Robin Givhan

Robin Givhan has been called meticulous, witty, esteemed, and one of the best fashion critics in the world by the thousands of people who have read her unforgettable articles and columns. Held in high esteem by designers and other critics around the world, Givhan knows how to make a broad statement and mean it. Givhan bluntly states that, “there are a lot of people who sort of say that something is good or important or progressive or edgy when in fact, it’s just crappy. And no one will say it’s crappy,” (Alfano). This brutal candor from Givhan is what makes her such a standout in the journalism and fashion world. She not only focuses on fashion, she believes that fashion can also be a convenient way to incorporate politics and culture into our everyday lives (Alfano). With her riveting and challenging articles, Givhan is attracting attention worldwide and making a declaration to the world by “pointing out where fashion fits into things” (Alfano).

Robin Givhan was born on September 11, 1962 in Detroit Michigan. She graduated from Princeton University with bachelor’s degree in English and then went on to receive her masters in journalism from the University of Michigan. Her first job was with the Detroit Free Press newspaper where she was a general assignment reporter where she eventually became a feature writer and then began to cover fashion (Putlizter). After roughly seven years, she left to start working at The Washington Post to cover the fashion industry (About). She left to become
special correspondent for Newsweek Daily Beast and also spent a few months at Vogue magazine. In 2014, it was announced that Givhan would be returning full time to the newspaper, bringing back her “tremendous reporting and writing abilities” (WashPostPR).

Known for being intimidating, outspoken and generally able to cause an uproar, it is not a surprise that Givhan’s most well-known articles are politically, socially, and culturally charged. In 2007, Givhan published a piece attacking presidential candidate Hillary Clinton during a Senate floor speech. Wearing a blazer over a v-neck top, Givhan was quick to comment on Clinton’s “bold, confident style package”. In surprise, Givhan clarified Clinton’s fashion history as the First Lady, stating that she sported “glamorous, regal and defiant” clothing. Insisting that displaying cleavage in a political setting was a “provocation”, Givhan made it clear that there was to be a divide between work and play.

Another victim of Givhan’s sharp criticism was the most recent First Lady, Michelle Obama, whom Givhan followed during her first few years as the new leader’s wife. In 2009, Givhan rebuked Obama’s fashion choices while the presidential family went on their family vacation. Wearing shorts, Givhan said that “she looked fine”, but that her ensemble was not okay. Calling the first lady “strikingly modern” in her modest outfit, Givhan berated Obama’s fashion choices that day. Saying that the position of First Lady is one of respect and privilege, Givhan said she must “dress for the ride”. “It does American culture no favors if a first lady tries so hard to be average that she winds up looking common.”

Throughout her impressive journalism career, Givhan’s criticisms have made her one of the most respected fashion critics in the world. Along with these examples of her work, Givhan is
also known for her articles criticizing celebrities, designers, and other political figures such as
John Roberts and Dick Cheney, the latter two articles contributing to her impressive Pulitzer win.

Givhan made journalism history when she won her Pulitzer prize in 2006. The category:
Criticism. Presented since 1970, the award has been given to a writer for “distinguished
criticism” (Pulitzer). The winners are chosen by an independent jury and the prize has been
awarded 43 times in 44 years (Pulitzer). Alongside other outstanding critics, Givhan was
awarded her Pulitzer in a shocking event to everybody. “For her witty, closely observed essays
that transform fashion criticism into cultural criticism,” Givhan became the first fashion critic to
win the award (Pulitzer). In this historic year for the Criticism Pulitzer, Givhan was a finalist
with Nicolai Ouroussoff of The New York Times and Jerry Saltz of The Village Voice. She was
chosen by a jury comprised of Jesse Washington, Sasha Anawalt, Michael Barnes, Judith
Howard, and Julia Keller who won the 2005 Pulitzer in Feature Writing.

Givhan was judged on ten of her articles spanning from January to October of 2005. The
first of the bunch being an appreciation article about Don Cheadle in the film “Hotel Rwanda”,
Givhan vividly explains how his crisp suit “provide[s] reassurance”. She compares this to the
secureness that everyday clothing can offer somebody (Clothes). In this beautifully detailed
article, Givhan makes it clear that a suit is the “sartorial equivalent of standing up straight and
pulling the shoulders back”. Here, she makes the connection between fashion and one’s self
confidence in themselves and others.

The second reviewed work by the Pulitzer jury was one of Givhan’s most speculated
articles. Focusing on former Vice President Dick Cheney at the 60th anniversary of the liberation
of Auschwitz, Givhan compared our representative to the French and Russian ones by their dress.
While the foreign delegates were wearing winter formal attire, Cheney was dressed in clothing Givhan could only describe as “the kind of attire one typically wears to operate a snow blower.” Wearing an embroidered parka with a fur-trimmed hood, a knit ski cap, and hiking boots, Givhan slammed the vice president for looking like an “awkward boy” amongst the “well-dressed adults”. Calling Cheney disrespectful and unconcerned, this hard-hitting piece revealed Givhan’s brutality for the truth and opinion.

