

# Life after Aunty

*Bureaucrat, broadcaster, writer, feminist— Wendy McCarthy was one of Australia's most prominent women of the 80s. After her unsuccessful make-or-break bid for the chair of the ABC, she's taking stock. Kitty Eggerking spoke to her in Sydney.*

Wendy McCarthy began her working life in the 1960s as a teacher. Since then she has been a newspaper columnist, film consultant, author, and radio commentator. She was for six years the executive officer of the Family Planning Association. From 1983 to 1991 she was deputy chair of the ABC; she is now the executive director of the National Trust.

Do you regret announcing that you would leave the ABC if they didn't make you chair?

No. At least six months before the end of my term I'd thought very deeply about where I wanted to be in the ABC. I decided there were no more challenges in being deputy chair. But I also felt it would have been churlish of me not to put my hat into the ring to be chair since I've spent half my life telling other women to do that. It wasn't an entirely attractive proposition for me because I thought, as chair, it would be very difficult to make some of the changes I would want to make in the ABC. But when I decided to apply I had already made my own commitment to changing other parts of my life if I got the job.

The only pain was parting with an organisation that I love very dearly, like an old friend or lover. There was no other regret. If I'd continued as deputy there would have been no control of who else was on the board. I've always had a strong view that the ABC board should represent the interests not just of the nation that it serves but also of the constituencies it serves. The ABC has an extraordinary investment

in ideas and the arts, so top people on the board should be those with a good history in music and the arts and in ideas.

In business, they put people in as deputy to train them for six to eight years. Not only does that give you experience, you also get to know the culture of the organisation, you get to know where the gremlins are and where the good fairies are, and you find out where the resources are. People can't trick you. You have your finger on the pulse. I had my finger more on the pulse of the ABC than any other board I've been on. But that's not how appointments happen in the public sector.

Is the ABC becoming management-heavy, at the expense of bright and creative young people?

I'm not sure about that. I said when I stopped being a director in June that I wouldn't sit and offer advice from the sidelines. But my observation in general of creative corporate structures like the ABC is that there is a tendency to manage the creative people and be accountable. I've always taken the view that the ABC at its best is in a state of harmonious anarchy. Everyone knows what to do and how to do it, and you don't need a lot of top-heavy management. You never have, any more than in a good advertising agency. Advertising agencies which corporatised in the last five years and went for high-paid, high-profile management have mostly gone broke or have gone back to smaller, creative units.

A paper was recently circulated within the ABC on the employment and promotion of women in broadcasting. It seems to have been hotly

debated in the ABC; some men have been saying "we're not back to this again are we?"

Well, we are, and they'd better remember it. The greatest contribution that's been made to women and broadcasting recently is Monica Attard. In the first place it was an extraordinary achievement for Monica to get to Moscow—and Heather Ewart to Washington—because they are very coveted posts. Neither of those women would want to acknowledge that it had anything to do with their gender. They are extremely competent, and it was good that they were women.

I am surprised at the reaction to that internal paper, but then I suppose I shouldn't be, because what happens when one or two women get up into positions is that people sit back and say, "they've had their turn now". What that piece of research shows is the insidious sexism at the junior levels where people are struggling to make a basic wage in an area that they love. They're not necessarily trying to be the high flyers.

The men are threatened, and rightly so, because there are an awful lot of extremely talented women who want to do things that they could never have dreamed of in another life. They're going to be better than most of the men because they're so determined. There's a strong network of women in ABC radio and TV now, and they won't let too many people walk over them.

Perhaps they're not so preoccupied with egos and power.

That's right. It's the same with women teachers. They were always interested in being extremely good in the classroom, less interested earlier on in being principals, but now of course they can see that the reason for being a principal is to make things happen.

Issues like child care and abortion are cropping up again; it makes one wonder if anything at all has changed. Have women made many gains over the past few years?



The changes are twofold. The psychic culture has changed so that child care is now a legitimate topic to discuss and take action on. I resented having to keep pushing it for a couple of years because I was sick of being the only woman doing my bit in all-boy gatherings. I felt resentful, too, when people thought that was all I could do. In a way they used that to denigrate my other skills. I found that very irritating and so I gave it a lower priority for a year; but I found when I ducked it for a year or so the issue started to slip away again.

