Review Essay

‘Having it All’, or Had Enough? Rethinking Feminism: A Review Essay

Wonder Woman: The Myth of Having it All
Virginia Haussegger (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005)
310pp, $26.95, paperback

What No Baby? Why Women are Losing the Freedom to Mother, and How They Can Get it Back
Leslie Cannold (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004)
336pp, $29.95, paperback

Motherguilt: Australian Women Reveal Their True Feelings About Motherhood
Ita Buttrose and Penny Adams (Melbourne: Viking/Penguin, 2005)
272pp, $32.95, paperback

What Women Want Next
272pp, $32.00, paperback

Families: Changing Families, Changing Times
Marilyn Poole (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2004)
254pp, $39.95, paperback

It is the authors’ belief that Motherguilt, as we know and understand it in the twenty-first century, can be deliberately attributed to the gaining of ‘choices’ at the time of Women’s Liberation.¹

Feminists should step back from the work/family issue, and hand it over to an … organisation that is better equipped to continue the fight: a ‘parents’ movement.²

Being a woman is a heck of a lot more than just succeeding in the workforce … That is what feminism failed to recognise.³

This review article examines five recent books that taken together represent a culmination of the ‘blaming feminism’ narrative, which has framed much of the public discussion about the fertility crisis, work/family balance and young women’s grief in the past decade.⁴ This narrative holds feminism responsible for numerous issues: for promising women they could ‘have it all’; for not warning them about their biological clock; and for...
denigrating motherhood. Because of these failures, the narrative contends, second wave feminism in Australia is responsible for creating a generation of childless career women and 'harried working mothers'. By 2005, this narrative has become common sense and come to dominate public debate to such an extent that it increasingly provides the only framework in which the issues of work, family and motherhood can be discussed.

Although blaming feminism for women's woes is nothing new, what is unique in this contemporary narrative is the (to me) astonishing lack of historical awareness of what Women's Liberation actually stood for. Rather than draw on, or engage with, a feminist tradition of critique, which has always identified the structures of the family and the workplace as the problem, the narrators of this new story about feminism's failures deploy popular representations, in the media and self help books for example, which equated feminism with 'having it all'.

Although diverse in their scope, intended readership and style, these books all share a loss of historical knowledge about Australia's feminist history. Each author justifies her book with reference to an alleged 'silence' about a particular aspect of women's experience for which repression they hold feminism responsible. They then attempt to break this silence by boldly speaking up about their own findings and their realisation of the perniciousness and redundancy of feminism.

Virginia Haussegger's *Wonder Woman: The Myth of Having It All*, is personal. The book offers an exploration of her own experience and that of her friends who, for similar reasons, found themselves unable to have a baby, or on deciding to mother, were overcome with the difficulty of combining motherhood with paid work. Haussegger argues that for too long 'women's voices had been quiet' about the pain of childlessness. They 'needed to talk' about their misery and grief and it was time they were heard.

She provides a potted history of the women's movement in Australia, which is remarkable in its spectacular lack of historical knowledge and thus, predictably, blames feminism for the monster of the 'Superwoman', for denigrating marriage and motherhood and for encouraging women to invest their entire identities and sense of wellbeing in their careers. Haussegger's is a very middle-class voice.

The most significant part of her book is the real depth of grief she and other women express about their childlessness and their seemingly genuine surprise at their predicament. Haussegger insists, and others agree, that women of her generation—'Gen X'—were led to believe by feminists as diverse as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Camilla Page that they could 'have it all'. As a consequence they are 'a failed and failing generation'.

Haussegger's own story is emblematic. She grew up in a large Catholic family well aware of the burden of motherhood and she determined to escape from 'domestic tyranny'. She married early, established her career while young, and briefly considered having children in her twenties only to be convinced by her husband that motherhood would ruin her career. Her marriage, however, failed and Haussegger then spent many years pursuing fruitless relationships in the hope of finding 'true love'. When she did meet her current partner and finally found domestic happiness she also, much to her surprise, discovered the depths of her maternal longing, 'the force of which [she] had never experienced before'. She was then alarmed when, on trying to conceive, she found that because of an untreated STD, it was impossible. She was 'devastated', 'gobsmacked and furious' to be told that at thirty-nine she had left her 'run a bit too late' anyway.
The way Haussegger tells it, her trajectory from successful career woman to bitter, angry and childless was immediate, with not even a glimmer of hope to dull her pain (she decided not to attempt IVF on discovering the low success rates). When recovering from the operation which confirmed her infertility, Haussegger happened to read Sylvia Hewlett's *Baby Hunger* and also came across author Sophie Cunningham's story of grief about her inability to mother, published in the *Age*. She realised with 'furious force' that she, too, was one of these women driven mad with despair about her childlessness and it was this realisation that moved her to write in the hope that she could give 'voice' to other women who shared her predicament.