In Givhan’s third piece, she stepped away from the political lashings and looked towards singer, actress, dancer, author, producer, and fashion designer Jennifer Lopez and her 2005 fashion presentation of her new line called “The J-Lo Story”. Saying that Givhan was less than impressed would be a great understatement. In a more fashion forward story, Givhan explicitly explains the “cropped denim, hot pants, tiny jackets, and hoop earrings” that Lopez was wanting to sell to teens around the world. Calling the collections “a rolling rack of castoffs”, Givhan vocalizes her opinion that “celebrity designers operate on the principle that consumers will want to purchase knockoffs of their past glories.”

Givhan returned to a political figure for her next article using high praises instead of her usual reproofs. Her object of fixation was Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who arrived at the Wiesbaden Army Airfield sporting an all black ensemble comprised of an above the knee skirt, a black coat with seven gold buttons, and a pair of knee-high boots (Condoleezza). With a outfit that reminded Givhan of Keanu Reeves in “The Matrix”, Givhan commended the power that radiated from Rice’s outfit. With just the right amount of sex and power, Givhan applauded Rice for challenging the “expectations and assumptions” of working women and for not hiding her sexuality to the world.
Givhan next wrote an essay that criticized yet saluted Camilla Parker Bowles, Prince Charles’ girlfriend at the time. Stating that Parker Bowles’ style has not changed a bit since she appeared in the public eye, Givhan holds out some respect and is able to admire the current Duchess’ resolve to basically look the way she has for years and years. This article is a quality reinforcement to the public about judging others. Believing that confidence and fashion go hand in hand, Givhan commends Parker Bowles for staying true to herself after years of “public thrashing”.

Givhan next published an almost comedic article in concordance with the release of “Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith”. She almost seems to make fun of fans who dress up in the movie’s costumes but in a way, she “feels a brief flicker of admiration” for those with this “high threshold for public embarrassment”. Once Givhan gets past the fact that people will walk around in Wookiee costumes and hold light sabers out in public, she salutes their pride and enthusiasm for the films and any other fan base (Wookiee).

Givhan takes a moment from fashion savvy looks to talk about racism and privilege in the next winning work. Oprah Winfrey made headlines when it was discovered that she had been turned away from the Hermes shop in Paris, France. Two versions of the story had been released, one stating that Oprah was turned away for being black and another stating that she arrived after-hours when the staff could not collaborate with her (Oprah). Givhan dutifully notes all of the possible reasonings for this miscommunication such as “treating a wealthy celebrity just like anyone else…a case of rudeness…racism…a complicated blend of all that and more.” Without bias, Givhan explains how celebrities can be turned away for reasons other then skin color and that they are not above anybody else (Oprah).
Givhan then went on the publish an article comparing the outfits of New York Times reporter Judith Miller and rap entertainer Lil’ Kim (or Kimberly Jones) on their last day of trial which happened to be scheduled on the same day. Miller, dressed smart and simple, and Jones, toting a Louis Vuitton bag, both dressed for their supporters (False Moves). Givhan stood behind both women saying that they “sent all the right messages to their supporters”. In this article, Givhan shed light to the way the right outfit can create support in time of need and she herself believes “both of them may well be rewarded” in the future.

Another high-profile article written by Givhan was one that surprisingly targeted the wife and young children of 2005 Supreme Court nominee John Roberts. Standing in pastels, Givhan described Jane, Josie, and Jack as “a trio of Easter eggs, a handful of Jelly Bellies, [and] three little Necco wafers”. While she was not particularly blaming the children, as they do not have a say in what they wear on a national stage, Givhan made it known that the Roberts family did not acknowledge fashion trends past or future, but took the tradition of appropriately dressing too far in a way that looked like a planned, costumed event (An Image).

The last work that helped secure Givhan’s Pulitzer win was a hard-hitting expose about being pretty in a world where appearance is a dominating trait. Focusing on three designers, Rick Owens, Yohji Yamamoto, and Jun Takahashi, Givhan took readers deep into the depth and meaning of true fashion- fashion that focuses on inner beauty rather than outer beauty. Describing the collections shown as “uncomfortable”, Givhan realized the effort to create “order out of chaos”. Givhan seems to say that being comfortable with one’s outer appearance first starts with their “dignity and their humanity” and with that, they can “make themselves whole”.

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Ten very contrasting and varied articles came together to prove that Givhan was the best critic writer of 2006. As a fashion critic, she pushed boundaries that showed the connections between one’s self in correlation to their fashion sense. Her vivid words turned what would seem like a boring rant about a hideous dress into words that weaved into true meaning. With articles that made readers think deep and look past one’s outfit, it is no surprise that Givhan won the prestigious Pulitzer award.
Works Cited