I decided it was going to happen in the ABC, and it has happened in the ABC. I decided that I had to pursue it and show that it could happen. Otherwise I was going to be seen as another waft of hot air, a temporary aberration, that came across the scene and changed nothing. That's the real challenge for women who get put into positions of influence. It's very hard because you're constantly denigrated for sticking up for women.

Does it distress you that in 1991 we are once more having an abortion debate?

There's no end to this campaign — and the approach is much more sophisticated this time around because they're just looking to close down the private clinics. Most people don't have access to the experience of South Australia or the ACT, where abortions are conducted in public hospitals. They don't know how hard it is to get a pregnancy terminated in a public hospital. Many chief executives of public hospitals are very much part of the Catholic public service base; they're mostly very conservative, mostly male and mostly one-industry experienced people. They won't make things happen in an area that has anything to do with philosophy or morals. They just want a straight accounting equation.

The interesting thing is that they think they can wear out a generation like mine. But I know my daughter will fight independently for those rights too and I know she'll march with me and be proud to do so. I actually think my sons would too. It's a less passionate thing for them but they're philosophically on side.

How much do you think young people know of the old fights and struggles?

I don't think they are greatly aware of them, and certainly not aware of the passions they aroused. But I don't think that matters too much; what matters is that they recognise when the rights that were won for them are threatened and when they must stand up and defend them. Their fights will be different in degree and style. Child care is still a very big issue. When I was marching in the streets with my first-born, I remember women saying "you'll be lucky if you get child care in her lifetime". At the time I thought they were hopeless pessimists, but it's true; she's now 23. It will be a very big battle for women her age if they decide they want to have children. It hasn't become much easier at all.

Do you worry that this generation is losing any sense of optimism that it might have had?

The interesting thing is that we are now parenting for much longer, in order to keep that optimism there. That's fine for people like me who have good jobs and enough money to do it, a house and a reasonably secure emotional life. But what about the parents for whom life is a struggle, who are unemployed and so on? The mothers are mostly the ones who have to manage all that emotional baggage. How they cope under that great stress, I don't know.

Perhaps one problem in Australian society is that people feel powerless?

I grew up believing you couldn't change anything, that it was all pre-ordained; it came as a great surprise to me when I wanted to start changing things that the changes happened. And I've had a great run at being able to change the things that I passionately wanted to change. Is it just that I've been lucky? Is it harder for other people? The first two areas where I tried to change something were a residents' action movement and abortion law reform. And later in childbirth education. I suspect that people feel not so much powerless as over-governed now. That might be the difference. I certainly still believe I can change things.

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# Cosmetic Solution

*The Beauty Myth*, by Naomi Wolf (Chatto and Windus, 1990).  
Reviewed by Annette Corrigan.

Naomi Wolf has written this book, I suspect, with an intention to shock. If Western women were lapsing into complacency about the liberation and equality they have achieved in the past 20 years, Wolf certainly provides a jolt of evidence to argue that such complacency is unwarranted.

She concedes that second wave feminism has been an important period of social change in which women have experienced greater opportunities to escape the constraints of domesticity and redefine their roles as more than wives, mothers and homemakers. However, she argues that women's new freedoms have been countered by an even more cruel and oppressive form of social control that has escalated in the last 20 years—the 'beauty myth'.

The beauty myth refers to those cultural practices and values which designate a woman's appearance as the most important criterion by which her femininity, her sexuality, and even her right to be considered a normal and acceptable human being are judged. The book exposes the beauty myth through a detailed critique of those industries whose survival is dependent upon the construction and maintenance of the myth: that is, those industries concerned with fashion and cosmetics, dieting, health and fitness, cosmetic surgery, advertising, women's magazines, and pornography.

