WHO WAS THAT WOMAN?

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Every time I give a presentation on the Women's Weekly in the 1950s, I am inundated with stories from women of my generation of baby boomers about its influence on their lives. This is not surprising. It was found in one in four Australian homes, far outstripping its rivals, Woman, Woman's Day and New Idea, in circulation and was far more glamorous in appearance. In the 1950s, the Weekly was the popular face of Australian femininity.

In this decade, the Weekly differed visually from its counterpart of 1946. New printing machines had been installed in 1950 to produce a magazine that was larger in size, glossier in appearance, with more colour pages per issue than its rivals. It led the price rise from sixpence to ninepence (7 cents) towards the end of 1951, increased the average number of pages from 56 to 88 by 1961, and over the same period increased its sales from 750 000 to 800 000. Its instantly recognisable layout and format became visually embedded in the memories of the baby-boomer generation.

For women of all ages, reading the Weekly in the 1950s was like stepping into a glamorous new home filled with desirable and up-to-date products, familiar objects, interesting and romantic men, practical yet alluring women, and happy children. In this haven of modernity, women found the emotional tools to deal with the masculine world.

The glossy cover beckoned the female reader first into the boudoir where she was surrounded by full-page colour ads for intimate products like Michel, Lournay and Revlon lipsticks, Goya perfume, Prestige and Berlei underwear and Holeproof hosiery. These seductive products were interleaved with romantic colour illustrations of the three fiction stories and the serial, which were usually about women and men in pursuit of love.

Further on, the reader came to the living area and found familiar features like Dorothy Drain’s ‘It Seems to Me’, the Social Roundabout, Wonderful Australia, Betty Keep’s dress sense section, readers’ letters, Louise Hunter’s teenage advice column and the humorists Ross Campbell and Betty Sydney. These columns were framed by cartoons and ads for cleaning products like Brasso and Silvo and products for children. This section also contained news stories of local celebrities like Judge Adrian Curlewis (8/2/51) and the actor John McCallum (12/9/51) at home and abroad as well as coverage of natural disasters like the 1956 floods on the Murray and Darling Rivers (5/12/56: 20–21). It also contained quizzes and surveys on personal appearance and how to catch the right man.

Then the reader moved into the kitchen where she found homemaking, entertainment, cooking and gardening sections, with full-page colour ads for products like Formica tables and Luxaflex venetian blinds, MacRobertson’s chocolates, Kraft Cheese recipes and Dri Glo bath towels. This was followed by the laundry section containing smaller ads for products like Velvet soap with more cartoons and fiction. The last or back porch section usually contained the regular comics, ‘Teena’ and ‘Mandrake the Magician’, the astrology page and a cut-out pattern.
page. The back page usually carried a full-page colour ad for Arnott’s biscuits or for Nyal pharmaceutical products.

This format varied to include regular special liftout colour sections on fashion, cooking and gardening, and in summer a special section for fiction. Every issue of the Weekly was glamorous yet familiar, with an element of surprise. Many issues in 1951 featured full-page colour advertisements for mantle radios and swimsuits, flagging the arrival of new forms of consumerism. They also contained reminders of the Cold War in full-page black-and-white advertisements exhorting women to persuade their husbands, brothers and sons to join the Citizen Military Forces. In 1956 consumerism reached a more expensive stage. A full-page colour advertisement for Kelvinator refrigerators appeared in the same issue as a feature on the arrival of television. That it could take pride of place in our lives. In 1961 advertisements for soap powder and automatic washing machines and travel to Europe and Hong Kong were juxtaposed with articles on dieting and ‘housewife blues’. While these issues and products identified different stages of consumerism, other products like Keen’s mustard, Kraft cheese and Curleypet provided continuity and familiarity, and were advertised in nearly every issue.

In this format the Weekly was the magazine for women as housewives and mothers. But it had a greater impact on their daughters.

1951

I began reading the Weekly in 1951, when I was 8 years old, at the house of my friends Diane and Barbara Trill, whose father ran the corner shop in a lower-middle-class part of Woollahra, in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. They also had 24 new comics every month and listened to popular music on commercial radio. On their record player I listened to records of Jo Stafford and ‘Carmen Jones’. They went to the ‘Ice Follies’ and had American children’s books. Their father read the afternoon papers. In my home we had the morning papers and the ABC Weekly, but not the Women’s Weekly or any comics. Instead we had a vast library of highbrow books and British and Australian children’s literature which were an accompaniment to the classical music we listened to on the ABC.

