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fighting words

News presenter, Feminist and Author, Virginia Haussegger

By Rachel Funari

Call it luck—or maybe a gracious act of the connected universe—that the Allen and Unwin new releases catalogue I actually looked through turned out to be the one advertising a new book by the lovely Virginia Haussegger, Canberra’s ABC news presenter. As some of you may be aware, Virginia launched the very first issue of *lip*, which really was the only fact I needed to know that I had to read this book and interview her about it. *Wonder Woman: The myth of ‘having it all’* is Virginia’s contribution to the feminist canon and is a discussion about the difficulty of having a successful career and being a wonderful mother—and how many women feel like they are failing at both.

Wonder Woman is a riveting read, a book that you want to rip through quickly but have to keep putting down in order to have a good think. When you finally finish, you then run to all your friends to discuss this important stuff. If you are like me, all that talk can keep you going for days.

What makes *Wonder Woman* so good is its objectivity and balance despite its starting point at a very personal space; the voices of the various women whose decisions and feelings about career and motherhood are laid bare; and Virginia’s own slightly satiric inflection (‘As I sat down to a business lunch one brilliant autumn day in Canberra, one of my companions leaned over and said, “I’ve been reading your columns and boy you’ve set the cat among the pigeons!’

‘Or, his mate chipped in, “the cat among the cats!”

Ho, ho, ho! Boy that was a blast. There were belly laughs aplenty.’)

Virginia opens the book with the story of why it has come to be. If you are a reader of *The Age* you may have noticed the article that Virginia wrote in 2002, given the provocative title ‘The sins of our feminist mothers’. This article, in which Virginia shares her anger and grief over falling hook, line and sinker for the second-wave feminist message that ‘fulfillment comes with a briefcase’ and finding herself in her late 30s, unable to have children and revaluing the importance of a ‘cafe-latte kind of life’, initiated a storm of response, some of it hostile. Initially taken aback by the virulence of the response, Virginia came to realise that what was important about the storm she unleashed was its indication that women needed to vent—that frustration, anger, resentment and disappointment were running high—and she set out to find out why. However, she goes through great pains, both in the book and when she speaks about the subject, to point out that *Wonder Woman* is not an academic treatise that surveys all women, but rather is a journalistic look at a particular set of women—women like herself who are successful, driven and career-oriented.

I'm ten years younger than Virginia's demographic and the press has begun talking about the difficulty of the career/motherhood juggle, even if for the most part it is the ideal of the woman who can do it all that is mainly pushed. The backlash against the career-focused lifestyle has already started, helped by a conservative government who, in Virginia's words, wants to take us back to the 1950s—when the nuclear family with 2.5 children was the pillar upon which the social structure was based. Perhaps it is the threat of this backlash that caused some feminists to savage Virginia's article. Or is it something else?

Virginia said, 'A lot of the response that was critical wasn't from women who would call themselves feminist, which is interesting... It was a very simple thing that got me in trouble. It was saying I'm daft, I'm foolish for taking my feminist foremothers' words as gospel—that fulfillment came in a briefcase. It's not that strong a criticism, nevertheless that's what is being focused on. Honestly, that is me clearly taking responsibility, I would have thought ...and also it is pointing to what is the basic truth: this was my experience, not anyone else's. I bought very strongly into the feminist messages that I grew up with, which were strong. I was a complete sponge to the cause and I don't regret that. And I'm not saying it was wrong.'

I also suggested that a reason for the angry responses to her article could be based on a cultural fear of the expression of grief or disappointment. Capitalist and patriarchal society suppresses expression of vulnerability, fear and self-questioning. Virginia agreed with this, but also attributed it in part to the envy factor (my word, not hers), which is compounded by a false sense of intimacy we feel we have with famous people.

'I think that people are uncomfortable with people saying I'm not happy or I'm miserable or I'm frustrated. We seem to not like that because it makes us uncomfortable... What I saw was a sense of people—women—feeling like I had no right to complain... because I appear to have a good life. People who know nothing about my life and nothing about me, just because they might know a little bit about me because of the public profile, literally they therefore assume, as we do with people, that we know a great deal about them. So the attitude was that I was being selfish and a whinger because I appeared to have the trappings of a very good life.'

