

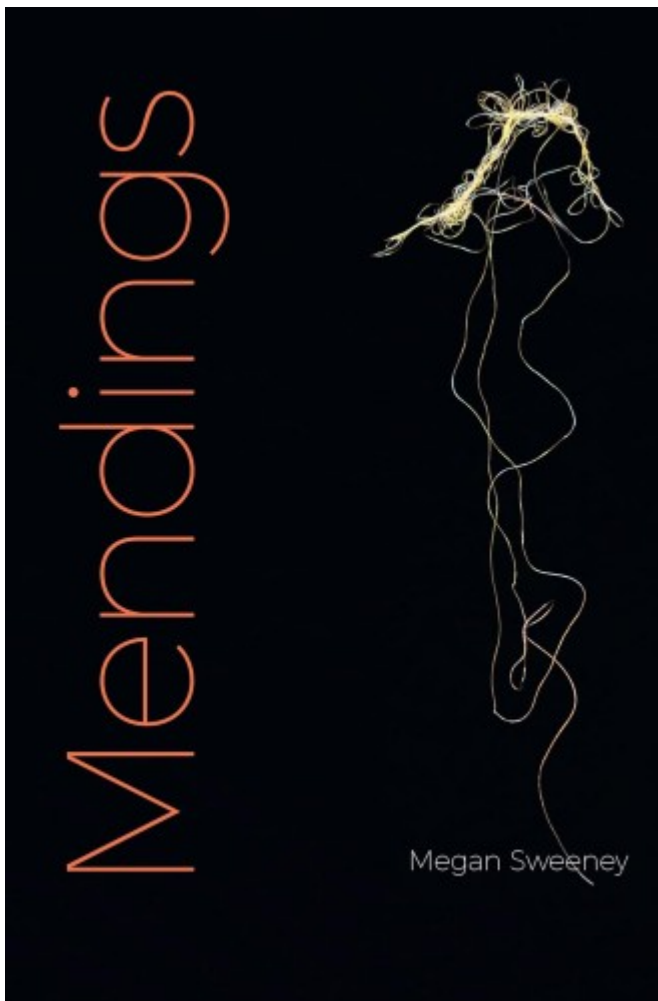
Dress and redress

In a blend of memoir and scholarly inquiry, Megan Sweeney challenges readers to take clothing seriously.

by [Céire Kealty](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue

Published on July 16, 2024

In Review



Mendings

By Megan Sweeney
Duke University Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Mendings opens on a familiar scene: tasked with cleaning house after the death of her parents, Megan Sweeney and her sisters sift through a lifetime of stuff. While her sisters are enthused to depart with familial excesses, Sweeney hesitates. She admits, “I need time to listen for the stories that objects tell, to dwell with my memories, to contemplate the pain next to equally powerful experiences of joy and bone-deep belonging.” Sweeney, professor of English at the University of Michigan, takes the stories among her familial debris seriously, and she approaches cloth and clothing as worthy objects of interpersonal exploration and reflection.

The result is a text bursting with stories of familial wear, tear, and repair writ large on keepsakes, or, as Sweeney calls them, “all-too-easily-discarded bits and pieces.” Across five chapters, Sweeney examines how her family’s stories reflect sartorial tasks, from salvaging to threading to mending. Throughout the book, Sweeney draws from prose and pictures to unravel the connections forged through textiles. Nearly every page intersperses personal anecdotes and theoretical reflection with pictures—of family photo collages, quilt squares, paintings, threads, and other relational fragments.

Word and image provide a sensorial feast for readers, who are invited to accompany Sweeney in her keepsake rummaging. In one chapter, she shares a paternal quilt, fashioned from garments and textiles rich with meaning to her father. Through text and textile, she displays how her “father is a quilt of many colors”—a parent who, like his own father, was alcoholic, withdrawn, and complicated through and through. In another chapter, Sweeney revisits childhood letters written to her mother, which make tangible the frays wrought through parent-child role reversal.

Throughout the book, Sweeney conveys how cloth and clothing encode in their very fibers memories and emotions, neither of which are neat or tidy. She writes of her mother, who rehabilitated Sweeney’s mutilated childhood dolls and static wardrobe staples to facilitate her evolution (and her tastes). Sweeney observes how beloved clothes, whether bought, made, or altered by her mother, mediate an “entanglement” between mother and daughter. This sartorial entanglement reveals “my mother. Caring for me through clothing.”

Mendings poignantly illustrates the “aliveness” of clothing, which becomes most apparent, paradoxically, after death. After her mother’s death, Sweeney takes two items from her mother’s bureau: an Irish wool cardigan whose pockets are full of used tissues and a ring fashioned from a great-uncle’s cuff link. “I can’t envision my mom’s hand—or my own—without this ring,” she muses. After her father’s death, she keeps one of his beloved garments: “a gorgeous paisley shirt from my husband and me.” She wears it around her house, drinking in the smell of his cologne. Later, when browsing a department store, Sweeney reaches for a men’s paisley tie and finds that “he was alive again, in a wave of warmth and fullness that made me pause and close my eyes.” She remarks that this tie is a silk lifeline to her father—a sartorial mediator of absent presence.

As equal parts memoir and scholarly inquiry, *Mendings* challenges its readers to take clothing seriously, not only as a medium for personal expression or interpersonal connection but as a conduit toward greater social understanding and participation. I experience this text and its challenge as ethical and spiritual in nature.

In terms of ethics, *Mendings* reveals how sartorial stories are not—and can never be—neutral. Sweeney confronts her clothed-ness as a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman and questions how her adorned form invites and inhibits connection. Her questioning gives way to broader reflections of power and privilege; they also lead her to grapple with the sociohistorical pain and environmental pollution that sartorial expansion has wrought on the world. By wrestling with ugly truths that are woven into beloved clothes, such as cotton clothing’s historical embeddedness in the transatlantic slave trade, Sweeney reveals how experiences and choices related to clothing “take place within broader social, ethical, and political realms.” Her inquiry also highlights an ethical imperative in dress: to seek redress.

Sweeney displays this redress in various forms, from her mother dressing her wounded confidence to Sweeney’s subsequent personal practices of dress and redress. Sweeney’s work also proves existential, as she asks: “What if my lifesaving practices . . . are actually life-threatening for others and the planet?”

Try as one might, contemporary discussions of clothing cannot be separated from the context in which it is produced: one of rampant overproduction and overconsumption, resource extraction, and waste colonialism (by which the Global North dominates the Global South through waste and pollution). Sweeney is keenly

aware of the United States' exportation of clothing castoffs to countries like Ghana and the deleterious environmental and humanitarian impacts resulting from this coercive trade agreement. Even presumed goodwill efforts—such as donating clothes—can do harm. Here she wonders, How can my individual actions ever make a difference? Such a question haunts many activists and informed citizens.

When trying to answer this question in my own work, I have found my footing best in theology. Although Sweeney occasionally gestures toward her religious upbringing in passing comments (recounting, for example, her routine rosary prayers and her father's decision to stop going to church), *Mendings* is not an explicitly theological text. Yet Sweeney's commentary is spiritually resonant. Her questions confront the broader hells wrought on God's creatures and creation through greedy, unfeeling commerce, and they refuse to let these hells have the final word. Sweeney rejects despair or resignation, and instead commits herself to mending the world.

Mendings is an exquisite text, whose purpose is summarized in Sweeney's invitation to embrace "the work of redress even when I know it may not matter, even if we can never know what might be 'enough.'" This book urges us to face the world's wounds and attune ourselves to the presences that empower us to mend, no matter what.