

The Meaning of September Text

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By Vanessa Friedman

So the end of summer has arrived. Actually, I know perfectly well it's not the end of summer, at least defined by temperature. According to a friend who emailed me recently about the issue of shorts in the office, many of us are in for a sweltering September. But it *is* the end of summer as defined by the calendar: Labor Day [the first Monday of September] or the August bank holiday being the symbolic seasonal bookend when you pack away your sporty whites and get out your plaid skirts and V-neck sweaters in preparation for school and the autumn. It's the end of summer in my head, and I'm not sure it'll ever catch up with reality.

It's possible that it will, of course. My theory is that most of life works on a time lag of sorts. Fashion certainly operates like this, as designers send out apparently crazy clothes – big clomping wedges! Playsuits! Puffa jackets! – that produce grimaces of horror in the onlooker for about six months, at which point your eye has become so saturated with the images that a switch in your brain tips, as Malcolm Gladwell would say, and suddenly you find yourself in Harrods or Barneys or Printemps, credit card out, Stella McCartney knit jumpsuit in hand, and visions of yourself curling up in front of a ski lodge fireplace dancing in your head – no matter if you don't ski. The implausible has become more than plausible: it has become desirable.

Politics also works like this: people you never could never imagine as a successful candidate campaign long enough until, come voting time, they seem suddenly very electable. (Or, like the ever-lengthening summer, they seem incomprehensible, but you're stuck with them anyway. I'll never forget my professional Manhattanite mother calling me up after George W. Bush won his second term and announcing, "I feel so disenfranchised!" More than four decades into her high-powered career, she had suddenly realised she was not exactly like the big red middle of the country.)

Last week there was Barack Obama (not so long ago seen by many as too green, or too multicultural), being cheered by a crowd of 70,000; this week there will be John McCain (latterly too old, too mad, and too unpredictable), shoulder-to-shoulder with the Republican faithful. Next month, there will be Gordon Brown (too boring, too uninspiring) and David Cameron (too young, too callow) trying to convince their respective parties that it's Their Time. And certainly at least one of them will succeed.

Personally, however, I don't think it's a coincidence that, as Michelle Obama pointed out in one of her post-convention speech interviews, while most of America thinks of September as the month the general election kicks off, it's also back-to-school time and (as she didn't point out, but I would like to) the time the women's ready-to-wear collections begin. We're all stuck in the temporal trap of introducing the new look/guy/whatever, come September.

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