drew in the acceptance and guidance he needed to complete his own coming of age, and the sewing skills to restore his father's suit.

I am disappointed he did not get to show it off as a finalist. Irregardless, this is a book that all Canadians could benefit from reading, and it set a really high bar for the rest of the contenders.

Bibi says

I picked up this book from the counter with book suggestions for Father's Day. Right from the beginning, the reader is made aware that the author's father has died; the trajectory of the narration is not in strict chronological manner. In fact, there are significant chunks of text which refers to the origins of menswear and the evolution of style and onward to the social mores of what in today's term is the business suit. At times, I wondered if this book is merely the outcome of a research project with sporadic interjection about JJ Lee's family. This would account for my generous 3 star rating.

There was nothing overly spectacular about Lee's family. His father was sent to Canada to live with his grandparents hopefully because his own parents felt that he would have a better life. He grew up in Montreal and given the time period, it was not surprising to learn that he received a beating/spanking over the years by his great grandfather and also by the Jesuit educators at the school he attended. Senior Lee appeared to be flamboyant, was an impeccable dresser - his repertoire included large patterned ties, aviator glasses, and bold cufflinks. His dad felt that to get ahead, one must be properly attired. In fact, here is an excerpt from the book:

The next morning my father set me down at the foot of the bed.

"What does one need to live?"

"Food?"

"Wrong," he said. "You can spend \$50 on food or \$1,000. At the end of the month you will have nothing. If you spend \$1,000 on how you dress, if you look good, clean, and presentable, you will never go hungry. Someone will always give you a chance to work for them. Then you can eat. Do you understand?"

His father showed him how to make a tie knot and how to be discerning about fabrics merely by the touch. This may have influenced his career as the author is a menswear columnist for the Vancouver Sun. He never did credit his father for the direction of his career. He was focussed on never repeating the mistakes and folly of his father who he resented for not being able to provide a better life for his family. His father, over the years turned to alcohol and made poor business decisions. His relationship with his wife deteriorated. He physically abused her when drunk. She left him and the children, and many years later, reconciled with him only to leave him again. He left Montreal for the west coast - Vancouver- where he died.

JJ Lee's recount of his memories of his father and his early years were suffocated amidst elaborate historical account of the evolution of menswear much the same as if JJ Lee is writing articles for his journalistic columns. While very interesting, I found it distracted from his personal story. I did learn quite a bit about lapels, notched collars and peaked collars, number and placement of buttons, colours and fabric, and much about coat tails, pleated pants and tight/slim fits, and the impact of jeans.

JJ's affinity to the tailor shop in Vancouver and his relationship with the owners provided solace for him and he attributed that to the lack of strong Chinese male role models in his life. In any event, writing this book must have been therapeutic for him. He writes eloquently - excellence in his words and prose. His sources are well referenced and the overall take way is that

You can look good in a suit no matter what figure you've got.

Also:

A man should look as if he has bought his clothes with intelligence, put them on with care, and then forgotten all about them.

The last part, he relates to James Bond - *climb out of a submarine and come out of it on land, shake yourself, and you're ready for the diplomatic reception without a moment's pause or a look in the mirror.*

It was just an okay book for me.