Wolf relentlessly documents the statistics on eating disorders, the economic drain of personal maintenance, the degrading effects of pornography, the mutilation of cosmetic surgery, the imagery and propaganda of advertising and examples of women's willingness to submit themselves to beauty practices which consume precious time,

energy and money. She paints a picture of women's entrapment in an oppressive and vicious circle of self-hatred, anxiety, pain, shame, humiliation, hunger, weakness and disability. The injustice, she argues, is not only that such negative states in women are tolerated, considered normal or unproblematic and often even applauded, as exemplified by the frivolous cliché that 'beauty knows no pain'; it is that the myth promotes the notion that women's access to love, attention, warmth, security, sexual pleasure, social value, social acceptance and self-esteem is contingent upon their conformity to certain prescribed standards of femininity. While women have to *earn* their right to sexual identity and pleasure, for men such things are inalienable rights and unquestionable givens.

Wolf claims the beauty myth has grown more potent in the last generation because women's self-assertion and pursuance of their rights have brought the sexes "too close for the comfort of the powerful". By seducing women into a way of thinking and behaving which focuses their attention on what they look like, the beauty myth ultimately reinstates their subservience to men and to cultural values that limit female freedom. As such, the beauty myth is "a violent backlash to feminism" and a means by which the sex war is sustained. Instead of women's homes existing as their prisons, now it is their bodies, a more difficult place from which to escape.

Wolf does not present a very pretty scenario of the position women are in right now. She depicts women as victims of the beauty myth and as unwitting participants in a form of social control designed to subordinate them. She speaks of "beauty addiction" and builds a picture of women as helplessly and uncontrollably dependent upon activities and products which offer only false or temporary pleasure and fulfilment. The image on the front cover is of a naked woman bound in shackles—an image which Wolf sustains with use of language such as entrapment, imprisonment and

enslavement to describe women's relation to the beauty myth.

This imagery is a problem, however, because it assumes that all women are on the receiving end of a one-way process of oppression, discrimination and victimisation. Wolf gives no consideration to the ways in which women themselves negotiate situations where their bodies have become a very significant site of political struggle. For example, when she deals with the topic of eating disorders, she fails to engage with what is now quite a substantial feminist body of knowledge about the resistance and rebellion entailed in anorexia nervosa. Instead, she likens dieting behaviour to the trances and chants of bizarre religious cults, suggesting that women are brainwashed and indoctrinated into rituals of bodily transformation. In so doing, she reduces the complex nature of eating disorders to instances of "thought control".

