

WHY WOMEN  
NEED WIVES,  
AND MEN  
NEED LIVES



# THE WIFE DROUGHT

Annabel Crabb

'A modern classic of common sense and clarity that explains so much  
for both genders. This is the conversation we have to have'  
LISA WILKINSON

## The Wife Drought

*Annabel Crabb*

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# The Wife Drought

*Annabel Crabb*

## **The Wife Drought** Annabel Crabb

‘I need a wife’

It's a common joke among women juggling work and family. But it's not actually a joke. Having a spouse who takes care of things at home is a Godsend on the domestic front. It's a potent economic asset on the work front. And it's an advantage enjoyed – even in our modern society – by vastly more men than women.

Working women are in an advanced, sustained, and chronically under-reported state of wife drought, and there is no sign of rain.

But why is the work-and-family debate always about women? Why don't men get the same flexibility that women do? In our fixation on the barriers that face women on the way into the workplace, do we forget about the barriers that – for men – still block the exits?

*The Wife Drought* is about women, men, family and work. Written in Annabel Crabb's inimitable style, it's full of candid and funny stories from the author's work in and around politics and the media, historical nuggets about the role of ‘The Wife’ in Australia, and intriguing research about the attitudes that pulse beneath the surface of egalitarian Australia.

Crabb's call is for a ceasefire in the gender wars. Rather than a shout of rage, *The Wife Drought* is the thoughtful, engaging catalyst for a conversation that's long overdue.

## **The Wife Drought Details**

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Author : Annabel Crabb

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# From Reader Review The Wife Drought for online ebook

## Highlyeccentric says

This book is not the second coming of feminism.

It's FUN - full of anecdotes and Crabb's trademark snark, but it is not the second coming of feminism. It said nothing we did not already know (... quite frankly, aside from the stats, its key premises were well known in the EIGHTIES. Women add work to household responsibilities. Men do not typically pick up the latter. Men who do are regarded as weirdos. It would be good if we could do something about the latter two points). Crabb offers no constructive solutions or even pointers on how her examples of stay-at-home Dads do make it work. Her conclusion rather wishy-washily suggests the digital age might help, without apparently having noted that telecommuting has been on the \*decline\* since the financial crisis.

Plus, well, Crabb is aware of some of the sacrifices she herself makes in the name of functioning marriage rather than feminism, but I am not as rosy-eyed as she. She regards her career change as a personal positive, and maybe it is, but it still makes her a statistic: woman shifts to less cutthroat, more flexible work environment after having kids. She doesn't quiiiite see that this is probably a personal bonus for \*everyone\*, and that's why it happens, yanno? Although when talking about what men lose by not taking on more home duties, she does suggest that they might be missing out on the personal-development and reevaluation time that she sees many women experiencing during mat leave.

Also, although working class women do come up a fair bit, they're statistics mostly. She hasn't found many working class women or men to TALK to. Gives the impression that the only people who's workforce participation we care about is the educated elite.

HOWEVER she, unlike most tracts on the wage gap, did have the statistics to point out that the wage gap is \*lower\* in blue-and-pink collar jobs than white. Why? Because award wages are good for something! The wage gap in working classes seems to be affected by pink-collar streaming (childcare is paid less than road maintenance, for instance) and perhaps by women not seeking or not being promoted to supervisory positions - not by the vagaries of salary negotiations. I am really sick of hearing about the wage gap talked of primarily in terms of salary negotiations. The VAST MAJORITY of working women (and indeed men) are not in industries where they can negotiate their salary packages, geez.

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## Anna Spargo-Ryan says

3.5 stars.

Overall, I found The Wife Drought to be a jolly good insight, based on things we kind of know already. For the first quarter of the book, I just felt stressed. Like, "Jesus Annabel! I have to read this and then I have to go and actually live this tomorrow? Pass the Nicholas Sparks!" The challenges of which she speaks are the cold reality for so many women, day in and day out.

It is acutely resonant, and that is both its strength and its weakness. Crabb is, in many ways, preaching to the choir. Which is, of course, the complaint of many with regards to feminism in this country. We know it's shite. Stop telling us it's shite. Mobilise the squadrons to make it less shite. And I'm not sure that this book

does anything more than anger wives and reinforce what we already know.

Having said that though, it is packed with interesting anecdotes and solid research to support this “what we already know” stuff. Her writing is charming and light, sometimes belying the legitimately devastating content. This is a quick and easy — if not enjoyable, exactly — read.

