

'I'm a pimp, I'm a mother'

Antonia Murphy wasn't a regular madam, she was a cool madam, running an ethical escort agency in a New Zealand town while navigating being a mother to six kids and untangling her open marriage. By Alexandra English

Antonia Murphy didn't have the guts to start a brothel until her mother died. The 41-year-old American, who grew up in big cities and spent her twenties working on yachts and backpacking her waythrough Central America, had found herself at the tippy-top of New Zealand's North Island, in the small town of Whangārei, completely and utterly *bored*.

At night, she cooked spaghetti and read bedtime stories to her two children, one of whom had a disability that left him mostly non-verbal and prone to violent seizures. The next morning, she'd pour cereal, pack lunch boxes and walk the kids to the school bus. Her husband, Peter, would go to his office job, and Antonia would head out to their farm. There, she'd deal with misshapen eggs from sick chickens, find maggots in the compost, and, on one particular day, fill her purse with goat poo to take to the vet for analysis. She grew her own food, raised livestock, and made fruit-wine and cheese. Her friends back home thought she was living the dream. She was so bored. She was tired and isolated. Her days were so repetitive she felt like a robot.

So, a week after her mother died, she started to blow up her life.

She started with her marriage. Antonia and Peter had never placed much value on monogamy. "Why can't you sleep with who you want and stay married?" Peter had asked on one of their early dates, and Antonia agreed.

Not long after her mother died, Antonia began sleeping with Patrice, a newly divorced French neighbour, while Peter started dating someone else. It seemed to them that they could have one big happy family. Eventually, Peter's relationship ended and he announced he wanted to sail around the world, and Antonia fell pregnant with Patrice's child. The family split, and Patrice moved into their farmhouse with his kids, who stayed there part-time. "All of a sudden, there was now a blended family of six kids, one was a newborn, another was disabled," says Antonia. She realised she needed to find a way to make more money.

Antonia had kept the idea of opening an ethical escort agency in the back of her mind for years. When she and Peter first arrived in New Zealand, Antonia was taken aback to read that they'd chosen the only country in the world where sex work was not only legal but also where the workers didn't need to obtain a licence. The *Prostitution Reform Act 2003* had passed with a narrow majority of 60 votes in favour to 59 against, with one abstention, in an attempt to pave the way for a safer, less-exploitative environment. It meant that, in theory, sex workers would be able to refuse to see a client and could negotiate what services they would and would not be willing to provide. It also meant – again, in theory – that there could be repercussions for clients who did not respect their boundaries. Initially, there had been concerns that there

would be a rapid expansion of sex work, but figures from the Ministry of Justice in 2022 showed that brothel applications had dwindled from 332 in 2004 to 16 in 2022.

Sex work is not criminalised anywhere in Australia, but tolerance of brothels varies from state to state. They're illegal in South Australia and Western Australia, for example, but decriminalised in New South Wales, where they come under council planning regulations like any other business. In Victoria, the *Sex Work Decriminalisation Act 2022* made consensual sex work legal in most places.

Despite being brought up to believe that sex work was "really dangerous", Antonia was able to shake off the notion that sex workers were "denizens of an underworld that I'd never seen". "The message I heard my whole life was that it was a bad thing that bad girls did when they didn't have choices," she says. But she had known girls at university (and this is Ivy League we're talking about) who were sex-work adjacent and loved it. "I had a friend who became a stripper and she said it was amazing because she would strip two nights a week and it would pay for everything," she says. At the time, Antonia was living in New York, showing apartments for \$8 an hour "and getting hit on by my boss". "I thought, 'There are escorts in the Yellow Pages – maybe I just need to go out with a nice man and have dinner. I can be charming, I can speak French, I'm pretty,'" she recalls, "so I called up



one of those agencies and a rough voice answered and told me to call back later and I lost my nerve. What stopped me was that prostitution was illegal – if I got into a dodgy situation, I wouldn't be able to call the cops and there wouldn't be any recourse."

After Antonia's discovery in New Zealand, she visited a brothel to speak to the women about what their lives were like as "safe" sex workers, and even sent Peter to a few parlours to gauge the state of play. "I remember him coming back and saying, 'It's like this really tacky idea of what people think luxury is, but it's definitely not luxury,'" she says. "I just thought, 'Why does it have to be that way? Why can't it be pleasant and not make you – the client or the worker – feel filthy and disgusting?' There should be no reason to feel disgusted with yourself."

And so the idea for her ethical escort agency was born.

Antonia's new book, *Madam*, is a romping (pun unintended) ride through the first two years of her agency, which she called The Bach, the Kiwi name for a beach house. It's already been adapted for television in a series starring Rachel Griffiths, and won the Golden Nymph at Monte Carlo TV Festival. ("They lightened up the story for TV," Antonia says with a wry smile.)

From trying to find a landlord who would allow The Bach to operate under their roof, to finding a roster of women to work with, *Madam* is a funny, startling, sad and empathetic glimpse into one woman's attempt to create a safe and beautiful space for women to work while also paying them a livable wage, giving them flexible hours and providing childcare. It's an insight into the industry rarely seen by those outside of it.

The idea for The Bach was to take away not only the dangerous aspects of sex work but also the admin (think photoshoots, advertising, bookings, billing). "A lot of the women who worked at The Bach were just stuck in a really rotten situation, in a small town in New Zealand with very few or no professional options," says Antonia. "A lot of women will do sex work in their own homes, and that's really dark – your clients know where you live. But they didn't have the skills to run their own business in another way."

