

# My wild life as an ethical pimp

**A bored mother in New Zealand started her own escort agency. But this memoir is a long way from *Pretty Woman*. By Ceci Browning**

Antonia Murphy's mother gave her the same piece of advice that most women pass on to their daughters: get an education, so if some man leaves you with kids to support you can find a way to get by. And in 2016 that was the position Murphy found herself in. An expat from San Francisco, she had been living with her two children on a farm in New Zealand when she became pregnant by a man who wasn't her husband. Her marriage crumbled. Suddenly she needed a way to make enough money to keep her growing family afloat.

Any ordinary person would scour a jobs board and pick up shifts at a supermarket or somewhere similarly flexible. Murphy, bored with rural life, had a different plan. She wanted to start her own business, "a clean, supportive place, where women could work". Since sex work in New Zealand had been decriminalised since 2003, why could that business not be an escort agency? She would be able to help women to escape poverty while doing the same herself. So armed with condoms, vibrators and a few ground rules — no drugs, no blackmail, and consent could be withdrawn at any time — she decided to give it a go.

The graphic details you would expect from a book about setting up an escort agency come quickly (excuse the pun). There are tips for employees, such as "you cannot drink too much pineapple juice" and the best way to get chilli oil off a man's nether region is washing-up liquid. Acronyms abound — BBW (big beautiful woman), PSE (porn star experience) and PSWG (pretty skinny

white girl). Condom etiquette dictates that the escort always selects which size is used. "Any time you leave it with the client to choose, he'll go extra large," Murphy explains. "He thinks his winky is a masterpiece." And I don't think I've ever read a book that uses the word "labia" so many times on the same page.

Murphy's first employee was a hustler who sold her virginity online — seven times. The second was a petite girl who specialised in sensual massage. A third signed up, then a fourth. Quickly it became impossible to keep track of which woman was which, given their matching blonde hair and "long, slender legs".

Her agency's first punter, on the other hand, was an Englishman in his eighties after a lady with a "nice bush". Of course, not all the clients were as polite or straightforward, the pattern becoming clear from the nicknames they are given: Andy Giggly, Neville Magic Fingers, Jack the Panty Thief, Larry Ogre and Donald Licky Sucky. One man was rewarded with a particularly long moniker: Solo Dad Obsessed with Squirting Wants to Trade Seafood for Sex.

From the bubblegum-pink cover you may expect the memoir to be a perky feminist manifesto, but it's far from the girl-power slogans of Hollywood. Two months in cracks began to show in Murphy's plan. She faced pressure from the council to shut down and was forced to take out a NZ\$30,000 (£14,000) bank loan. A couple of the girls slipped back into old drug habits. "In the space of a week I lost half my staff to meth," Murphy writes. A repeat visitor roughed

up one girl, a terrifying incident that unfolded while Murphy was at home putting her new baby to bed.

Undeterred, Murphy and her co-pimps pushed on. New women were recruited, a panic button was installed and a huge Maori called Greg was brought in to give everyone a lesson in self-defence. On slow days the team would press their hands together and chant, "The dick will provide." And it does.

At the end of the agency's second year things were looking up: 12 reliable escorts populated the staff room (called "the Dungeon"), 3,000 men filled the contact book and, Murphy writes, "no one was on drugs". She could pay her bills and support her family. Her late mother would have been proud. One of her employees could afford to hire a custody lawyer to keep hold of her kids. Another was able to take her family to the dentist. "I searched my heart and I tried to find shame or regret," Murphy says. "But I couldn't. It just wasn't there."

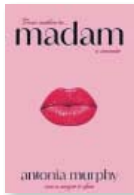
Make no mistake, though, Murphy's memoir has none of the romance of the Julia Roberts film *Pretty Woman*. There isn't a happy ending. One of the youngest employees, Alicia, died a drug-related death, aged 21. There were three rapes within the two years Murphy documents — not at the agency, but involving the girls who worked there. And in an epilogue she reveals that she sold the business, which then folded during Covid.

Murphy makes an intelligent case for why sex work is legitimate and should be taken seriously — "when people say it is not a 'real job', like please tell me, what does a 'financial analyst' do?" —

but on finishing the book I felt exhausted, overwhelmed by the need to sit quietly and stare at a wall for a few hours, just like I do after bingeing true crime documentaries.

When Murphy first sought advice about setting up an agency, an experienced escort warned her: "You'll hate men by the end of this."

So will you, reader, so will you.



### **Madam**

A Memoir

by Antonia Murphy

Gallery £20 pp368

HANNAH PETERS/GETTY IMAGES