Read my whole diatribe against my lack of wife

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### **Daisy says**

I honestly cannot give this book any higher praise. Annabel's book, *The Wife Drought*, is meticulously researched and unpacks the issues surrounding the share of domestic work, work life balance, and the general helpfulness of 'wives' so brilliantly. It is also done with her laugh out loud inducing humour that makes reading it on public transport embarrassing.

The women of Australia thank you, Annabel, and I'm sure the men will get around to it too eventually.

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### **Ellie says**

Absolutely adored this book. I have laughed out loud on public transport, nodded my head in agreement and quoted passages to my mother more times than I can count. Crabb's research is impeccable and her conclusions are sound.

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### **Rachel Eldred says**

I would not have read ‘*The Wife Drought*’ had it not been selected for my book club. I’m not sure why. Perhaps it’s the image of the iron on the front cover. Iron! What decade are we in? The 1950s?\*

If I am to be entirely honest, I’d also lost interest in the author. I’d been a fan when Annabel Crabb wrote for ‘*The Sydney Morning Herald*’, but thought she’d lost a certain ‘edginess’ when she moved over to the ABC. Those long wild locks had been cropped into a bob and I’m not sure I coped with the change. Crabb, it seemed to me, had embraced conventionality. Was it her new ‘kitchen’ show on the ABC? Perhaps it was her age. Or maybe it was a necessary survival manoeuvre as the (political) world around her swung further to the right.

‘*The Wife Drought*’ ticks all the right boxes in conservative journalism: it’s heavy on data from the social sciences to eke out societal patterns and give it statistical gravitas (a very necessary requirement in our modern age); it provides the opinions of many ‘experts’; there are some enjoyable personal anecdotes; and it points out the differences between the sexes in a light-hearted and humorous way. While there is no radical treatise on how to turn things around, ‘*The Wife Drought*’ reveals (perhaps unintentionally) that there is a strong tendency in our world to trap people into an idea of how they should behave, usually based on how each of us chooses to behave (predominantly conservatively, it seems). Examples throughout the book show

we don't like it when people don't mirror our choices. Maybe it makes us sit uneasy with our own decisions.

As I read, I was shocked at the statistics; the numbers seemed to indicate that a great many people like to stick to the tried and true when it comes to gender roles. I guess that is okay if you are happy with that choice; not so great if you feel trapped in that choice and are unable to see a clear path out. For those people, 'The Wife Drought' may help them identify the problem and perhaps change it – if the spirit is rebellious enough.

I also found the book a tad dull. Mention of Australia's Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, was particularly disheartening; he's a man I view as a master manipulator, someone who grabbed power in a vacuum (damn you Rudd and Gillard!) and has, ever since, successfully managed to avoid any serious challenge to his own inadequacy. Crabb is a case in point: she lets Abbott off the hook way too easily and makes him out to be a naïve but well-intentioned ding bat. (He's way too savvy for that!)

Crabb writes: 'Prime Minister Tony Abbott's avowal, when he took office, of his determination to help women "struggling to combine career and family", had a headline message: helping women. But the underlying message – unintentional, almost certainly – pulsed out like a beacon: this is a problem that women face.'

'Unintentional, almost certainly.' Wha? Why did Crabb feel the need to write that, as though the behaviour is excusable because it's 'unintentional'? It's not. Not even nearly. That Abbott, a man who went on to grab the title of Minister for Women when he came to power, can not see that career and family are issues that affect women and men is just, well, unbelievable in 2015. And that's to put it mildly. Really, it's downright dismal.

To my mind, the title of Minister for Women he so arrogantly bestowed upon himself was nothing more than a massive 'f\*\*k you' to Julia Gillard for 'that' speech.

Clearly, to most people who do the juggle in 2015, career and family are issues that affect women and men. Maybe that's blindingly obvious to me because I live in a community where the typical distinctions between men's roles and women's roles are increasingly blurred. Yes, I do the lion's share of the housework, but that's because I spend more time at home than my partner. There is certainly no expectation that it is my role alone, and he always pitches in when he is here. Is this such a rare experience in 2015? It seems so, if the stats in 'The Wife Drought' are to be trusted. (Personally, I thought there was reference to too much overseas research to make the book a typically Australian experience. American cultural imperialism has a lot to answer for!)

'The Wife Drought' did inspire me to evaluate my own choices, as well as consider my own judgements towards others' choices, and I thank Crabb for that – it did open my mind. Ultimately, however, it was a bit light on for someone who was born to uni students in the early 1970s and is in a relationship with a man who was raised by a radical feminist. It was a reminder that rights gained can be quickly taken away and that change can be slower than trying to grow wings!

