

KATE FLETCHER

Kate Fletcher is a fashion and sustainability pioneer, design activist, writer, and research professor at the Centre of Sustainable Fashion, University of the Arts London. Over the last two decades, her original thinking has infused the field of fashion, textiles and sustainability, and she has released over fifty scholarly and popular publications in the field, most recently *Design and Nature: A Partnership*, and *Wild Dress: Clothing & the Natural World*.

ANIA ZOLTKOWSKI: Your new book, *Wild Dress*, explores where garments and the natural world meet. What was your intention in writing this?

KATE FLETCHER: My intention was to try to change the story. For the most part, I think that work around fashion – including work around fashion and sustainability – puts humans at the top of a hierarchy and nature at the bottom. Nature remains unseen, misunderstood, and subjugated. Nature is seen as a dead resource, separate to humans. It tends to overlook relationships, causing us to establish a world full of disconnections. It distances us from the consequences of our actions. So I started to write *Wild Dress* in part to make sense of the opposite experience, and to fold together clothing and nature, layering them, blending them, both to show the many interdependencies and the futility of acting as if it was not so. It's a personal book. I use "life writing" and direct sensory experience to unfold the world of garments and nature, to tell stories of a new relationship.

ANIA: I love the idea that you present – 'a wardrobe that welcomes wildness'.

What does this mean to you?

KATE: By this, I mean a wardrobe that makes for closer ties with the life on our changing planet. This could be, for instance, pieces that ground us in the soil (literally) or the health of our communities. I am interested in clothes and capabilities: what real freedoms do they enable? What do they allow us to do, to become?

ANIA: How do you think garments can enhance our understanding of our intrinsic interconnection with nature and with one another?

KATE: Garments can connect us to nature courtesy of being what they are: a steady companion, our second skin, ushering us into places and situations, acting as an enabler, a portal. Sometimes clothes act as a barrier, keeping the world out. At other times they are like a kaleidoscope, totally changing our experience of things, altering what we see, what we know, what we take responsibility for.

ANIA: So many of us within the sustainability space are so focused on numbers, measuring, analysis, checklists that we forget to actually develop an experiential relationship with that which we are "sustaining" – nature itself, which seems quite at odds with what we are trying to do. How does your relationship with the natural world relate to your work in sustainable fashion?

KATE: Certainly, *Wild Dress* is different from the fashion and sustainability knowledge gained from measurement, classifying, and naming. It's about relationship and care. I grew up in a working-class family in a depressed northern British city. It wasn't a nature-based childhood – in fact, it was quite the opposite – there was no green space where I lived (I can even remember the first time that I saw a leaf unfold on a tree – I was sixteen), but I knew how to care for things. A caring relationship with nature doesn't

just mean tending to the pristine wild spaces, but to all of it: the abundance, the craziness, the dirt, the rawness, the life, the clothes. This is our world, to which our hope and fate are tied.

ANIA: What is your vision for the fashion and textile design space, and how do you think we could achieve this?

KATE: I see design as needing to foster a new relationship with nature, in which the legacy of modernity – mastery, control, "progress" – is thrown off and design instead embraces interdependency and humility. This requires us to shift our relationship with Earth and to make ourselves, and perhaps even our fabrics and garments, smaller and less central. Nature needs more of the attention that some of us give to ourselves and the things we make.

ANIA: Who would you name as your key influences, and what have they taught you?

KATE: I see *Wild Dress* as a variety of nature writing, and I've been hugely influenced by Nan Shepherd, Annie Dillard, and Kathleen Jamie. In terms of the method of life writing, I have been made bolder by Cynthia Chambers. These women all taught me to observe closely, to feel and laugh, to work with details, "to write with the blood of an actual life."

'Wild Dress: Clothing & the Natural World', was published by Uniform Books in May 2019, and *'Design and Nature: A Partnership'* was released by Routledge in September 2019.