My envy of the Trills stemmed from two conditions. My parents’ political and intellectual interests appeared to set them apart from those of my friends at a time when ‘difference’ was becoming increasingly unacceptable. And as the youngest of three widely spaced children, I needed to find my own identity. So for me, reading the Women’s Weekly at the Trills’ was a deliciously furtive and slightly subversive way of finding my own place in the world.

I identified with the normality of the white Australian girls in the advertisements. They wore the same Paddle school shoes, Joyce school blouses and Cleo school tunics, ate the same Weetbix breakfast cereal, Sao biscuits and Kraft cheese and used the same Ipana toothpaste, Tek toothbrush and Protex soap as I did. They also had the same Jeldi bedspreads and dressing gowns. These items provided me with a sense of identity with my school friends that I could not find in British children’s fiction like Enid Blyton’s Famous Five series nor in Australian children’s fiction like Norman Lindsay’s The Magic Pudding, Ethel Turner’s Seven Little Australians, or the novels of Mary Grant Bruce.

My family fitted some images of modernity but not others. While my school friends’ mothers and sisters wore intimate items of glamour and sophistication that appeared in full-page colour ads for Lournay and Michel lipsticks (17/3/51: 14), Prestige and Kayser lingerie (12/5/51:14) and Berlei bras (28/11/51: 2), my mother used more practical items like Herco hand lotion (14/4/51: 15), Pond’s Angel Face (21/11/51: 3) and Napro hair colour (26/12/51: 28) and wore Adelyn frocks (14/11/51: 23).

Yet the Weekly did connect me to my mother’s involvement with politics and the status of women. I devoured articles on the women candidates in the 1951 election (14/4/51: 17; 28/4/51: 17) and read with interest the editorial noting how few women had been elected to Parliament and how only one, Dame Enid Lyons had held Cabinet office (27/1/51: 13). I enjoyed the short pieces on ‘interesting women’, like Alva Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist who worked for the United Nations, and Mrs Pandit, Indian Ambassador to the United States (3/2/51: 12, 24). I also read the features on Dame Enid Lyons (31/3/51: 12) and Sister Kenny (17/3/51: 17, 26). And I was delighted that two books that my family enjoyed reading, Belles on Their Toes by Frank and Ernestine Gilbreth (17/2/51: 18) and This I Remember by Eleanor Roosevelt (144/1/51: 22), were warmly reviewed.

The two abiding images in the Weekly in 1951 were the swimsuit and the portable or mantle radio. They belonged in the carefree outdoors and in particular Bondi Beach, where my parents went every Sunday afternoon in summer. In 1951 the Weekly advertised several brands of swimsuits, like Cole of California, Jantzen (7/11/51: 10; 5/12/51: 23), Sandeze (15/11/51: 61) and featured fashion pages of beachwear from Paris, California and Sydney. Women even wore swimsuits in illustrations of the fiction. Men’s beachwear was also advertised but there were fewer ads for children’s swimwear.
By the end of the year beach accessories like hats, towels, shell jewellery, and chenille beach robes were featured, but not sunglasses, suntan cream or beach umbrellas. The swimsuit was all that mattered.

As a budding surfer at Bondi Beach, I identified with two swimsuited women who were often in the *Weekly* in 1951. The swimming filmstar Esther Williams, whose films I saw regularly at the Regal theatre at Bondi Junction, was featured in at least one double-page spread in the *Weekly* for her film of 1951, *Pagan Love Song*. Jean Newington, the Australian model, was photographed wearing a swimsuit on the front cover of the *Weekly* in 1951 and again in 1956, at a Sydney location with which I was familiar [figure 20]. These two women represented my aspirations of glamour, of local possibilities and American success.

The portable five-valve radio represented a new consumerism of affordable sophistication. In the advertisements, portable radios from Hotpoint (3/2/51: 14), HMV (14/11/51: 30) and Philips (5/12/51: 2–3) were placed in the kitchen, the garden, at the beach and in children’s bedrooms [figure 21]. This icon of modernity liberated our family from the console radio in the lounge room. My mother bought a mantle radio for the kitchen where my sister and I listened to *Take It From Here* while we washed the dishes on Sunday nights. I was enchanted when my father brought home a Stromberg Carlson battery-operated portable radio. It looked far more exotic than those advertised in the *Weekly*. We listened to the Davis Cup and the cricket at the beach until they were drowned out by the pop music on other radios. After that my father, who was hard of hearing, listened to it in the garage.