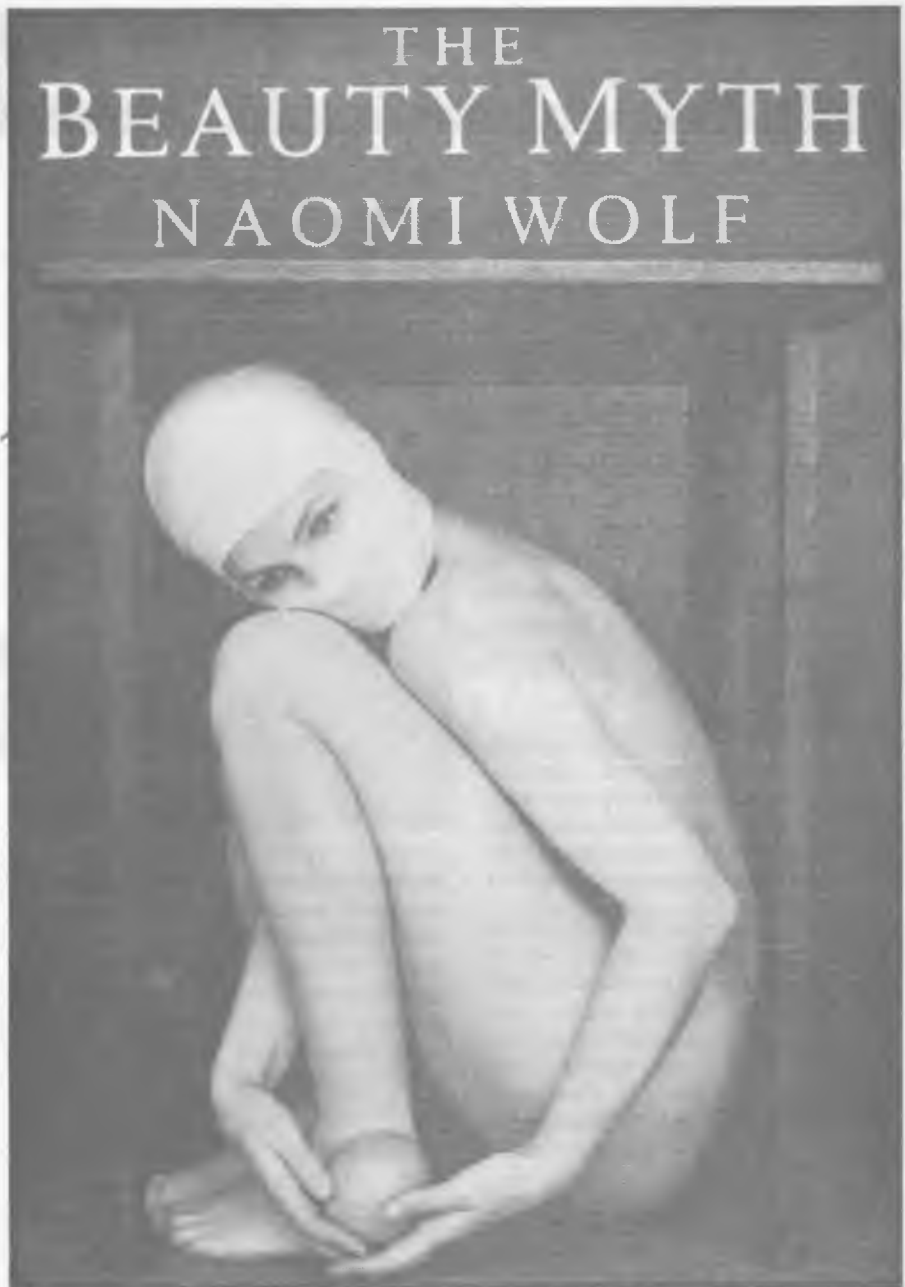
At the outset, Wolf denies that she is suggesting a conspiracy theory; however, throughout the book she gives the reader every reason to see conspiracy. Sometimes the conspirators are men in general—but mostly it is the beauty industries, who cleverly lull women into a state of severe dissatisfaction with their bodies. Advertising is a major culprit in this state of affairs. Wolf claims it leads to obsessive and irrational responses in otherwise competent and successful women who nevertheless remain "painfully receptive" to what their magazines tell them. Yet this argument ignores a plethora of work on representation and subjectivity (feminist and otherwise) which has shown this kind of causal connection between media images and human behaviour to be simplistic and deterministic. To depict women as passive sponges who soak up advertising propaganda is to refuse to allow any agency, or power of negotiation to the female consumer.

Despite the absences and problematic assumptions and conclusions of *The*

*Beauty Myth*, Wolf's book is unique and therefore valuable for the way in which it brings together a host of updated statistics, survey findings, reports, medical research and other evidence of women's engagement with the beauty industries. For instance, she draws upon a range of sources to provide evidence of the extent of eating disorders in America. She cites figures suggesting that one million American women each year become anorexic or bulimic; 150,000 American women die of anorexia annually; on college campuses up to 20% of women students are anorexic; 20% of college women binge and purge on a regular basis; 5-15% of hospitalised anorexics die in treatment, giving the disease one of the highest fatality rates of a mental illness and 40-50% of anorexics never completely recover. Until Wolf's book, this type of documentation of evidence from multiple and various sources was hard to find.

Despite the picture of gloom and doom she paints in the first seven chapters, Wolf ends her book on an optimistic note in chapter eight. Called "Beyond the Beauty Myth", here she suggests some ways out of this horrible prison in which women have been interned. The essence of her solution is for women to find: "a new way to see", to refuse to accept that beauty is their passport to confidence, sexuality and self-regard and to find pleasure in themselves and each other by appreciating and celebrating the multitude of dimensions of their female selves. She does not advocate that women abandon beauty altogether but, rather, that they work towards "a pro-woman definition of beauty". This will happen when the high stakes which now rest on physical appearance are removed and that practices like adornment simply become play—something that doesn't matter.