The majority of women Haussegger interviews are women like her, highly educated and professionally successful. They consider themselves feminists and are shocked to find that despite being told that a career would fulfill them, they are not immune to maternal longings or 'baby hunger'. Many of Haussegger's friends, if they considered children at all, thought they would have them later in life after travelling, establishing a career and 'sowing their wild oats'. They never expected that they would discover their desire for a child too late.

Haussegger also explored the experiences of other women she names 'victims' of feminism. First are those women who were fooled into believing they could beat their biological clocks by using reproductive technology, only to suffer the humiliation and despair that comes with multiple failed attempts at IVF. Second are the 'harried working mothers' who were told 'having it all' would be easy and were shocked to discover the guilt, hardship and emotional exhaustion that come with trying to juggle a career with motherhood. Third, and most interesting, are those women who were allegedly so convinced by feminism of the futility and irrationality of having children that they were sterilised, determined never to be burdened by motherhood.

It is the chronicle of women's different experiences and the rawness of their emotions that are the strengths of Haussegger's book, and despite its lack of political or social analysis or attempt to offer solutions, these make it an important publication. In the end however, her lack of historical and critical understanding and her overwhelming desire to lay blame render her unable to think her way out of her own and other women's predicaments. Like many narratives that blame feminism, it also inflates the social power that feminism is able to wield.

Haussegger and her friends are victims, not of feminism, but of its misrepresentations in the mainstream media, which have reduced the complexity of feminist demands and achievements to a selfish and individualistic grab for advancement in the workplace. But as Haussegger herself states in her introduction, she was not attempting to write an academic treatise, but wanted simply to give 'voice' to her own and her friends' frustrations. In this, the book is successful and its record of the discursive construction of female subjectivity in the early twenty-first century is valuable.

Leslie Cannold in *What, No Baby: Why Women are Losing the Freedom to Mother, and How They Can Get it Back*, also sets out to 'give voice' to a 'hidden' group of women, in this case those 'childless by circumstance', not by choice. She seeks to debunk some of the myths surrounding the so-called 'crisis in fertility' and argues that contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of educated, ambitious women do desire children, but for various reasons are thwarted in their journey to motherhood. Cannold, however, an
established academic and author, offers a more complex account of the condition of childlessness, based on an impressive amount of original research, including her extended interviews with a large group of Australian and some American women.

Cannold explores the three 'fertility crunches' that restrain the 'circumstantially childless'. The first is the myth of the 'good mother' which scares women out of having babies, because they are taught that having a career and being a 'good mother' don't mix and they are unwilling to sacrifice their hard-won economic independence. Those who do try to do both, like Cannold herself, employ 'imaginary thinking' - the idea that it will somehow be different for them, somehow they will manage. But the truth is, she argues, even with part-time work and a supportive partner, combining work with motherhood, under current social arrangements is hard.

The second crunch, Cannold suggests, is 'the trouble with men': the fact that there just aren't enough 'gorgeous men' (like her own partner) who want to share the joys of childrearing, while those who do often delay parenting until it is too late for their partners to conceive. Like many women, men too have been swayed by our capitalist and highly individualistic society to value financial independence, romantic relationships and high-powered careers above all else, all of which makes parenthood seem like an 'irrational' choice, or at least something to be delayed until circumstances are favourable.

Furthermore, many women, Cannold argues, find it hard to justify their desire to mother when all the evidence suggests that having children is an expensive and difficult option with few tangible rewards. She blames this understanding for the rise of two other groups of women, 'the militant childfree' and 'the moaning mums' who go to great lengths to show just how difficult motherhood is.

The third 'fertility crunch', Cannold identifies, is the work/family debate which, she believes, has been dominated by conservatives who blame women for their own childlessness and recommend that the best way to solve the dilemma is for women to 'opt out' of work altogether. There has not been enough debate, Cannold argues, about the need for structural change. Cannold, at least, is aware of a history of feminist activism.