But most of all I loved the film shorts and the comics, ‘Mandrake the Magician’ and ‘Teena’ because they represented the exotic. My parents were concerned about the deleterious effects of comics on the reading habits of the young and banned them from our home. But it was impossible to escape comics in 1951. Like the *Women’s Weekly*, they were found everywhere outside the home. Together with ‘Archie’, ‘The Phantom’ and ‘Prince Valiant’, the comics in the *Weekly* provided the spice of excitement for an 8-year-old and connected me to the modern world.

In 1954 I became part of the *Women’s Weekly* when I appeared in a feature as one of two schoolgirls serving afternoon tea to ‘old students’ at the seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations of my primary school. I was selected for the photograph because I was neat and normal, and similar to the girls in the Joyce school blouse ad, not because I was different (1/9/54: 37).

In 1956, I was 13 and read the *Weekly* in new ways. My parents had left the middle-class security of the Eastern Suburbs to run a 5-acre poultry farm at Canley Vale, on the southwestern outskirts of Sydney. As a teenager in a working-class environment, I was introduced to the youth revolt and began to have yearnings for romance. I read the *Weekly* at the home of my school friend Jeanette Bender, who played Buddy Holly records and had a boyfriend. My parents, however, were still involved in the anti-comics campaign and did not hear the seductive sounds of rock’n’roll.

The *Weekly* was firmly opposed to the youth revolt. Robert Feldman from the *Weekly*’s New York staff, wrote this piece about Elvis Presley:

This side-burned, mascara wearing singer is not just another Sinatra or Johnnie Ray, although he draws his main support from the same age group. Presley has contributed an unhealthy new twist — literally and figuratively — to the teenage ‘revolt’.

His appeal is straight from the jungle and his ‘singing style’ copied from the rawest of America’s burlesque-house stripteasers.

As a voice, Presley is nothing. But as
This article diverged from the pleasure and advice that attracted a 13-year-old like me to the Weekly in 1956 and was very different in tone and style from its representations of teenage love and the many facets of marriage which dominated its pages that year. Indeed the Weekly had responded to the rise of the teenager in 1954 with the Louise Hunter advice column, which I read avidly. While I had no boyfriend(s) at that time, I was certainly interested in the lives of my girlfriends who did.

Louise Hunter made it quite clear that I was too young to have a boyfriend, even if my friend Jeanette did, and I was even too young to go out with a group of boys, although many of my school friends did. According to Louise Hunter, a 14-year-old girl could go out one night a week with her girlfriends, ‘providing she was not home too late’ (4/4/56: 24). Having reached puberty and second year at high school, I was aware that many of my classmates were in conflict with their parents, hated school and couldn’t wait to leave home. They imagined their escape from home and school, not in a job, but in the arms of a man like Elvis Presley. They had no intention of following Louise Hunter’s advice not to have a steady boyfriend before the age of 18, not to have sex before marriage and not to tie the knot before at least the age of 20. While Jeanette did not fit the Weekly’s image of teenager, she joined me in escaping the realities of our everyday lives by reading about the marriage of the American film star Grace Kelly and learning about the pitfalls of marriage in Dr Mace’s advice column.

My clearest memory of the Weekly in 1956 is the marriage of Grace Kelly. Every week from the announcement of her engagement to Prince Rainier of Monaco on 25 January to the end of May, I devoured stories of her childhood and career as a movie star, her meeting with the Prince, her surrender of her acting career, and her marriage in April [figure 22]. In that time she appeared on three covers of the Weekly (1/2/56; 11/4/56; 18/4/56). Then I followed her honeymoon on a yacht in the Mediterranean Sea, read the announcement of her pregnancy in August and the impending birth of Princess Caroline the following year. For me this was magazine soap opera at its most intimate and glamorous.

In these stories I made many identifications with Grace Kelly. First, she was a commoner like me, a Cinderella who had found her charming prince. In this image she showed me that any girl who believed in romantic love and good planning could find Mr Right, marry and feel like a princess. In this way Grace Kelly represented a more accessible image of femininity and royalty than Queen Elizabeth II, who had been born a princess. But the catch was that I had to be prepared to wait until the age of 26, to find Mr Right. As a 13-year-old, that seemed a hundred years away.