\* There were moments as I read the book that I did think, 'It is the 1950s!'

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**Loki says**

A wry and insightful look at the way our society has focused with almost hilarious inequality on one half of the equality debate. Crabb is reliably one of Australia's best commentators on political matters - turning her hand to the social arena, she demonstrates that this is no mere fluke.

**The Wife Drought** is a kind and forgiving look at the way that, although our society has spent decades trying to improve women's access to work, we've spent a lot less energy on trying to improve men's access to the home. The "traditional gender roles" are still alive and well in modern Australia, and Crabb looks at how much this costs us, both economically and as human beings. (The conclusion also contains a marvelous rebuttal of these "traditions".)

This is not a book of easy answers, but rather, a book of difficult questions in need of answers. Here's hoping it becomes to conversation starter it's intended to be.

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### **RitaSkeeter says**

Federal politics over the last few years have demonstrated just how deeply misogyny is ingrained in some parts of Australian society. This book is attempting to open a conversation about the position of women, through their need for a 'wife'. It is unclear to me, however, whom the book is aimed at. The book provides basic information, that won't be anything new to many. Whilst it may be 'new' to some in society, I can't really see those people picking up a book called 'The Wife Drought'. This leads me to believe that Crabb is wanting to preach to the converted, but this is problematic as she doesn't add anything new to the conversation. Having said that, she does make some important points regarding challenges the poor men face from their workplaces when wanting flexibility for family reasons.

Undoubtedly the book had its humorous moments, and some gut wrenchingly familiar anecdotes (Chiquita anyone?), but for all that little of the book resonated with me despite me being a card carrying member of team enlightened. The problem for me was that very little of this book was about your average suburban mum juggling work and small children. Yes, there were some stats, but all the anecdotes related to those in places of privileges. Sure I enjoyed reading yet again about how Tanya Plibersek is superhuman (no really, she *is* amazing), but she also has the cash to outsource the duties a 'wife' would perform. I don't doubt for a minute the absolute complexities and challenges of raising a family while in politics, but it wasn't what I thought the book would be about. Sure, there was only one 'formal' chapter about women in politics, but where were the anecdotes from Ms Average slogging it out in the 'burbs?

All in all, I got sick of this book pretty quickly.

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### **Michael Livingston says**

This a clear, well-written discussion of the ways in which men and, particularly, women are constrained by the ways of the modern workplace. It's convincing and well argued, but really feels like something for people who've not really given the topic much thought before - anyone who has been interested or bothered by workplace inequality will have covered most of this ground before. Still - the book seems to have reached a broad audience and that's definitely valuable.

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## **Caitlin says**

I have to admit to a massive girly-crush on Annabelle Crabb – to me she is an elegant swan, gracefully delivering intelligent, funny insights into politics with the suggestion of a flurry of activity happening behind the scenes, especially knowing she has small children to manage as well.

(Also my mother in law thinks she's an awful, smug bore so I naturally love her even more)

Those who haven't read more than the blurb could be forgiven for thinking this book is all just a whinge about women's rights and how men are terrible – and yet Crabb actually addresses the tired stereotypes of “weak women and awful men”. Her central thesis is also just as vital for men – that the glorification of busy at the cost of family life is horrific for men, and admitting this should be socially acceptable.

I personally found a lot resonating with my own situation, having recently become a stay at home mother but with a partner who works away two weeks out of every four (so I spend half the time as a single mother, the other half with a house husband).

I also recommended this book to a friend of mine who doesn't have a family, but she does have a chronic illness that has kept her out of permanent employment and requires careful negotiation of flexible work hours.

In a time when the term “feminism” has become a filthy concept by those who just don't know the first thing about it (or feel greatly threatened by its aims), to bring out a book that actually advocates the change of lifestyle for both men and women is very brave.

As I find with books about grand social phenomena written by journalists, they are great observers and able to gather evidence together well into a thesis around raising awareness of issues, but rarely about providing solutions. This could be seen as a drawback to Crabb's book – that she can diagnose issues but not necessarily suggest ways to treat them – or it could be seen as acknowledging that the issues are so broad and complex that the solutions have to come from policy makers, employers, cultural commentators, individuals themselves etc and not necessarily from a journalist.

A lot of the material about gender and work is stuff I've heard before - and I can understand people wanting to roll their eyes and shout "Yes yes, I know!"

But it's the fact this stuff is **STILL** true and going on in 2014 that is the main point of this book - and hopefully this book will become obsolete in the next ten years.

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## **Peta Campbell says**

I love Annabel Crabb's writing.

