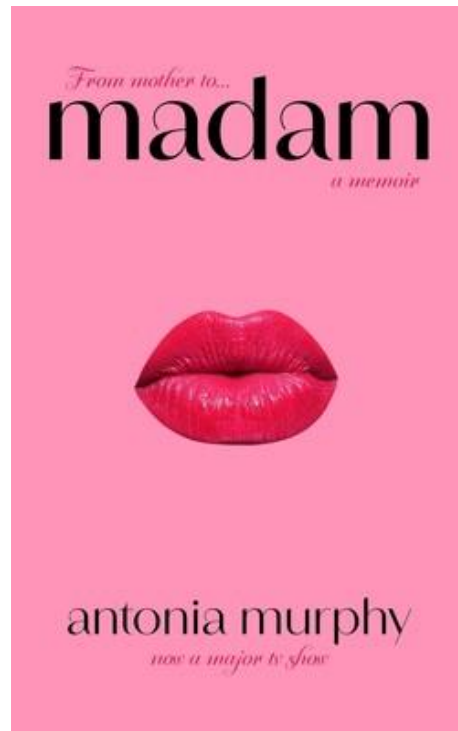


Naked massages and sleepless nights: Antonia Murphy's Madam takes us behind the scenes of running an 'ethical brothel'

Non-fiction

'Madam: A Memoir' by Antonia Murphy



Antonia Murphy's brothel tale is a roller coaster experience.

Photo: Andi Crown Photography 'Madam: A Memoir' by Antonia Murphy

Frieda Klotz

Yesterday at 02:30

A typical day at office for Antonia Murphy was unusual. She would field messages from men keen to meet her escorts, blocking those who seemed rude and swatting away anyone asked for a discount.

She would hang out in a room known as The Dungeon and chat with her employees in between jobs. And she would note down the habits of the men who came in and give them nicknames based on their peccadillos.

Over the three years she ran an "ethical brothel" in rural New Zealand, she learned a thing or two. She writes in this memoir about the experience. "I saw through men's bullshit now like I had Superman's X-ray vision for lies."

Murphy, originally from San Francisco, set up an "ethical brothel" in New Zealand, where sex work was decriminalised in 2003. Her account has been made into a TV show but here she tells the real

version – which, as she puts it, “is closer to the truth, at least as close as a madam’s discretion [and the lawyers] will allow”.

Madam is a pretty crazy story and not one for the faint of heart. Throughout Murphy includes the messages she received from men seeking to book a session at the brothel – notes in grammatically challenged and deeply crude text-speak.

In the backdrop is Murphy’s own family, as she recounts her separation from her husband and the appearance of her new French partner, a talented chef who spends his time whipping up wholesome salmon dishes. Alongside her other children, she has a little boy, Silas, born with a rare and unidentifiable medical condition that leads to dangerous epileptic seizures.

Murphy is a gripping writer, deftly outlining the breakdown of her marriage to a selfish husband (“Peter”) after the couple began to dabble in open relationships. She moved in with her lover, Patrice. As Peter refused to pay regular child support, she realised she had to earn a living. That’s where the idea of an “ethical brothel”, which would protect women’s rights, came in.

This approach would mean that clients were pre-screened, those who were rude or aggressive banned, and that consent was key: the women could always turn a client down if they wished and still be paid.

The opening months of the operation were tricky: Murphy found herself paying her staff while living on her savings. She struggled to find the right women. Many were unreliable or had substance-abuse issues.

Many of the women had other things in common too: they were lone parents trying to raise children without support or putting themselves through college. Or they were trying to leave abusive partners and money they earned at the brothel enabled them to do so. In these sections, the book reads like social commentary.

Murphy knows that two of the women she hired had no other options as they had neither an education nor a career. Another was mired in legal fees from a custody battle with her ex. Another, Robyn, was trying to leave a violent partner, and Murphy let her prepare for court at work. She spotted her sitting with her laptop surrounded by documents. “The piles of paper. A woman trying to mount a legal case while giving men naked massages.”

Murphy had long envisaged setting up an “ethical brothel”, but waited until the death of her mother, who had been an ardent feminist. And as Murphy is aware, her brand of feminism is complicated. On the one hand is the inarguable reality of the vulnerability of the women she employs who are raising children on their own – she’s helping them earn a living. “Sex work is the one job in which most women can reliably make more money than men,” she writes.

On the other is her debatable view on the principle of selling sex. “These women know their sexuality has a monetary value – a bright, shiny coin they were born with,” she writes. “And since every man wants it, why shouldn’t they sell it – isn’t that supply and demand?”

In Murphy’s eyes her brothel filled a niche. To prevent the need for sex work, vulnerable people need free childcare, affordable housing, a working car, addiction treatment and mentoring to help them learn a trade.

“Is there a government, in any country in the world, that will provide all those services to people in need?” She answers her own question: “No, there is not.”

Whether a brothel can truly be ethical is an open question by the end of this account. It’s one that Murphy grapples with herself, over sleepless nights, worrying about her business and the plight of her workers. Financial pressures push her towards bad decisions. Even when the operation runs smoothly, she observes: “After two years, I was good at this job – but I knew it had changed me.”

Madam offers a glimpse into the power dynamics of a difficult world between the women and their male clients and between Murphy and the women themselves. Would she do this work if

she were younger, she wonders. She's not certain. But her verdict on sex work is at once open-ended and definitive. "When consenting adults freely choose to do sex work, I think we should leave them alone," she says.

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