The last time I saw Princess Grace as a ‘commoner’ was on the front page of the Weekly for 11 April 1956. Inside she was described as ‘honey cream loveliness’, with the steady, self-contained look of a young woman with an unruffled temper who could manage her emotions and her life. I felt I could trust and admire her. The by-line on the cover, ‘the forthcoming wedding’, invited me into the secrets that Grace Kelly would share, so that I too could one day marry a handsome prince. Yet throughout the Weekly’s coverage of the wedding, Prince Rainier was cast in a minor supporting role. This was all women’s territory. As Janice Winship has pointed out, this fantasy was less a denial of the ‘real world’ than an affirmation of how much women and feminine concerns were neglected in that ‘real world’ of the Cold War.

My admiration for Grace Kelly also led to emulation. While I was too young to copy her ‘simple dress’ from the cover of 11 April, or her wedding dress from the cover of 18 April, and her hairstyle, I knew many older sisters of my school friends who did. In that respect Grace Kelly represented the ‘levelling up’ possibilities of white Australian women, identified by Bill Bonney and Helen Wilson in their study of the Weekly in 1953 and 1954.

Grace Kelly’s transformation from film star to princess was assisted by the screening of her last two movies, The Swan in which she played a princess who nearly marries the wrong prince, and To Catch a Thief, set in Monaco, where Kelly played a rich American girl who falls for an American playboy. It was easy for a 13-year-old reader like me to become confused between the film star and the real-life princess. Most important of all, her promotion to icon status made her a part of my life. Her subsequent life as a married woman and as a princess would become part of my experience.

In the same issue that revealed the engagement of Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier, the Weekly also announced its joint sponsorship with the Marriage Guidance Council of Australia of a four-month tour of Australia by ‘world authorities on marriage’, Dr David Mace and Mrs Vera C. Mace, to address local and community groups on how to keep marriages together (25/1/56; 11/4/56). While the Marriage Guidance Council organised the tour, the Weekly paid...
Dr Mace explained that marriage guidance was a science, a ‘blend of psychology and sociology’, applied to the family and society. When this science was applied to the family, women were identified as the cause of marital breakdown:

I blame woman’s entry into the man’s world for much of today’s marital discord where 50% of wives work and one marriage in four fizzles out in divorce. Regrettably, the rest of the world seems to be moving towards the American concept of female emancipation.

Don’t misunderstand. There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with wives working, nor am I attacking the concept of equality between spouses. But parallel careers inevitably give rise to temptations and friction and it takes an exceptional maturity in both husband and wife to carry it off successfully.

I was puzzled by this article because my mother had taken a clerical job to provide cash for the rapidly failing poultry farm. And most of my school friends’ mothers worked to support their husbands’ meagre wages. From my perspective, it seemed our mothers’ wages held our families together.

Between 15 August and 28 November I avidly read Dr Mace’s responses to readers’ marital woes [figure 23]. The four most common problems were marital infidelity; differences in expectations in a marriage where wives wanted love and affection and husbands wanted sex; disappointment by women in their marriage partners; and the need for married couples to have their own space in which to make their marriages work. In all cases Dr Mace found that the woman, either as the jilted or disappointed wife, or as the interfering mother-in-law, was at fault. The husband, it seemed, bore no responsibility at all. Indeed Dr Mace offered little consolation or support for women in desperate marital circumstances. I preferred the warm, confiding and more inclusive approach to romance represented in the stories of Grace Kelly.

My school friend Jeanette was more knowledgeable about these matters. As the oldest child, she had a more practical view of marriage as a career. She was already planning her life as a married woman with her boyfriend, even if it were in the distant future. In the meantime she revelled in the escape of rock’n’roll, the symbol of the youth revolt. Nor was she concerned that her behaviour did not meet with Dr Mace’s approval. In his final article, ‘Australia’s Grave Sex Problem’ (12/12/56), Mace estimated that about half of all Australian youth had sex before marriage and that a third of marriages took place with the wife already pregnant. He gave the impression that rock’n’roll had caused a decline in moral standards, although he did suggest that the age at marriage in Australia was ‘needlessly high’. Many years later I found that Dr Mace had exaggerated the statistical rate of pregnancy at marriage. While 25 per cent of brides were pregnant at marriage, only 4 per
cent of women and 8 per cent of men never married at that time. Dr Mace, it seemed, was not satisfied with the highest rate of marriage and lowest rate of divorce in Australia’s history.\(^5\)

By the end of 1956 I was confused about the meaning of romance, love and marriage. While the story of Grace Kelly indicated that romance and marriage were very firmly linked, Dr Mace claimed that marriage worked best without romantic ideals. Louise Hunter also advised us teenagers that we were too young for romance or sex. But the youth revolt was all around me. I went to rock’n’roll dances and managed to arrive home with my virginity intact.

