generation" long before she wrote this book, on account of *Girls*, which follows four fictional friends, young women of college leaving age, as they blunder around New York looking for work and love, though not for husbands. It is exceptional in that, unlike most television of this sort, it aims at moral and physical realism. These girls go back to dingy apartments with sorry examples of manhood, there to have clumsy and ungratifying sex for reasons they can't really explain afterwards. They are not especially nice girls, but motivated principally by egoism, appetite and a wounded sense of entitlement. They go about letting everyone down and feeling sorry for themselves. Dunham plays the principal character, Hannah Horvath, as a self-obsessed, unstoical little monster, much given to exhibitionism – providing her with the opportunity to direct herself in every kind of unflattering light and posture, and perform a public service for the real girls watching. As she says, "When you're naked, its nice to be in control".

The purpose here, again, is not to show these girls as exceptionally gauche or degenerate, but as typical young women of their type and times. In 2014, Celia defecates. She drinks your last beer and then she defecates again, and passes out, and is so busy sobbing over some minuscule perceived slight that she leaves with your keys in her pocket.

Dunham has cited influences from British television comedies to Gloria Steinem as the source of her inspiration. I don't know if among all this the name of Eloise, the heroine of Thompson and Knight's children's books who is six and lives in the Plaza Hotel, has ever come up. As every New Yorker knows, Eloise spends her days scampering about the hotel with her knickers showing, populating the public rooms with her fantasies and leaving a trail of chaos. A child looks hungrily at this licence and glamour, and at the same time half-intuits another truth: that Eloise is a lonely child who glimpses her socialite mother in such traces as a high-heeled sandal, size 3½, or the smoke-ribbon of a lawyer's cigar. That is the genius of the book.

The girls of *Girls* are a bit like this: their riotous self-absorption reads as a freedom and a privilege, a feminist victory over the old nurturing imperatives – but we can also see what a mess they're in. Disloyalty costs friends. Self-absorption limits the view. Though there is no question of seeing the error of their ways – the whole point is that they can't see any such thing – Dunham still shows her characters as victims of their own small monstrousness, and keeps them on the side of our sympathy.

Not That Kind of Girl redeploys many of the elements of the television show, returning them to their biographical source. In chapters divided into themes like "Love and Sex", "Body" and "Friendship", Dunham, an almost-real-life Hannah Horvath, shows herself at all ages running around drunk and out of hand, sleeping with people who work for her, being thoughtless, egotistical, priggish and frighteningly eccentric. It is brave and very funny, with beautiful comic timing at the narrative level as well as stylistically. All the same, the comedy of *Girls* doesn't quite translate to memoir. For a start, the paradox of Dunham's self-awareness – how can you be this perceptive about your own lack of perceptiveness? – clearly works better as a fiction, when you can load the unperceptive bit onto a fictional alter ego and retain authorial clarity, rather than occupy both positions at once. Also, the masterly balance of badness and sadness, achieved in *Girls* through the dramatic operation of character on character, doesn't transfer to memoir, where the writer must attack and defend herself at the same time to get the same effect. Here, Dunham mercilessly deprecates herself, but then rushes round to mitigate the circumstances and head off any negative impressions we might have received. There is something superb about this, but tiring, like watching sheepdog trials.

The chapter headed "Girl Crush: That time I was almost lesbian, then vomited" is a good example of Dunham having it both ways. Here, she meets a young English playwright, "Nellie", in London, and ends up back at her house being sick on the carpet. The episode is couched in terms of self-reproach – Lena drunk, overexcited, irresolute, Lena disloyal to the friends she's stood up – yet she manages to convey to us that "Nellie" is both sinister and pretentious, and a violation has taken place.

Then there's "Barry", a chapter about whether the sex she had with the eponymous man was or was not consensual. At the centre of the story, there is Lena behaving badly, determined to go off with this creep, and giving him more encouragement than not. On the periphery, though, Dunham nips about, planting doubt ("I'm an unreliable narrator") and contradiction ("you were raped!") until, without exactly letting herself off the hook, or directly saying that "Barry" is a rapist, we know what conclusion to draw.

If ever there was a case of "when you're naked, it's nice to be in control" here it is. Doubtless the thought will occur to Nellie and Barry, too, if they read it. Still, disingenuousness is a besetting problem with all exercises in self-exposure; Lena Dunham is not the first to encounter it, any more than she's the first girl to be sick on the carpet. She is, though, the first girl with her own HBO series, and we should all be pleased that that girl is her.

Lost trousers

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Vivienne Westwood and Ian Kelly

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Vivienne Westwood grew up in a working-class home in Derbyshire during the war. Her father was a greengrocer and her mother worked at the local cotton mill. There were few books in the house – "we were encouraged to make more than read" – and her mother, "a demon sewer and knitter", made the clothes for the three children (Westwood is the eldest). The family motto was "Do it Yourself". Westwood claims that at the age of five she could have made a pair of shoes.

