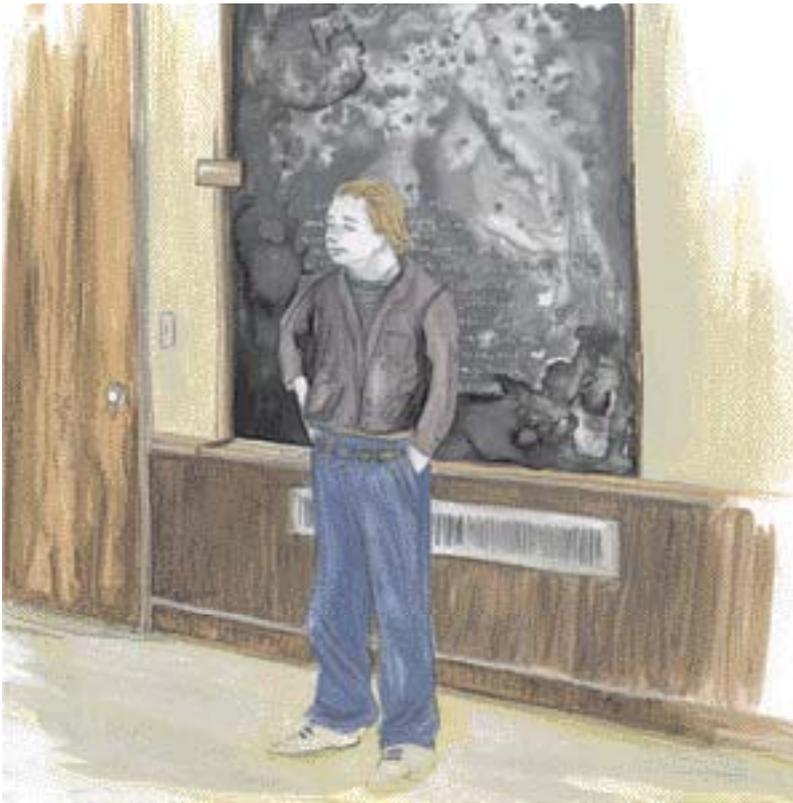


# My New Look

By Dennis Cass



**When I landed** a job teaching writing at Carleton College, the first thing I did was buy a hip new wardrobe. Twenty years earlier I was a slovenly underachiever at this small, Midwestern liberal-arts school, and new clothes would mark my triumphant return. Also, I had never taught before. If I failed as a teacher, at least my students would think I was cool.

“You’re crazy,” my wife said. “They all wear sweats. If you overdress, they’ll think you’re trying too hard.”

“You’re crazy,” I said. “The kids all wear jackets. Underneath they might have on a hoodie from Target or a T-shirt with some nonsense scribbled on it, but still: *jackets*.”

I realized my mistake the first day of class. In general, no one on campus was dressed up. More specifically, no one was wearing leather tennis shoes, flared jeans, a studded belt, a brown-and-teal striped shirt and a purple velvet jacket. Walking across the quad, I felt as if I were being followed by a helicopter.

The kids were wonderful, 15 mostly first-year students who gathered around me in an eager semicircle. They dressed casually — one even came to class in bedroom slippers — but I didn’t care. My new wardrobe both gave me confidence and reminded me of my pledge to deliver more than writing-workshop clichés like “show, don’t tell.”

Then, one morning, while putting on my black, hand-tooled belt, I had an idea.

“People talk about hidden meanings,” I said in class later that day. “But it’s all right here, out in the open. The world is *vibrating* with information.”

Their assignment was to say what my clothes revealed about me as a person, while I wrote their observations on the blackboard. I then let them take a good, long look.

“You can’t hurt my feelings,” I said.

“Do you mean we can’t hurt your feelings in that we’re not allowed to, or that we won’t be able to?”

“You won’t be able to,” I said. “It is physiologically impossible to hurt my feelings. Hit me.”

Tentatively, they offered that I cared about detail, that I was youthful. Then one student spoke up.

“The shoes and the belt. ... How do I say this? The shoes and the belt don’t quite match.”

I felt my face flush. Should I have worn my orange trainers instead?

“O.K.,” I said. “But what does that *mean*?”

The belt/shoes comment obliterated their reluctance. Suddenly the class was like the House of Commons.

“You hang out in coffee shops trying to look like an artist.”

“It’s not so much professional as a *semblance* of professionalism.”

“You shop at Whole Foods for the image, not because it’s good for you.”

My hand trembled as I wrote. In their eyes I drove a Prius and looked down on people who ate at McDonald’s. I was a cat person who listened to jazz. At first my shoes meant I couldn’t afford Converse, then one student noted they were a cloying — and grossly more expensive — knock-off. Even the incorrect observations were cutting, but what killed was the refrain. Whether talking about my jeans (“Are those really Rock & Republic?”) or my sideburns (“It’s like, Look at Mr. ’70s”) they used words like “wishes” and “wannabe.”

“Is it *trying* to look hip, or is it actually hip?” I said. “It’s a crucial distinction. As writers, we have to be precise. Do you mean hip?”

I looked around the semicircle — *Is anyone going to stick up for me?* — but everyone agreed I was merely trying.

Reading their comments — 31 in all — my body couldn’t have felt any hotter. Even my legs were embarrassed. Still, when you’re right, you’re right. I put Xs next to the wrong answers and check marks next to the right ones. The rights had it, 23 to 8. One student had offered a defining question: “Yuppie or starving artist?” I sighed, circled Yuppie and sat down.

“For the record, I go to bars, not coffee shops,” I said, to faint laughter. I then told them about the origins of my new look, and how I stuck to it out of principle.

“Writing is about commitment,” I said. “To a point of view. To an argument. You commit, and you never back down.”

The next class was on Halloween. A male student came dressed as a girl on his floor, another girl wore a homemade Renaissance Faire dress. To demonstrate my point about commitment, I considered wearing red snakeskin pants and affecting a fake British accent, but then thought better of it. Instead I wore running shoes, a University of Minnesota long-sleeved T-shirt and an old pair of jeans. My students nodded in approval. This was supposed to be a costume — Suburban Dad — but they didn’t see it that way. They said the whole look seemed “more natural” and “not as forced,” although at least one of them thought that my jeans still looked as if they cost too much. ■

Dennis Cass is the author of “Head Case: How I Almost Lost My Mind Trying to Understand My Brain,” which will be published next month. He lives in Minneapolis.