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LITERARY FEATURE

Finally, a Bookstore That Sells Mesh Underwear

The book and fashion worlds have been flirting. At Climax, they're making out.

By Callie Holterman
For Hudson Literary Review

On a recent Saturday afternoon, a storefront on East Fourth Street in Manhattan emitted a mysterious pink glow. Vinyl film over the windows obscured its contents to passers-by. Customers left carrying parcels in sheer latex bags.

It was not a sex shop, but another kind of place that might make you tingle: a bookstore.

Inside Climax, a dealer of rare books and ephemera, a fashion design student wearing fringed boots flipped through a Vivienne Westwood monograph. Other shoppers — a musician, a stylist, a consultant and her obedient boyfriend — browsed collections of work by Juergen Teller and Martine Syms.

The aluminum shelves were punctuated with neon plastic erasers, a collection of short stories by Mary Gaitskill, assorted erotica and a guide to cake decorating from the 1970s. What did these offerings, which cost anywhere from \$4 to several hundred dollars, have in common?

"I think it's a feeling," said Isabella Burley, 35, who is easy to spot among the stacks because her hair is the shade of Twizzlers. The onetime editor of Dazed magazine, she is now the owner of this tiny East Village shop and its sister store in London, where she grew up.

A bad time for the world turned out to be a pretty good time to buy and sell books. Climax appeared online in September 2020 with a stock of about 100 items, half of which sold the first day.

Burley does most of the buying for Climax herself, online and at secondhand bookstores across the U.S., Europe and Japan. "The sourcing most of the time happens at 3 a.m., in bed, on my laptop, going down some crazy internet hole."

After a temporary takeover of the ground floor at the Sadie Coles gallery in London in 2023, Climax opened permanent storefronts in the East Village in 2024 and in Clerkenwell, London, in 2025.

Climax now hosts artist collaborations, literary signings, and the social media series "Under the Cover," featuring celebrities discussing their literary influences.

The rise of Climax reflects a broader cultural shift where books are symbols of identity, style, and creative taste.

Industry observers say the store has helped redefine what a modern bookstore can be.

"Stores like this are what make reading cool," said creative director Ava Nirui.



Burley, who has a background in fashion, stocks her shop based on her own taste and intuition. "I think it's a feeling," she said. Credit...Gabriela Herman for The New York Times



Isabella Burley lies on the floor of a sleek stainless steel space, wearing black furry slippers. Isabella Burley, the owner of Climax, an East Village shop that sells rare books and ephemera — as well as an array of playful merch.

Credit...Gabriela Herman for The New York Times

Climax, she said, is meant to be a place where a first edition of a 1994 photo book by Nan Goldin and Nobuyoshi Araki documenting youth subcultures in Tokyo might brush up against a collection of Marc Newson's spaceshipy interior design. "That sort of weird tension between things is more interesting to me than, 'Oh, we only sell fashion books.'"

The store is also breaking through in a moment of obsession with broadcasting one's personal taste. "The Gen Z girl who loves the Miu Miu show and buys everything thrifted — that's who is going to this shop and buying stuff," said Lauren Sherman, the host of the podcast "Fashion People" and

Burley's vision for Climax, with its dose of sex appeal, is particularly of the moment, Sherman added: "She's capturing what desire looks like right now."



Customers browsing on a recent afternoon. Credit...Gabriela Herman for The New York Times

During a lull between customers, Burley slipped off a pair of furry Phoebe Philo slides and settled in on a butter yellow bench in the corner of the store. She wore a silver necklace with the name of her dog, a spindly whippet named Bambi.

Like many book dealers, Burley started out as an obsessive collector. "It was really just like, 'I need this — I don't know why.'" Over about a decade, her collection expanded — until the pandemic gave her time to think about what to do with it all.

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Yet Burley's idiosyncratic taste has attracted a fashionable clientele. Alexa Chung and Paloma Elsesser are regulars; the store has hosted book signings for designers including Simone Rocha. In 2024, Climax released a \$250 set of ruffled mesh underwear in collaboration with the brand Chopova Lowena that swiftly sold out.

It's the latest brush between the fashion and literary worlds, which have been flirting for years now. Consider that Prada enlisted the author Ottessa Moshfegh to write short stories for a campaign last year, or that the designer Anna Sui staged her fall 2024 runway show in the Rare Book Room at the Strand.



A sleek, mirrored interior displaying colorful T-shirts.

Some customers come for books. Others are drawn to colorful T-shirts (\$100) or zip-up hoodies (\$185). Some tote their purchases out of the store in latex bags (\$200).

Credit...Gabriela Herman for The New York Times

Other visitors took home books by Gary Indiana and Sofia Coppola. A handful who came in seemed mostly focused on the store's \$185 hoodies and Day-Glo baby tees: One woman bought a yellow crop top that read "Dial 'C' for Climax" for \$100 and wore it out of the store.

Was there any concern that the "book" part of bookstore might be overshadowed as Climax grows? Burley cringes over "merch" and "content." But she increasingly thinks of Climax as a brand — and a place for discovery.

"We get people in the door with T-shirts and TikToks," she said. "Then they find the books."

Callie Holterman reports on style and pop culture for The Times.

ABOUT THE FEATURE

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FEATURE HIGHLIGHTS

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- ★ Celebrity clientele & tastemakers
- ★ Boutique bookstores shaping culture
- ★ NY & London flagship locations
- ★ Literature meets modern lifestyle



EDITOR'S NOTE

Hudson Literary Review continues to spotlight the evolving world of literature, publishing, and cultural storytelling — celebrating spaces where books shape conversations, inspire creativity, and redefine modern artistic expression.