

Media Tarts: How the Australian Press Frames Female Politicians.

By Julia Baird, Melbourne: Scribe, 2004, vi + 330 pp. ISBN 1 920769 23 4

Reviewer: Helen Pringle*

The subtitle of this book is misleading. *Media Tarts* is as much concerned with how women politicians present themselves in the media as it is with exploring how the press sets up women in politics. Julia Baird asserts the ‘fact’ that many women politicians ‘have exploited the stereotypes and superficiality of press coverage for their own gain’. In terms of this angle, Baird wants to avoid what she sees as a conspiracy theory of the media held by ‘feminists’, the theory that women in politics are the victims of sexist male hacks. The book’s lurid cover captures Baird’s approach more accurately than her subtitle: a female King Kong character with Rita Hayworth hair and a pink sarong straddles Parliament House, clutching a reporter in one hand as she reaches for another from a pack of journalists scarpering away in terror. I should note however that it is rather difficult to follow Baird’s line of argument, as there is very little in the way of a clear statement of the project, or of signposting as to the unfolding of that project throughout the book. The book is a series of vignettes on individual women politicians drawn from all sides of politics.

Baird effectively presents the way in which women politicians have not risen above a series of clichés, such as steel sheilas, housewife superstars, or cover girls (to use her terms). In particular, their appearance rather than their policies or ideas has been the focus of press coverage. While seeming to disparage this aspect of the media’s attention, Baird herself often begins a discussion of a particular politician by describing how she appears. For example, Bronwyn Bishop is introduced in these terms: ‘Her honey-coloured hair was tied at the back of her head, not dragged skywards in a stiff sweep of blonde, and her trademark pearls bulged from her neck’. And Baird confesses that as a *Herald* journalist, she was not above making fun of the appearance of women or men politicians. In the chapter entitled ‘How to Succeed in Politics without a Penis’, Baird offers tips to women on how to be successful in politics, most of which are concerned with how to fashion one’s image. Baird’s version of desiderata includes the injunction to avoid ‘posing in ballgowns or bikinis’ — and to ‘Try, in the midst of it all, to be yourself’.

The most striking impression left from a reading of *Media Tarts* is the triviality, vulgarity and tawdriness of modern Australian politics *and* the press. Baird quotes MP Don Randall’s attack on Cheryl Kernot as ‘an alley cat on heat’, as well as a woman journalist who characterised Kernot’s move to the Labor Party as ‘dickstroking’. And nothing set out in Baird’s tableau of politics and the press seems to attain any greater level of complexity than this level of analysis.

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This is a chatty and readable book, but it made me fearful about what now passes for a 'free press' in Australia. Granted, the press plays an important oppositional role in both its serious and satirical aspects, but there is nothing in this book that suggests that the press (or politicians, whatever their sex) has contributed much at all to the nurturing of civil society or democratic culture. ▲