How to get from here to there is not clear. Wolf seems to suggest that subversion will happen when women become aware of the myth and can consciously fight the ways it operates against them. The conclusion seems too optimistic from the arguments presented in the previous chapters. For if women are as successfully duped as she suggests, and given the relatively small number she will be



able to influence through her book, then this feminist subversion is looking rather like an uphill battle, if not a lost cause already.

*The Beauty Myth* is aimed at a popular audience and is not intended as an academic text which, to some extent, accounts for its theoretical limitations. However, the problem remains that feminist attempts to politicise beauty still need a more subtle and sophisticated analysis of the problem than Wolf provides. This does not have to mean esoteric and inaccessible academic prose. Rather, there needs to

be an exploration of the possible multiple interpretations of women's engagements with beauty practices; a recognition of the ways in which women already negotiate and resist their sexual objectification and subordination; and a consideration of the ambiguities and contradictions in women's everyday lives as they actively take part in the construction of femininity and its meanings in contemporary Western culture.

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# Trending Down

**Fading Loyalties: The Australian Labor Party and the Working Class**, by Andrew Scott (Pluto Press, 1991). Reviewed by David McKnight.

At the 1990 election, as its centenary year approached, the ALP received its lowest primary vote for 60 years. At the same time Labor was undergoing one of the most divisive debates of the Hawke government: whether to privatise a number of longstanding public corporations.

Within the party there was a crisis both of morale and of numbers. Membership has dropped to a very low level and complaints that branch members are ignored are far from confined to traditional critics from the Left.

Andrew Scott's valuable book charts the measurable dimensions of Labor's crisis — the trends in membership and social composition. The author was given access to membership records in a number of states, and they form the foundation of the book. However, while the raw figures tell a tale, there is also an important context.

In modern Australia the proportion of wage and salary earners within the population is greater than ever before. But as Scott points out "They have been increasingly fragmented along the lines of occupation, gender, ethnicity and age. Inequalities within their ranks and between them and welfare recipients have been visibly multiplied." Poverty is now most often the consequence of family breakdown or age, rather than being a semi-permanent feature of working-class life.

Yet Labor has been grappling for decades with problems that have a familiar ring — without success. Even Arthur Calwell in the 1960s was saying that Labor had to accept "new hopes, new tastes and new desires", and to understand that "the age of the



Andrew Scott  
The Australian Labor Party  
and the Working Class

affluent society ...poses a whole new range of problems for the Labor Party". (Though he went on to state that "we view with bewilderment the expenditure of vast sums on trivia and gimmicks", and to deplore "the materialist outlook" which was, "sad to say, quite marked among many of our young people".)

Yet it's not all bleak. In spite of the continued domination of older Anglo men, the 1980s saw women for the first time voting Labor in the same proportion as men, while the 1970s had seen Labor cement majority support among migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds.

But these changes are not generally reflected in the kind of people who join the ALP. True, women are now a higher proportion of members than ever before. Yet, as Scott points out, this has been connected to a quite separate phenomenon: the disproportionately large number of professionals and semi-professionals who have joined.

Some migrant groups have joined in large numbers, yet often this is connected to branch-stacking exercises where family and ethnic community

networks are rolled out to provide numbers for one faction or other. Because this is so much a part of the traditional Labor culture of patronage and favours, it might be argued it is no different from the enrolment of blue-collar party faithful for the same purpose in the 1950s and earlier — but somehow I find it more artificial and cynical.

In terms of membership participation as a whole Scott paints a picture of protracted decline. While population has grown steadily and the Labor vote has at least grown in absolute terms, party membership has been static. That is to say, in relative terms it has fallen drastically.

Scott rightly attributes this in part to a decline in the belief that politics and parties can make a difference to people's lives, and partly in a failure on Labor's part to culturally adapt. The starkest figures are those for membership by occupation. (The following figures are from NSW, but the Victorian figures are comparable.) In 1961, the proportion of "professionals and paraprofessionals" in the ALP was roughly equivalent to that in society as a whole (9% and 7% respectively). By 1981, however, the same group comprised 24% of ALP membership but only 10% of the workforce. In 1961 plant and machine operators, drivers and labourers comprised 23% of Labor's membership, and 16% of the workforce; in 1981 the respective figures were 11% and 14%. The proportion of tradespeople in Labor membership likewise more than halved between 1961 and 1981 (23% and 10%), while the proportion in the workforce fell only marginally (12% to 10%). At the same time the blue-collar membership of the ALP has aged steadily.

