Under the Fashion Juggernaut

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In the popular mind, male fashion designers, like flight attendants, hairdressers, and interior decorators, are assumed to be gay, and not without reason. A few names come to mind: Balenciaga, Dior, Givenchy, Cardin, St. Laurent, Lagerfeld, Valentino, Dolce and Gabbana, Armani, Versace, Franco Moschino, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler, Halston, Bill Blass, Calvin Klein, Geoffrey Beene, Stephen Burrows, Clovis Ruffin, Tom Ford, Michael Kors, Marc Jacobs, Isaac Mizrahi—not to mention the legendary Charles James, who, rumor had it, used to fit his dresses on Puerto Rican boys in his room at the Chelsea Hotel. Yet no one has written about the strange symbiosis between gay men and the straight women who wear their clothes, go to their fashion shows, write about them, and find an excitement in the fashion industry that may mystify non-fashionistas, but certainly surpasses, for some of us, anything that happens in the NFL.

Dana Thomas' book is about two gay British designers, John Galliano and Alexander McQueen, and their remarkably parallel careers. Both were gay sons of working-class families—Galliano's father was a butcher, McQueen's drove a cab—and both were bullied for being sissies when they were growing up. Both had mothers who supported their interest in clothes. Both went to an arts school in London called Central Saint Martins. Both went to gay clubs—McQueen to gay clubs in London. He said, go to YouTube and watch McQueen's shows, and you may understand why this book was written. Both were helped by aristocratic women who spotted their talent. Both were hired by Bernard Arnault, the French billionaire who built the luxury conglomerate LVMH, to head famous fashion houses. Both became the fashion equivalent of rock stars, with total creative freedom.

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Both McQueen and Galliano became the fashion equivalent of rock stars, with chauffeured cars and total creative freedom. Fun because, after McQueen sold his company to Gucci for $25 million, he chartered a jet one night to fly with his boyfriend to Spain for cocktails, Paris for dinner, and Amsterdam for clubbing. Fun because he took another boyfriend to Africa after buying all the first-class seats in the upstairs lounge of a 747 so they could be alone. Fun because Galliano, who began each day by jogging through Paris with a professional trainer, got his idea for his infamous hobo-inspired fashion show from the homeless men he passed under the bridges. Fun because, when Bernard Arnault called Galliano in after hearing reports of his drinking and told him he had to enter rehab, Galliano stood up, opened his shirt, and said: “Does this look like the body of an alcoholic?” Fun because McQueen “bought the huge Swarovski chandelier he saw in the Four Seasons George V lobby for 30,000 pounds—just so he could use the crystals to decorate his Christmas tree back home in London.” As Andrew Leon Talley, the Vogue editor, put it: “The divadom. The divadom.

Divadom is fun to read about even when it’s not. This book is filled with self-destruction, disloyalty, megalomania, betrayals, overdoses, and cocaine. (“He was spending 600 pounds a night,” a friend of McQueen’s said. “He had five dealers.”) Isolation seems to have gone along with grandeur. Galliano would deal with the pressure by refusing to get out of bed, even on the day he was invited to Buckingham Palace to be given an award by the Queen. The more down-to-earth McQueen was all alone at the end when he attempted suicide, first by slitting his wrists and, when that failed, by hanging himself from the shower head, and after that buckled, from the pole in his closet. (Bingo.) The two men’s lives confirm every cliché about fashion one has ever entertained, including, in McQueen’s case, the obligatory trip to India and the dalliance with Buddhism—the search for peace with which Charles Ludlam opened his play about the very gay fashion designer Claude Caprice.

Caprice seems to have been the bane of the two men’s existence—not just their own whims, but the passionately judgmental audience at their fashion shows, who wanted to be astonished, amused, moved to tears, and transported by a new way to dress. Thomas’ descriptions of these shows are like the recreations of long-forgotten Broadway shows that we remember only for their songs, which can be tedious because she leaves nothing out: where they got the theme, who did the music, hair, makeup, hats, accessories, and lighting, and who was in the front row. (That said, go to YouTube and watch McQueen’s The Horn of Plenty show, and you may understand why this book was written.) Both McQueen and Galliano created narratives for the collections they were showing (“a ravished Russian royal named Princess Lu-

Andrew Holleran's novels include Grief and The Beauty of Men.