Perhaps my interview with Virginia might have been more interesting if I was one of her hostile critics, but as it was we agreed on most things. I did assert my difference over the issue of IVF funding. 'I'm some kind of freak feminist who doesn't believe IVF should be funded,' I interrupted, nervously repeating that I don't think it is a god-given right to have children, that IVF seems another example of how we can just buy ourselves everything we want. Virginia's response was so reasonable that I might have to rethink my position. She graciously partly agreed with me and then explained that it infuriates her how the government presents IVF in the same way previous governments presented abortion: as if it is a fallback position that women have, allowing them to make bad or wrong decisions. IVF is in fact 'a horrible thing to have to go through' and it is a medical hope for women who have a genuine medical problem of age-related infertility, not a choice that allows women to be irresponsible and delay child-bearing.

'My argument is that those women, who have given the best part of their most productive and creative years to the workforce—they've been either working or

studying or whatever, but they've given damn good years to this country. And for those who've been working, and that's the majority of them, they've been paying their taxes along the way...contributed to the growth of this country—and this country is enjoying stellar economic times—to then turn around and say late in life to some of those women who are experiencing age-related infertility problems and need medical help...to turn around and say tss, tss, tss, it's your own fault'

Virginia has a lot of anger towards the Howard government, which seems to her to be living in a world that doesn't exist anymore, steadfastly refusing to ignore the changing face of our society. It is their policies that are making life so difficult for women, promulgating backwards attitudes that women are primarily and fore-mostly breeders, while simultaneously devaluing the role of motherhood when it comes into direct relation with the workplace. I expressed hopefulness that this might change as more women remain childless. In *Wonder Woman*, Virginia discusses the trend of falling fertility rates in Australia and abroad—and she does not shy away from confronting the severe economic changes this could mean. But she does not say that a solution is for women to go back to spending their lives raising kids. If we don't revert to this idea of womanhood, then surely this new social structure of single people and small families can foster positive change when the economy is forced to reshape in accommodation?

'We unfortunately have to go through an uncomfortable time in shaping the cage a little bit, and I guess that's what I've become involved in. In saying, at the moment the government that administers the way we live here is living in la la land, not recognising the face of Australia is changed. So maybe shaking all this up will help speed an understanding that we aren't all families....one in four households now have single occupants, so the makeup of our community has changed dramatically over the decade. At the moment our policy, our media—or social consciousness of that—doesn't reflect that change.'

But of course when it comes to changing social consciousness it is often at the level of the individual that change begins. In *Wonder Woman*, Virginia hypothesises that one of the reasons women are finding themselves childless is because they have been unable to find a partner whom they feel safe to raise children with. This seems to me a result of the changing social consciousness of women that feminism has achieved, but it has perhaps gone a little too far—helped of course by romanticised media images of relationships—and is causing women to reject the reality of a constantly negotiated relationship in favour of chasing a dream of a man that doesn't exist. But then again, perhaps male consciousness simply hasn't changed as fast as women's.

Virginia is certainly wary of letting men off the hook and blaming women for attempting to choose a mate by 'laundry list' and a steadfast refusal to compromise. Virginia is worried that espousing this idea too strongly could result in giving too many women the idea that it is okay to stay with 'dud' men. Despite some women's choosiness, others are still committed to relationships that are bad for them and need to be encouraged to demand more from their partners.

Staying with dud partners raises the issue of low self-esteem, which Virginia has been shocked to discover seems to be a rampant problem particularly related to the female gender. She has interviewed some of the most successful and influential women in the world, only to be told that they feel like fakes or failures, waiting for the world to discover they are frauds. This is related to the self-deprecating words of women who

feel that are 'just' mothers. Is this feeling of inadequacy a particularly female phenomenon? Does it come back to the fact that many of us put on a great show of feeling successful and confident, having it all together and achieving it all, when really we believe we are only barely holding it together?