She endeavours to move away from the simplistic accounts that have shaped public debates about the work/family crisis to offer a more complex analysis of women's experiences, and thus provides valuable contribution to the debate. She criticises those such as British sociologist, Catherine Hakim, who assume that women's work and family patterns are a reflection of their choice and through women's own personal stories she illustrates just how little real choice many women have. She draws on the work of other academics, particularly the demographer Peter McDonald, to show that fertility rates across the developed world have risen when family-friendly workplaces are in place, a trend which supports her main argument that when the circumstances are in place to provide for real choice, more women will choose to mother.

She urges that a rethinking of the 'impulse to care' needs to take place so women can speak of their desire to mother in positive and rational terms and she also believes that more discussion about the joys and rewards of childrearing needs to occur. She concludes that women (and men) will only regain 'real reproductive choice' by demanding that government not only remove the barriers to motherhood, but provide parents with real support. This, she says, will entail radical change to the way we think about work and parenthood and a reduction in the standard working week. The way forward,
she says, is the creation of a 'parenting movement' in which both sexes work together to reinstate women's right to mother.

Cannold is keen to point out in her introduction, that unlike others, she does not seek to blame feminism for women's current woes and criticises those, such Virginia Haussegger, who do. She continually emphasises that the difficulties women face getting to motherhood are structural, not personal, or a result of feminism's failure. She also engages with an earlier feminist critique by quoting Marilyn Lake's work on 'the question of time' at length. But the recommendation that 'feminists should step back from the work/family issue, and hand it over to an (as yet non-existent) organization that is better equipped to continue the fight: a parents movement', is questionable, and undermines much of her argument.

Given that most of the barriers to parenthood she outlines oppress women rather than men, women are more likely to have a greater interest in bringing about change. Furthermore, Cannold's solutions to circumstantial childlessness—a shorter working week, and 'a unisex fight' for parental freedom—although welcome, are far from original. Getting fathers involved in childrearing and liberating both men and women from the oppressive structures of paid work are precisely the aims pursued by many feminists for decades past.

Despite Cannold's valiant efforts to honour earlier feminist strategies, her lack of historical knowledge and her need to make her own mark implicates her work in the current tendency to disavow feminism and its achievements and goals. This is disappointing as Cannold's work shows with clarity that what we need now is not a further demonisation of feminism, but a return to its original vision of a world in which productive and reproductive work is valued and shared between all members of society.

Ita Buttrose's and Penny Adams' book Mother Guilt: Australian Women Reveal their True Feelings About Motherhood is perhaps the most disturbing book produced by the discourse on 'blaming feminism'. The authors purport to offer women support and assuage their guilt about motherhood, but in fact they do the complete opposite by embracing a narrative that blames working mothers for their own difficulties and holds feminism responsible for encouraging mothers into the workplace in the first place. This judgment comes, ironically, from two highly successful career mothers; beneficiaries of the very movement they criticise.

Rather than examine particular difficulties of childless career women, Motherguilt seeks to reassure all mothers that their feelings of guilt and inadequacy are perfectly normal and shared by all.

In the first half of the book the authors explore a range of themes and issues including pregnancy, childbirth, breast feeding, paid work and childcare. They, too, propose that there has been a 'silence' regarding these different areas of motherhood which they believe is responsible for 'Motherguilt', and they attempt to assuage feelings of inadequacy through sharing their own experiences, along with those of 'celebrity' and 'ordinary' mothers, who all admit to their various failings.

In the second half of the book, however, there is a notable change of tone and the authors build on their initial assertion that 'Motherguilt' is directly the result of the choices given to women by the advent of the Pill and Women's Liberation. Gaining control over
their lives, the authors argue, has left women feeling they must also take absolute respon­sibility, particularly for childrearing, leaving many mothers feeling disillusioned and guilty, when they can't 'do it all'. Until now, the authors declare, mothers have not expressed this guilt for fear of 'letting the side down', but now it is time to bring these concerns out into the open.