1961

In early 1961 and nearing my eighteenth birthday, I was coming to the end of a year working on the switchboard at Bebarfalds furniture store in Fairfield. After completing the Leaving Certificate in 1959, I had taken this job to earn some money before starting an Arts degree at Sydney University. As the youngest and least experienced of the three ‘girls’ in the office, I had much to learn.

The oldest, Merle was in her mid-twenties, already married and planning to resign within a year to begin a family. Joan, in her early twenties, was about to marry and as a Catholic, expected to start a family immediately. They had both left school at 15 and by the time I arrived in the office they were ‘seasoned’ white-collar workers.

In this work environment which offered us no career, the Weekly was our pleasure and escape. We read it at morning tea to test our knowledge in the advertisements for furnishings and home decor, because we worked in a slightly upmarket furniture store and had inside knowledge about particular homeware products. We also enjoyed reading about the lives of TV and movie stars, the quizzes about marriage, the features on musicals like West Side Story, as well as the Louise Hunter column, the fashion and the fiction. We also noted the increase in information about diets (e.g. 4/1/61; 11/1/61; 22/2/61), travel (18/1/1961: 66) and the boom in ads for automatic washing machines and washing powder.

In February 1961 as I was eagerly preparing for the start of university, the Weekly featured a story, ‘Do women really benefit from a university degree? Education — A Burden for Women’, by Maree Lidden, BA, LLB (8/2/61: 29, 31).

She had received a copy of the 20-page questionnaire sent to 1569 married women graduates of Sydney University by Madge Dawson from the Department of Tutorial Classes at the university and under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council. The survey was designed to capture basic data of these women: their family background, the school they attended, their university careers, their marriages and their family life, their leisure pursuits and reading habits, their religious beliefs and their politics, their participation in community activities and their paid work.\(^6\)

It was this questionnaire that irritated Maree Lidden: ‘While attempting to answer all 84 questions honestly and dispassionately, it occurred to me out of the entire questionnaire a single question — the old but burning one still stands out: “Do women really benefit from a university education?”’

To test this question, Lidden carried out her own survey of 18 women graduates. She concluded that ‘the answer is very often, “No”’. ‘Many women graduates feel they have not really benefitted by their education. Indeed they believe it can prove a distinct disadvantage, both before and after marriage.’ They also found that they were discriminated against in the workforce.

As evidence that a university degree handicapped a woman’s marriage prospects, Lidden quoted Mrs A., a former economist, now married with two children:

Your university degree is anything but an added attraction to men. It makes them think because you earn a high salary yourself, you’ll expect them to keep you like a duchess. My husband did not like the idea of a working wife, and made it clear there was room for only one bread-winner in the home.

Mrs D, once a mathematician of promise and now mother of three children, gave this sage advice: ‘If you want to get a husband, you have to act as the original dumb blonde’. ‘Hide your degree as if it was a guilty secret. The vaguer and sillier you are, the more men like you.’

As evidence that a degree can also narrow the field of prospective husbands, Mrs E., a former industrial chemist and now mother of two sons, said:

After all, you can’t really marry a labourer if you are a scientist yourself, can you?

Nor are there all that many professional men who want to marry you. If you earn as much as they do, you mean competition, both professionally and socially, and that is an affront to masculine vanity. They don’t call it womanly. Australian men, anyway, still think it is feminine to scrub floors, but not feminine to use a slide rule.
Mrs F., a former psychologist, and twice married, added:

My first husband, a fellow undergraduate, was less intelligent than I. We married young because of a strong physical attraction, but when I passed examinations and he failed, he began to hate me. This sense of competition and the feeling of inferiority it gave him broke our marriage in less than two years.

Lidden then recounted the story of Mrs H., who found the conflict between professional and family life intolerable:

I can’t look forward to a future of nothing but housework, broken only by afternoon teas and hit-and-giggle tennis parties. I’m prepared to give up my profession till all the children are at school, but surely I can do something then? But Mr H. said ‘If you wanted a career, you should not have married. It is as simple as that. You can’t have the best of both worlds. Children are your full-time responsibility till they are adults. I should not permit you to work if I considered our children suffered by it in the slightest degree’.

Maren Lidden wondered whether in this circumstance, the cost of education was worth it.

