

## Fashion at the edge

Jane Shilling

**Vivienne Westwood**

Vivienne Westwood and Ian Kelly

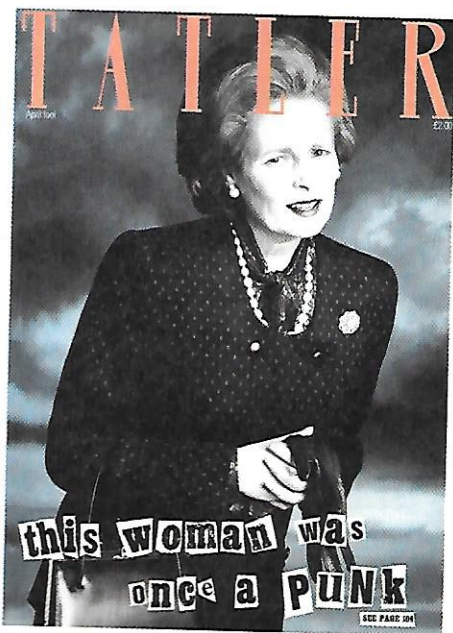
Picador, 464pp, £25

Among the images in Vivienne Westwood's handsomely illustrated biography is a photograph of her dressed as Margaret Thatcher, used on the cover of *Tatler* in April 1989. The resemblance is eerie. Westwood captures to perfection Thatcher's mannerisms: the forward-pitched stance and clasped hands; the disturbing contrast between her expression of strenuous compassion and the naked fanaticism of her gaze. Back in 1989, the teasing image said something sharply irreverent. A quarter of a century on, it gives an insight into the trajectory of Dame Vivienne, once the wayward urchin of British fashion, now its grande dame.

She was born Vivienne Isabel Swire on 8 April 1941, the eldest daughter of Gordon and Dora Swire, and grew up in the Derbyshire village of Hollingworth. It was, she recalls, "the most brilliant childhood". Money was short but there was freedom to roam in the countryside and Westwood was a bookish child with eclectic tastes.

In 1958, her parents moved to London to run a post office and grocery shop and Vivienne began a course in jewellery-making at the Harrow School of Art. There she became fascinated by the fashion influences of jazz, mods and rock'n'roll and began running up outfits from furnishing fabric. A brief marriage in 1962 produced a son, Ben, but she left her husband the following year and met Malcolm McLaren, who was five years her junior.

Both McLaren and Westwood later vehemently denied fancying one another. "I didn't want Malcolm at first but I did in fact end up getting pregnant by him," is how Westwood puts it, recalling that she was on her way to get an abortion when she had a Damascus change of mind and spent the money on a cashmere sweater. Malcolm was not the paternal type, so the burden of bringing up the children fell on her. She explains why she stayed with him: "I could develop by talking to him. Ideas are more important than everything, don't you see?" Her autodidactic passion for knowledge outlived the relationship, which ended in 1979 when she "lost interest in him intellectually". But for a heady, anarchic few years, her fascination with fashion and his magpie intellect combined in the variously monitored alembic that was 430 King's Road (at



different times the shop was known as Let It Rock, Too Fast To Live, Too Young To Die, SEX, Seditious and, eventually, Worlds End) to produce punk.

"Punk, for me and Malcolm at the shop, became a sort of bricolage: collecting ideas. Collecting people," Westwood says, and the spirit of the time is gloriously exemplified in a photograph of her with Chrissie Hynde, their bare behinds embellished with red letters spelling out "SEX".

"Malcolm wasn't terribly interested in the politics of it all," Westwood observes. "He just hated everybody" – including her. As punk imploded and the relationship with McLaren ended in debt and re-creation, Westwood responded with a flowering of creativity. She compares her innovations with those of Chanel, and designs such as the jersey tube skirt, the pirate boot and the stretch corset have entered the wider vocabulary of fashion in precisely the same way as Chanel's little black dress, masculine tailoring and flamboyant fake pearls.

But while Chanel's intellectual ambition was pretty much bounded by the walls of her studio on rue Cambon, Westwood has always seen the catwalk as an extension of the literary and political salon and vice versa. Her co-writer, Ian Kelly, argues that her importance as a cultural figure resides in "her conviction that clothing can change how people think. Fashion as agitprop."

Irksome in short quotations, the vaguely hyperbolic tone is less irritating once you get used to it. Although the biography is written in the third person, Westwood's trenchant voice and her superlative sense of self-belief rise pungently from the page. She is now 73, but, like that other iconic figure whom she once mischievously parodied, she shows every sign of going on and on. ●

## NS RECOMMENDS

### Forensics: the Anatomy of Crime

Val McDermid

In the 13th century, a coroner solved a murder in a Chinese village by lining up suspects with their sickles (the believed murder weapon) and waiting to see where the flies would land. It took the rest of the world a little longer to catch up – forensic science did not emerge in Europe until after the scientific advances of the late 18th and 19th centuries. The subject is no great departure for the novelist Val McDermid. She argues that crime fiction owes its existence to the development of an evidence-based legal system and she dissects the history of forensics through gripping stories of real-life crime.

Profile Books, 320pp, £18.99

### A Replacement Life

Boris Fishman

Frustrated by his lowly position as a researcher at a *New Yorker*-style magazine, the would-be writer Slava Gelman undertakes an unusual commission: forging restitution claims to the German government for his elderly Jewish-immigrant neighbours – regardless of whether they were affected by the Holocaust. Fishman's debut novel is piercing, witty and enviably well written. It is a tribute to the great assimilation narratives that populated American literature in the 20th century, an echo chamber of the genre. It asks where the line between truth and fiction lies and whether, in the case of history, anyone will ever know the difference.

One, 325pp, £12.99

### Common People

Alison Light

With the advent of *Who Do You Think You Are?* and ancestry.co.uk, family history seems to have lost any pretence of serious scholarship. This book is a welcome corrective to that – Alison Light demonstrates that it is possible to investigate your past in a way that is both intellectually sound and relevant beyond tedious dinner-table anecdotes. Her light, clear prose ties together the sprawl of eight family trees to make this work a refreshingly modern way of thinking about our past.

Fig Tree, 352pp, £20