Like Haussegger, the authors blame 'feminism' for the creation of 'the Superwoman', and for telling women that combining a career with childrearing was 'easy', rather than being honest about the stresses and guilt of bearing 'multiple roles'. They proceed to blame working mothers--the followers of feminism--for numerous social problems, from the growth in childhood obesity, the rise of depression and recreational drug use, the prevalence of eating disorders and increasing levels of anti-social behaviour amongst Australian children and teenagers. Children, they argue, have become the victims of the 'feminist ambition' to 'have it all'.

Once the shining example for working mothers everywhere, even Ita Buttrose now confesses that although she never felt guilty about returning to work after the birth of her children and does not regret it, she wonders whether she did the right thing. She now believes that many working mothers, including herself, 'got it wrong ... If, as mothers, we need to feel guilty about anything', she says, 'it is children. We have short-changed them'.

The advice the authors offer to working mothers however returns us to the solutions of old. On the one hand, like Cannold, they argue that 'caring work' needs to be more highly valued and that feminism needs to encourage men to contribute to childrearing as well as paid labour. However, the authors also praise those successful career women who have chosen to leave paid work in order to become stay-at-home mothers. For instance, comedian and radio host Wendy Harmer, who 'gave it all up' for full-time motherhood, is heaped with praise and admiration, with the authors describing Harmer's experience of stay-at-home motherhood as 'every woman's dream'.

The authors' solution to 'Motherguilt', it appears, lies in a return to a pre-feminist past. Women, they argue, 'need to compose their lives in a way that feels right to them and not by current male definitions', which, they believe, means putting their desire to mother first. They praise the emergence of women who call themselves the 'new wives'--those who have decided after watching their mothers' attempts to be Superwomen not to follow their lead, choosing stay-at-home motherhood instead.

Buttrose's and Adams' book is disturbing on a number of counts. First they seem to affirm that guilt is synonymous with motherhood, and, although they argue that this does not need to be so, they offer no tangible solutions (other than a sharing of stories and list of self-help and relaxation techniques) for overcoming this situation. Similarly, although they are aware that 'Motherguilt' is created by unrealistic social expectations, there is no acknowledgement that this guilt can, and should be, assuaged, not by individual solutions, but by social and political change to ease women's burdens.

Furthermore, although in some parts of the book the authors show an appreciation for the women who occupy different social situations from those they occupy, such as lesbian mothers and women from non-English speaking backgrounds, they show little appreciation for real economic differences between women. The stories that fill this
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book are all from upper-class, privileged women: surgeons, actors, politicians and businesswomen, who have options available to them that the ordinary woman would not. Like Haussegger, the authors have no real understanding of the social and political context in which women's choices are made and as such much of the book reads like a 'who's who' of successful Australian women, rather than the chronicle of Australian women's voices they claim it is.

In What Women Want Next Susan Maushart, a sociologist and media commentator and author of two books about motherhood, picks up on many of the same themes but her scope is wider. Maushart explores why it is that equality (in theory if not in practice) and greater choice have not made women happier and attempts to 'think deeply and critically'—in her usual amusing and personal way—about 'what women want next'. She makes no claims to having the ultimate or final answer to this question, but hints that the solution might lie in a simple acceptance that the difficulties women face are not a male conspiracy or evidence of feminism's failures, but simply the normal burdens of 'life'.

She agrees with other writers that many of feminism's central tenets need to be questioned, particularly the emphasis placed on work, and also agrees that feminists ignored the joys of motherhood. However, instead of engaging with the blaming feminism narrative Maushart, who has a deeper understanding of feminist literature, does not advocate, like others, a return to a pre-feminist past. If full-time motherhood and domesticity really made women happy, Maushart argues, second wave feminism would never have happened in the first place. Most women do not really desire full-time motherhood, she suggests. However, this option has become attractive in response to a wealth of literature (including her own, she admits) which has presented the combination of motherhood and work in negative terms.

Maushart devotes a number of chapters to showing that happiness is purely subjective and women will never find happiness in an ideological prescription. Feminism, she says 'has made our lives freer and more fair. It has expanded our options exponen­tially—but it is up to us to make the choices that will lead us toward fulfilment on our own terms'. It is time, she says, to 'personalise the political'. This means that, like men, women need to make individual choices regarding work and family and learn to make the best of them. Women, she believes, have to be courageous enough to make the choices they really want without seeking to lay blame for the difficulties they face.