Rationing meant there were certain objects Westwood knew of but couldn't have: "my most precious possession was a matchbox with bits of broken glass inside copied from a friend's make-up compact, which had fake gems and pearls. I coveted the idea of a single peacock feather, but this seemed too exotic to ever hope for". And fashion was politicized: everyday you saw "utility clothes", with a certain number of pockets and no turn-ups because fabric was scarce. "Even as you pulled on your navy-blue utility knickers, you knew there was war and there was want and that you were part of it." When she was fifteen, she made herself a tight pencil skirt – "it was like changing from a child to a woman overnight . . . a thrill I'll remember forever" – and huge earrings made from marguerites that caused the frontman of a band to stop playing and call out to her across the crowd. It's an example of Westwood's unabashed conviction that wearing extraordinary clothes can give you a better life.

After a brief stint at art college in Harrow, and then as a primary school teacher, she married Derek Westwood and had a son. Then she met Malcolm McLaren, the manager of the Sex Pistols, with whom she began customizing T-shirts with metal studs, functioning nipple zips, chains, subversive slogans ("How To Make a Molotov Cocktail") and images (Disney characters in sex positions), appliquéd boiled chicken bones spelling out "ROCK", and bicycle-tyre rubber sewn onto the arm holes. In 1977, the year of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, Westwood put a safety pin through the lip of Elizabeth II on a T-shirt which became the iconic uniform of the punk movement in the late 1970s and early 80s. All the T-shirts were first sold at McLaren and Westwood's shop on the King's Road in Chelsea, renamed several times to reflect the evolving styles of clothes. At one stage it was called "SEX"; the letters on the façade were made out of pink rubber, with an aphorism from Thomas Fuller ("Craft must have clothes, but truth loves to go naked") written underneath and, inside – which was made to look like a suburban living room in the 1950s – flying penises were graffitied on the walls. These T-shirt designs were thereafter the staples of her eponymous fashion house.

The importance of material and the way in which design can tell a story become increasingly significant. Westwood created "bondage kecks", for example, from luxurious cotton sateen in the 1970s, which had a strap binding one knee to the other and a zip under the perineum, inspired by fetish wear and its paradoxical empowerment of constriction. In the 1980s and early 90s, she developed corsets and tailoring that enhanced the latent eroticism of historical clothing. She printed Boucher's painting "Shepherd Watching a Sleeping Shepherdess" onto a corset and paired it with drop-pearl earrings and platform shoes for the catwalk show, "as though the woman is on a pedestal" and has

Vivienne Westwood, 1977

"stepped out of a painting". For her "Britain Must Go Pagan" collections in the late 80s, she brought new life to traditional British Harris tweed by combining it with sensual ancient Greek drapery ("debutantes going to balls but with a Barbour flung over their ballgown"), as well as printing pornographic images onto John Smedley knitted underwear. Flesh-coloured leggings with fig leaves appliquéd on the crotch, she delights in telling us, were put with Regency-style jackets, "like a man who is perfect, but just lost his trousers because he has been having sex".

The toxic relationship between Westwood and McLaren is by far the most affecting part of the book. McLaren lost his virginity to Westwood, which "trapped him into accidental fatherhood". Instead of having an abortion, they decided to use the money to buy "dirty-turquoise" tweed fabric to make Westwood a skirt. Raised by his eccentric grandmother, whose proverbs included "to be good is bad", McLaren, with his unpredictable behaviour and presence, was exhausting for the whole family. He refused to let their son, Joseph Corré (who went on to found the lingerie company Agent Provocateur), call him daddy. He bought a cactus for the household and whenever Joseph called him daddy he instructed him to address the cactus instead. Yet without him, punk – which changed the way Britain saw its music, fashion and itself – would not have happened. "There was no punk before me and Malcolm", Westwood says. "And the other thing you should know about punk too: it was a total blast."

The book takes the form of an extended interview. Ian Kelly is a first-person compiler, interjecting with summations that can be sentimental, infused with fashion-speak (it's "My Year of Magical Blinging") or patronizing (models are "girls", who "have in common only their preternatural beauty, height and need for a good meal"). Another downfall of this otherwise imaginative auto-cum-biographical technique is its lack of sharper editing. For such a richly produced book full of beautiful photographs and sketches, it's disappointing to find repetitions and inconsistencies. But Vivienne Westwood's voice is authentic and compelling, as are the quotations from her family and friends. "The Greeks wanted clothes, like art, to express more than physical beauty", she says. "If clothes can't express our higher aspirations as human beings then they are not doing their job."