

If the suit fits WEAR IT

Canadian author JJ Lee explores the relationship between sons, fathers and well-tailored suits

Theresa Tayler
CALGARY HERALD

Call it a rite of passage, a coming of age experience or a turning point — just don't call it shopping.

That inaugural trip to the tailor is not to be taken lightly. As Canadian fashion columnist and author JJ Lee will tell you, a young lad's first suit can lead the foray into manhood.

"Women have their wedding day and the prom dress. That first suit for a man is about being ready for the world," says Lee, who will speak about his first book, *The Measure of a Man, The Story of a Father, a Son and a Suit*, tomorrow at WordFest.

In his often heartbreaking yet humorous and compelling memoir, Lee reveals a story that centres around his father, once a successful restaurateur with a closet full of beautifully tailored suits, who slowly loses his battle with alcoholism.

After his dad's passing, Lee decides to alter his father's last remaining suit for himself. Through the process, the writer discovers much more than just how to measure, stitch and sew.

Woven into the autobiographical storyline of Lee's childhood are tidbits about the social history of the suit and how a simple fashion statement can create tension between generations.

"Buying that first suit can be a moment between a father and a son. You're 13 or 14 years old and you probably already

hate your father, but you're going to do this very male thing — find a suit — and you begin to see that your father actually knows what he's talking about," Lee says.

"You have to trust the men in the shop to help you figure this suit out and make you look great. It's a sharing of a masculine experience that relies on older men passing their knowledge to the younger men."

It was while completing a radio documentary about the history of the suit that Lee first mulled over the idea of writing a book.

Finding one of his father's old navy blue suits tucked away in the back of the closet inspired Lee to apprentice under a master tailor. Somewhere in between cutting and re-sizing the forgotten garment, the writer began to pen together the events he remembers as being pivotal points in his childhood. From the first moments his father's drinking began to affect the family, to the day when Lee's mother finally had enough and left, to much later in life when Lee experienced a brief moment of bonding with his dad over a hearty Thanksgiving dinner, Lee dives into his past with a reflective glance.

"It's a book of accumulated wisdom," Lee explains.

"What I went through was a journey through my life with him. I worked hard to try to get to know him by proxy."

While Lee's childhood appears to be fraught with trauma and abuse, the writer's tone does not come across as 'woe is me.' Lee's writing paints the picture of a family simply doing their best to keep things going, one day at a time. "(The book) wasn't born out of some weird post traumatic shock, but more out of optimism. I knew things were bad at that time and I blamed my father. But, I didn't know that I was traumatized — I

just constantly wished for things to be better," Lee says.

"I never felt like a victim. In fact, I feel closer to my father now that I've had the time to reflect on him. The way he dressed, the person he was... The way you dress can be a conversation among generations sometimes."

As an adolescent, Lee begins to experiment with style for the first time, finding himself sartorially along the way. First fashion milestone: punk-rocking up one of his grandfather's old suits by adding a studded belt and yellow and black-checked shirt — his clothing and personal esthetic begin to reflect the man Lee is becoming.

Unlike traditional fashion-focused reading, *The Measure of Man's* pages are not full of style tips or trend trivia.

Lee describes his first memoir as a smart fashion book.

"It's an approach to dress that touches home and reaches to the core of men's ambivalent feelings toward clothing," Lee says.

"It's a serious meditation on why we wear suits and what's up with them and why do they make us feel so strange? I want the reader to never look at the suit the same way again. Because they're rich with history, full of possibility and they distil a quality upon a man like no other."

Born in Eastern Canada, Lee eventually ended up settling in B.C., where he studied architecture. He lives in the New Westminster with his wife and twin boys, and writes fashion columns for the Vancouver Sun, broadcasts for CBC radio and works as a creative consultant for a design firm.

While the dapper fashion writer can tell you almost anything you need to know about evolution of the man's

staple wardrobe piece, he says at heart he's actually a "T-shirt and jeans kind of guy."

"But I look really good in a suit," he says with a laugh.

"I know what I'm doing, so when I'm at the office, I wear one. At home, in front of the computer or TV, that's a different story."

TTAYLER@CALGARYHERALD.COM



Canadian Journalist and author JJ Lee will appear this week at Calgary WordFest. For more information, visit wordfest.com.

■ JJ Lee will speak about his new novel, *The Measure of a Man*, Wed. Oct. 12, 12 to 1 p.m. Free at Hotel Le Germain Calgary.

■ JJ Lee will co-present (with Emma Ruby-Sachs and Lynn Coady) Social Publishing: Industry Insiders Thurs. Oct. 13 from 5 to 6 p.m., \$12 at The Auburn.

Courtesy, JJ Lee
Canadian fashion columnist JJ Lee will discuss his first book, *The Measure of a Man, The Story of a Father, a Son and a Suit*, at WordFest tomorrow.