Mrs I.: I cannot bear to stay home. The four walls, the monotony, the dreary minds of other housewives drive me mad. So I put my children in nurseries and go on with my profession.

Mrs. J.: I resigned myself to living like a vegetable during the children’s early years.

Lidden also wondered whether university training for women made for more effective motherhood, broadened cultural interests and offered a well-paid job to fall back on.

In cases like that of Mrs I, the first is immediately cancelled out. No woman can possibly be a more effective mother, if the greater part of her life is led away from home. Also, any woman who tries to run both a home and a profession cannot give her whole mind to each. As for both ‘broadened cultural interests’, since marriage and family must absorb most of her time, rarely can the woman graduate follow intellectual pursuits in anything but a desultory way.

In relation to the third concern, that women in the professional paid workforce faced lively prejudice, Lidden quoted Miss N., a lawyer:

From the time you start out in your profession, you get the feeling you are handicapped because of your sex. You feel you are blamed because of all the ‘traditional’ female insults. You hear arguments that women are an unreliable labour force, they are less capable of objective decisions, they become too emotional, that men will not work for women executives. All these arguments are brought forward when a man is promoted over your head in any profession. If you’re a woman, you have not got to be just as good as the next man, you have got to be spectacularly better.

According to Lidden, women graduates saw many disadvantages deriving from their university education. Many felt they would have been better if they had never attempted to invade the professional world, which pre-eminently remained a man’s world. ‘If I have not quoted one woman prepared to state she has not wholly benefitted by her university training, the reason is simply this, I was unable to find any such woman.’ She concluded: ‘Don’t make your daughter a sage, Mrs Worthington. She’ll be far better off in the home’ (8/2/61).

I was not only startled by Lidden’s menacing tone of rebuke and bitterness, but I was puzzled by her article in other ways. I had been told at school that women were going to university in greater numbers and could look forward to the professional world, which pre-eminently remained a man’s world. ‘If I have not quoted one woman prepared to state she has not wholly benefitted by her university training, the reason is simply this, I was unable to find any such woman.’ She concluded: ‘Don’t make your daughter a sage, Mrs Worthington. She’ll be far better off in the home’ (8/2/61).

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None of these letters, however, challenged Lidden’s evidence that professional women faced discrimination in the workforce, nor did they provide evidence about how to manage motherhood and a career.

Nine readers supported Lidden. One related her experience of discrimination in the workforce, where she was forced to accept a position far below her qualifications. Another bemoaned the fact that men did not like educated women, while another considered young women would be better off spending ‘three years at a Domestic Science school instead of going to the university’ (1/3/61: 7).

Two men also wrote. One noted that ‘many women, through envy or other motives, are scornful of other women who want to use their brains’ (1/3/61: 7). The other supported the idea of a university-educated wife, but within limits. ‘It is not the excess, rather the lack and the inadequacy, of the right kind of education that becomes a millstone on the necks of scholarly spinsters’ (1/3/61: 7).

The responses seemed to indicate that women could, at best, have only limited aspirations. Yet I belonged to a generation of women who had been encouraged to search for self-realisation. So, despite Lidden’s article and the diverse responses, I was in no doubt that I wanted to go to university. My experiences at Bebarfals had revealed the limitations of women’s career opportunities in office work. Besides, I had a scholarship and I wanted new challenges.

By the end of 1961 I had discarded the Weekly in favour of Punch and Nation and entered a masculine world of new kinds of contradictions.

LEVELLING UP

Most women of my generation grew up with the Weekly. No matter how and where we read it, it was a major form of social interaction with our peers, opened us to the world as young Australian women and shaped our identities, desires and destinies. Initially the Weekly helped to shape my identity as a young white middle-class Australian girl, trying to find a place in my immediate world. Then it advised me about the contradictions of femininity and sexuality. Finally it tried to restrict my ambitions. Yet paradoxically it ‘levelled up’ my expectations by showing me a bright and glamorous world of modernity, occupied by film stars, fashion, fun, new products and romance.

It was as if the Weekly had provided my generation of women with the key to the Pandora’s box of modernity but would not let us open it. Yet it was inevitable that we would. As the magazine of modernity in the 1950s, the Weekly exuded optimism not seen since the 1920s and affluence not seen since the 1880s. It was inevitable that as the daughters of this decade we would expect something new and different. Instead, in 1961 the Weekly offered us travel and soap powder. It was inevitable that some of us would leave home.