'[This is] the ridiculousness of the have-it-all ideal, such as [women] feel like they are failures because they aren't managing to do it all like everyone else is. The fact is we're not being honest and open about what's going on for all of us. And that's why I'm saying we need to be unflinchingly honest about, you know, that sometimes it doesn't work or sometimes I feel like a failure or sometimes I want to hide under a rock. You hear a bit of that. But even to say, yes, I've got a terrific position but sometimes I feel very frustrated and miserable about the fact that I didn't achieve these things. I think that honesty will do us an enormous amount of good.'

I ask Virginia if she thinks this is beginning to happen. Are women starting to be more open and honest with each other? 'No... I think there's a great deal of fear about that honesty. I think we PR things out of existence. We use PR speak in such a way now, in all our political speak, in our media, in such a strong way that a lot of what we say doesn't even make sense in politics. But, no, I don't think we are being honest; I think we do live by the false expectations that we have an awful lot to achieve and speaking out and saying, I'm slipping a little bit or I'm having trouble here, is an admission of failure. It's silly.'

Now that we've established neither our government, our social structure, nor our peers are helping us to feel good about our lives, I want to also establish that *Wonder Woman* sets out to do exactly what none of these structures are doing: giving women permission to admit to feelings of frustration and disappointment. By sharing hers and other personal stories, Virginia not only lets us know that even the most outwardly successful women sometimes feel like failures, but that admitting it is not only okay, but liberating. It is the journey of learning that one is not alone that is so healing and, at least privately, women are particularly good at sharing their stories and themselves as the best way of offering support. I asked Virginia what it was that helped her to deal with her grief around not being able to get pregnant, what are the supports that young women should build up in their lives to enable them to deal with life's blows?

'It really was talking to other women and finding out that not only was I not alone, but even for women in different situations that I might look at with envy, they had issues as well that they wanted to share, and that for me has been incredibly supportive and in a sense empowering for me too... There is a tremendous generosity of spirit among women when it comes to sharing stories about our lives... and that has certainly been a tremendous support for me.'

Aside from celebrating, exemplifying and encouraging this generosity of spirit, *Wonder Woman* does not pose answers or solutions, but rather exposes problems. Virginia worries that there 'isn't optimism in it'; she worries about scaring younger women. But I disagree. I think the book may prove to be an early step on an important and positive road towards encouraging young women to think about their choices as they bumble or plow through life, to providing the personal stories that expose the consequences of such choices, allowing young women to be much more informed about where their choices can lead.

'The one very positive thing that's come out of this while I've been doing all these

talks around the country recently, a number of women, particularly young women, have been coming up to me and saying, thanks, Virginia ...it got me talking... That sort of response is fantastic. To hear, even if it's just one girl—but it's been a lot of them—say that it's got us thinking, it's got us talking, or it's even got us arguing or it got me and my boyfriend talking, that's good. Whether they agree or disagree, whether they fight, I don't care, just that "it's got us talking" is fantastic.'

I hope that I was able to convey my sense of the book's optimism to Virginia—during our talk she certainly put a positive light upon an issue I've become negative about: the disrepute the word 'feminism' has fallen into. I'm still impressed by Virginia's lack of fear in calling herself out loud and publicly a feminist and I asked her if she has suffered any consequences as a result. Not really, she said, though she thought some people saw it as a cute quirk of hers. 'I guess I'm surprised about how many of my own colleagues and women who would have once called themselves feminist have now cut themselves off from it; it's just not part of their lives. And of course I realise that's quite widespread. That doesn't mean, though—and this used to worry me a great deal—but I've started to come up to the view that it doesn't really matter whether girls call themselves feminist or not, that's not really the issue. What it is, is do they feel empowered, do they feel a sense of entitlement: that's what matters. And if I think that young women weren't feeling that then I'd be really worried, but I think they do'.

This article doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of the many important issues discussed in *Wonder Woman*, from the sacrifices brilliant women are forced to make because of the hostility of the workplace towards mothers, to the loneliness faced by single women still in search of a partner. I urge you to get yourself to your local bookshop or library, find yourself a copy of *Wonder Woman* and get myth-busting.

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