"A LOT OF THE WOMEN WERE STUCK IN A SMALL TOWN WITH VERY FEW PROFESSIONAL OPTIONS"

– Antonia Murphy

Antonia also understood the importance of maintaining a work-life balance, no matter your work. "They could leave their real life at the door for a couple of hours while their kids were in preschool," says Antonia, who provided the women with lingerie, outfits and shoes, and organised their bookings according to their schedules and willingness. "They'd walk in off the street, put their junk in a locker, dress up in whatever crazy outfit they wanted or the guy requested, go to their booking, take the cash, and then go on their way."

Madam is landing at a time when women's sexuality and sex work as work is being reconsidered and taken seriously. Gillian Anderson's book *Want* is an anthology of women's sexual fantasies; Rufi Thorpe's *Margo's Got Money Troubles* tells the story of a young mum who joins OnlyFans because it pays more than her restaurant job and means she can stay

home with her baby; in the Australian comedy series *How to Please a Woman*, Gina starts an agency that sends hot men to women's houses to clean – and more. Antonia says these are all signs that people's attitudes towards sex work are becoming more positive.

"When I spoke to women about my project, if they were under 40, 100 per cent of them were like, 'That's amazing, tell me more.' But with older women, it was clear they had more reservations or were more judgey," says Antonia. She chalks up young people's progressive attitudes to the "existing atmosphere of how people meet up for intimate encounters." "They've grown up in this atmosphere where the idea of meeting up with a stranger you might have sex with that night is not so crazy. The women who worked at The Bach were already having casual sex, and they were doing it for free – the guy wouldn't even pay for their dinner. They were looking around like, 'This set up is not ideal.'"

Now, as attitudes towards sex work have changed and people have become more accepting of it as genuine work, people are reframing it as an empowered decision. And for some women, it definitely is. But for others,

Antonia says, it's just work. They're mothers and students trying to make ends meet in an economy that's not built for them. "There's a kind of binary that people fall into, where if sex work is not abusive then it must be empowering," says Antonia. "But let's face it, most work is not about empowerment, it's about making money. And if you're earning \$150 an hour rather than \$8 an hour, how much less of your time, of your life, do you have to sell? If we look at it in the sense that we all need to, for lack of a better phrase, eat our ration of shit in a capitalistic world, if you're getting paid more, maybe you have to eat that little bit less."

Antonia ran The Bach for three years, the last of which she describes as becoming so routine as to almost be boring. In 2019, her son Silas had a seizure in his sleep. When Antonia went to wake him in the morning, she found that he had died in the night. Antonia, Patrice and their daughter Miranda moved to France for a year to clear their heads, only to be confined to their apartment during the pandemic. Now back in New Zealand, Antonia has been reflecting on her life while writing the book.

They say women contain multitudes – perhaps none more so than Antonia Murphy. She grew up in San Francisco, went to boarding school in Massachusetts and graduated from the Ivy League Columbia University in New York. After what she describes as "20 years of homework", she left the academic world behind and "booked it onto a yacht out of Florida to the Caribbean" working as an on-board cook. When she was living in San Francisco and about to turn 30, she had the realisation many women have when approaching their fourth decade. "I recognised that I was living in one of the most expensive cities in the world and I just didn't see how I was ever going to be able to have a family and raise them while trying to live a life that was even a little bit creative," she says.

Then she met and fell in love with Peter, a sailor from Brooklyn. Immediately, they started hatching plans for their future. "We were talking about where we could move to, where we could sail to, and I was pushing hard for France," she says. "But Peter didn't speak French, and Australia and New Zealand were downwind, so that was it." Peter and Antonia settled

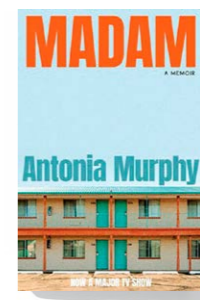
on the farm where their family expanded, broke and expanded again.

It's interesting, this life of juxtapositions that Antonia has led: city girl and farm wife; mum of six and madam; happily married and in an open relationship; academic and creative. Does she thrive on the push and pull of opposing identities? "I've always been peripatetic. I love sinking my teeth into a whole new set of skills that I know nothing about," she says. "The farm was just so foreign, it was fascinating. I've always loved learning." That's the same approach she took to opening The Bach – she treated it like an assignment. The sheer amount of research she undertook at times threatened to overwhelm her. She went deep into "r/Seggswork" forums on Reddit, visited brothels, and even had a turn as a dominatrix.

Madam masterfully flicks between the often lovely and sometimes devastating mundanity of everyday family life and the fast-paced, dangerous world of sex work. Antonia is often sitting down to dinner with her family when she gets a graphic text from a client, and she says that while she tried not to bring her work home with her, the exhaustion could take her to a dark place.

Antonia also writes with refreshing honesty about the reality of having a child with a disability. She loves him endlessly, of course, but she's also candid about her frustrations, disappointments, worries and the moments of fear when he becomes progressively unwell. At the same time, she relishes the sweetness, the love, the moments of connection and joy she had with Silas. "While I was running The Bach, I was conscious that a place like this would be the only way that he would ever be able to encounter intimate contact," she says. The Bach was not only a shame-free space for women, but for their clients, too.

"I wasn't surprised that there were older men who were lonely, widowers, and I wasn't surprised that there are disabled people or people who are morbidly obese or conventionally ugly who couldn't get dates," she says. "What surprised me was the number of ordinary people who are just lonely. There were young and healthy people, and there's no reason why they shouldn't be out there playing the game. Loneliness really is an epidemic."



Madam, by Antonia Murphy (Simon & Schuster, \$34.99), is out now; *Madam* the TV series will air in Australia in early 2025.

LEFT Antonia Murphy has been an academic, cook, sailor, cleaner, farmer, dominatrix, madam and author. OPPOSITE PAGE The Bach offered free childcare for its sex workers.