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## **Sarah says**

Where do I start? This book is insightful, funny, real & intelligently written. Just returning to work from mat leave after my second child, I found this book refreshing & inspiring framework to return to the workforce.

At every page I wanted to shout out 'yes, exactly that's how I feel!' And it's a wonderful feeling to know that many other working mums feel the same as I do. And finally, so nice to see a book be critically honest and open about the inadequacies of men/family life in the workplace! Certainly a lot of stats & information, so not a 'beach holiday read' in that sense. The only comment I would add is I felt is that there is a lot of commentary & comparison of full time working mums vs part-time/not working mums. As a part time working mum with a very demanding role I felt somewhat defensive every time I was pushing into that category as in some ways I have the best & worst of both worlds- work expect me to be across everything as if I am full time & home expects me to do the same as if I didn't work. But I do have the opportunity to spend time with my kids in the week so that makes up for everything. I'm sure one thing this book will do is open up a lot of conversations about work-life family balance.

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## **Jennifer (JC-S) says**

‘A ‘wife’ can be male or female. Whether they’re men or women, though, the main thing wives are is a cracking professional asset.’

Many women who juggle work and family responsibilities would like to have a wife. Someone to take care of the domestic stuff, including cooking, cleaning, childcare and ironing. In some households these responsibilities are shared, but why – in the second decade of the 21st century – is this still an issue? After all, equality (of opportunity and pay) has been around for forty years or more, or has it?

‘Who gets wives? Dads do. Most mums have to make do with alternative arrangements.’

This entertaining and thought-provoking work is about men and women, family and work. About the barriers that exist for men as well as for women in trying to balance work and family. About the differences in approach to work which, for me, a comment by George Megalogenis (included in the book) summarises neatly: ‘Women have trouble asking for pay rises, and men have trouble asking for time off’. That’s surely part of it, but my own observation is that men are not always able to get the same flexible working arrangements available to women in the same workplaces. How many of these barriers are cultural, as distinct from legal? While Ms Crabbe is writing about Australia, many of the issues will apply similarly in other developed economies.

‘Well having a wife is an economic privilege. A privilege far more men enjoy than women. But it’s a state of affairs so broadly accepted as to be barely mentioned.’

Some of us who read this book have managed to survive the experience of combining full-time work and parenting. Some of us have been fortunate enough to have partners who shared the responsibilities, joys and difficulties and were able to agree on ‘spheres of influence’ thereby ensuring that we each knew who was cooking, ironing, paying bills, mowing the lawn and servicing the cars. And times have changed in the 30+ years since my child was a baby: bills can now be paid online, which provides some of us with more flexibility.

‘A mother who works is a ‘working mother’. A father who works is just a normal guy.’

There are reminders, too, of the impact of marriage on women in the Australian Public Service. Until 1966, women had to resign from the Australian Public Service on the eve of their marriage. (It’s worth noting that this provision was not universally supported when it was introduced in 1922: Ms Crabb includes some of the



debate in this book.)

‘Is it not in the public interest that a female officer on her marriage should retire from the Service?’ [1922, Federal Parliament]

This isn't a book about women versus men. It's about the barriers couples face as family units (usually men and women), sharing responsibility for domestic issues including parenting, and participation in the world (usually in the form of paid work) outside domestic responsibilities. It's a discussion about how we value both. It's not a detached discussion: while there are references to case studies and statistics, Ms Crabb also includes her own experiences as a working parent.

I'd recommend this book to anyone (male or female) interested in the barriers and challenges of combining parenting and working.

‘Perhaps in our ferociously joined-up new world, in which unthinkable volumes of information and intelligence are available from anywhere at a keystroke, we will finally realise that the worlds of home and work can't make sense until you look at them side by side. That a drought in one place created a drought in the other. And that rain is good for everyone.’

My thanks to Netgalley and Random House Australia for an opportunity to read an advance copy of this book.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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### **Eliatan says**

While I quite enjoyed reading Annabel's book, and her writing style is excellent, I don't feel like she has contributed anything new to the debate over who should do what work and why.

I've read fairly widely in this genre and while this book was one of the most entertaining, it wasn't the most illuminating. Annabel is an incredibly intelligent and articulate woman, I was secretly hoping she would present a radical solution to the problems women have once they're trapped in the cycle of primary parenting and low paid work.

Choose a good husband who'll support your career ambitions, look after the kids and do a fair share of the housework was the key takeaway I got from this book. At this point in life, with three kids already in the mix, that's just as depressing as the rest of the statistics that show how much less I'll earn and how much more housework I'll do.