The pattern among migrant members is perhaps less gloomy. In 1961 only 7% of members in NSW sampled had recognisably non Anglo-Celtic surnames; by 1981 the figure had risen to 14% in NSW and by 1986 to 22% in Victoria. However, as Scott notes, "this is less spectacular than the

change in the electorate at large", while "few of the ALP members from non-English speaking backgrounds were drawn from manual jobs where migrant men and women are most likely to be found".

The worst possible interpretation of these figures is that "trendies" have driven "workers" out of the ALP. Yet, as Scott's research shows the major loss in blue collar membership was in the 1950s and 1960s, while the new white collar constituency only really emerged in the late 1960s with the as-

cension of Whitlam, and the rise of the anti-Vietnam War movement.

Scott draws conclusions from this research which I find sensible but somehow inadequate. They include opposition to attempts to break the union nexus, support for the democratisation of structures and the creation of special interest branches, and a healthy scepticism about large-scale union amalgamations. Yet solutions will not necessarily be found simply by improving the participation of Labor's traditional constituencies — a point which Scott seems to accept, but which he never follows through.

There is a crisis of what Labor stands for, as well as of what it means in practical political terms to stand for a range of progressive values. Part of the solution lies in analysing why it is that Labor's declining primary vote has not simply swung over the conservative parties. Rather it has been expressed in support for independents and the Democrats. But teasing out the scope of this phenomenon is understandably beyond the scope of *Fading Loyalties* — as it is of this review.

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## Fear of Women

**Amongst Women** by John McGahern (*Faber and Faber* 1990).  
Reviewed by Jane Sutton.

*Amongst Women*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1990, is a disturbing novel. The opening descriptions of the preparations for Monaghan Day at the Moran household in Broadmeadow, an Irish village, suggest a sweeping tale of political and family life, or a detailed exploration of Irish village life will follow. But *Amongst Women* is actually a telling and claustrophobic study of a patriarch and the emotional and physical violence he inflicts on his family.

John McGahern is a writer interested in the dynamics of power and control between men and women. *Amongst Women* is at its most powerful and disturbing in its exploration of these dynamics.

Moran, the central figure, is an Irish Republican and had been a figure in the IRA. However, the connection between the fierce emotional tensions of family life and the Irish situation provide a background but not the sinister focus of the book.

The women of the title are Moran's new wife, Rose, and his daughters Mona, Sheila and Maggie. Moran's mood swings and physical violence towards his sons keep the women in a constant state of fear.

The rituals of the Catholic religion, such as the saying of Grace and the Rosary at times of the day dictated by him are the ways in which Moran exerts his control over the women.

The reader is given a disturbing sense of the psychics as well as physical space in which Moran, his wife and daughters live, and the means by which Moran makes the house his domain. Not only does he create the sense of time by which they measure their lives by the use of the Catholic ritual; he also constructs and controls the space in which they live.

Following a fight with Moran, Rose retreats to the bedroom and closes the door. Moran insists his daughters open it. He proceeds to declaim the Rosary in his wife's hearing, thus negating her separate existence outside his mental space.

The title, *Amongst Women*, suggests that Moran may only exist inside the definition of the group of women

which makes up his family. Moran's violence is a response to his fear of female power as described through his son Michael's first sexual experience. When Michael's girlfriend Nell is:

...ready for her own pleasure...such was her strength that he was frightened. She shouted, seized him roughly at the hips and forced him to move.

Michael can't "comprehend" Nell's behaviour. It is Moran's fear of being engulfed by a femaleness he cannot comprehend that brings him to his hideous use of emotional and physical violence within his family.

*Amongst Women* is a brave and disturbing novel. Brave to deal with the difficult issue of the dynamics of violence and power within a family, and disturbing because I am not convinced the author is aware of the fissures in his text which vent this terror and fear of women through the exploration of the violence and control of the central character of Moran.

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