Of all these publications, Maushart's is perhaps the most accessible, least polemical and most aware of a tradition of feminist literature than any of the other authors. She gives an impressive overview of the current work/family debate and the 'crisis in fertility', and, unlike the other authors, does not seek to establish a feminist 'silence' or 'conspiracy' that she must address. Her book looks candidly at the difficulties women experience attempting to find the magic 'balance' between career and motherhood.

Maushart believes that most women do find some balance between work and family, which is evidenced by the large proportion of women working part-time. She agrees therefore with Catherine Hakim's assertion that it is only a small number of professional women who experience conflict between work and home. Maushart herself confesses to enjoying the rushed and harried life of a working mother and encourages
other women to reach a similar acceptance. Women must use the power they now have to 'shape their own destinies' 'without guilt or blaming'. Sure, she says 'wreaking vengeance for the injustices of the past was kinda fun while it lasted. But we're over that now'. Living well now, she concludes, is the best revenge for past injustice.\textsuperscript{13}

Another publication released this year--Marilyn Poole's Family: Changing Families, Changing Time--although different from the books so far discussed, in that it is designed as a textbook for students, is included in this review, because it provides a good starting point for those seeking a way forward rather than apportioning blame. And, as an academic text rather than a popular or personal account, shows the importance of historical knowledge for contemporary understandings.

Poole, a Professor in Sociology in the School of Social and International Studies at Deakin University, has amassed an impressive collection of academics to contribute to this book. She frames the collection with an overview of the demographic shifts that have taken place in Australia in the last decade and the changes they in turn have wrought on the family. The contributors pick up on these themes. Kerreen Reiger, for instance, gives a historical overview of the social, cultural and economic forces that have shaped Australian families over time. Sherry Saggers and Margaret Simms look at the expanding cultural, organisational and social diversity of Australian families and Andrew Singleton looks at the changing role of fathers.

Two chapters deal exclusively with fertility, work and motherhood. Barbara Pocock, whose book The Work/Life Collision was released in 2003, gives a comprehensive statistical and historical analysis of the numbers of women in the workforce, the amount of housework and childcare they do and the various ways they negotiate 'work/care regimes' with their partners. She mentions the tendency to blame feminism for women's difficulties and argues that apportioning blame functions as a convenient scapegoat for government and workplaces that want to forestall change. What is really needed, Pocock argues, following feminist writers of the 1980s, such as Mary O'Brien, is a redistribution of paid and unpaid work so women cease to do the 'lion's share' in the home. Helen Marshall also engages with the debate over childlessness in her chapter on fertility. She contextualises the current 'crisis in fertility' historically, showing how similar debates have occurred in Australia's past. She urges a move away from blaming feminism and thinks the way forward in this debate is to include men as well.

Each chapter ends with a list of key terms, questions for discussions and impressive lists of further reading, which offer a way forward for any interested reader. The strength of Poole's book is its grounding in solid research and the accessibility of its style. It will be a valuable resource for students and teachers alike.

Each of these books, although informed, or at least inspired by the fashion for blaming feminism for women's plight and social ills more generally, contribute to a growing body of literature that seeks out women's contemporary voices. And, in the present political climate where debates about issues affecting women (such as access to fertility treatment, abortion, childcare and industrial relations laws) are increasingly taking place in their absence, they are welcome and worthwhile.

These books are also a timely reminder that if past feminisms failed, there is still much to be done by younger feminists today. Now that the work/family debate has been established as the issue for the twenty-first century, it is imperative that we do not
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lose sight of earlier feminist insights. For instance the feminist critique of the sexual division of labour and the insistence that both men and women share the burdens of reproductive and productive labour. It is also important that we do not allow the narrative of blaming feminism to dominate understandings.

‘Feminism’ is constantly constructed, contested and ever-changing, perhaps the most interesting point to emerge from these books is that if ‘feminism’ in Australia does have a new ‘wave’ it will not be able to fall back on old assumptions about ‘what women want’. Feminists of all types must use this opportunity to once again state their vision for the future.

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ENDNOTES

1 Buttrose and Adams, 4.
2 Cannold, 305.
3 Haussegger, 80.
5 Haussegger, 80.
6 Haussegger, 75.
7 Haussegger wrote two articles to the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2002, which were largely responsible for the increased circulation of the ‘blaming feminism’ narrative.
8 Cannold, 1-25.
9 Buttrose and Adams, 207.
10 Ibid., 123.
12 Buttrose and Adams, 346-50.
13 Maushart, 248.