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### **Melissa says**

"if we are serious about equality, we should stop worrying so exclusively about women's ease of access to the workplace and start worrying more about men's ease of egress from it"

Clever and engaging look at men & women in the workplace. As a 30-something woman in Australia, this is an emotionally close-to-home and often depressing topic. My jaw dropped at some of the statistics presented in this book. Nevertheless, thanks to Crabb's nuanced handling and excellent sense of humour, this book was a delight to from start to finish.

An absolute must read.

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## **Andrew Carr says**

This is an impressive book. Annabel Crabb has not only undertaken significant research, but she offers some fresh thinking about the role of women and child rearing in Australia today. As is usual for her, the book is a pleasure to read, both serious enough but also with clever phrasing and personal anecdotes.

I was somewhat surprised while reading this book to find myself arguing with it, though not necessarily because I disagreed with what Crabb was saying. I suspect this reflects an uncomfortable truth: That however much I think my own views are 'enlightened' and that I support the 'appropriate policies', this isn't going to be enough to overcome the serious problems laid out in this book. Though I'm not yet sure how it affects my political beliefs.

It did raise some questions and debates in my own mind that I can't resolve. First, Crabb comes down clearly on the nurture rather than nature side of the debate. Women do more housework and child raising because they've been raised to do so. And that's certainly true. But as Crabb hints at but never quite explores, is there also a nature aspect at work? While human social organisation is far more flexible and weird than some like to admit, the pattern of women taking primary responsibility for child raising does seem rather constant. It's not that we should accept the current discrimination women face at work or in the home, but rather recognise to what extent this problem is one capable of being solved. By government or anyone else.

Or even the extent to which it is a problem. Our desire for spotless homes and clean safe children has had costs in immunity restrictions and less childhood experiences exploring the neighbourhood. I also see countless 'experts' declaring the vital importance of education during the first few years. As much as these studies are right about the benefits, we also have generations of experience that shows the absence of such education isn't too harmful. Virtually every successful adult you see around you didn't have the kind of early childhood education we are now being told is vital to children's development. And while I would never want to argue against education, the cost of higher quality services does mean many parents can't afford child care, forcing many women to stay home or work far less than they would like. Some solutions may be worse than the problem.

While Crabb blessedly skips past the 'have it all' concept, it does seem to inform her thinking. She rightly complains that parents\* responsible for multiple kids and the hours and hours this costs them are seen as less capable at work. But I suspect she would see no problem with someone who has a second job also being seen as less capable at work. Outside hiring external help, can we ever expect child raising to be compatible with serious full time work? I strongly hope so, but I'm not entirely sure, and our use of third party options like nannies, au-pairs, childcare centres and mandatory primary and secondary education systems suggests otherwise. Maybe there are other alternatives out there we can use to also lessen the burden. (\*Of course I've guilDED the lily in the above comparison by using the word 'parent' rather than 'mother'. Employers regularly accept fathers can keep their focus at work, but doubt mothers can. That is an unacceptable sexism that needs to stop. But maybe part of the problem is our overvaluing of parenting in total.)

Relatedly there is a tendency in the book to view all work and all child rearing as identical and identically valuable. But there are many different approaches and personal value systems. Some people like Crabb value their work highly and so struggle to keep it while raising kids. But for many work is just a means to a paycheck and they would much rather focus on their kids. It's extremely difficult to separate these two groups with any policy settings, but to me it does seem to matter. When the first group can't stay in work, that's a problem for society. When the second group doesn't, it's not necessarily as bad. The problem is less about people not working and raising kids at the same time. It's that the fact the first group tend to be men and the second group women.

Crabb's best innovation (though I don't know the literature well so maybe this is widely discussed elsewhere) is not to focus just on working women and instead urge us to try and get more men out of work and into child rearing. This is a useful addition to the debate, not only because more fathers want this but feel unable to do so, but also because it would help push towards a less gendered idea of parenting, while bettering opportunities for women at work. Unfortunately, I suspect Crabb's line of work and desire to remain a commentator rather than pundit means she never offers any specific policy suggestions. A shame, but then it's her general nonpartisan good standing now that helps ensure more people will read this book. So perhaps it's better this way. Perhaps.

As this review perhaps suggests, I agree with most of what Crabb writes, even if I find myself being argumentative about how to view it. This is something for which the book should be praised. It forces the reader to think about an issue which many of us would prefer not to. This book should be seen as the standard for 'Australian journalist writing about major social issues'. A willingness to seriously engage the extensive academic literature, a desire for fresh and clear thinking, and a crisp prose. Impressive stuff.

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