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**Madam  
Murphy**



After playing a character based on Antonia, Griffiths helped celebrate her book launch.

### WHEN SHE NEEDED CASH TO SUPPORT HER KIDS, ANTONIA OPENED A BROTHEL

**W**hen you think of the word “pimp”, the image that comes to mind is likely to be very far removed from Antonia Murphy. However, that is exactly what the New Zealand-based mother became when she opened a brothel in a small town on the North Island in 2017.

Most of the time, Antonia cared for her blended family of six kids, packed lunch boxes and read bedtime stories. But two days a week, she was one of the most powerful women in Whangārei as owner and madam at The Bach.

While it's not something she grew up

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## Real life



dreaming she would ever do, as she writes in her memoir, *Madam*, it seemed like the best option available to her. She needed cash after her divorce to provide for her children, including her severely disabled son, Silas, who was mostly non-verbal and prone to seizures. Three years later, she sold it.

"I'd been out of the workforce for 10 years so there weren't really a whole lot of career options open to me," she tells WHO. "I also liked the idea of having my own business."

When it came to sex work, Antonia wanted to do things differently and opened what she calls an "ethical" escort agency.

"People are always going, 'Huh, what is that?'" she explains with a laugh. "But it means I didn't want to make money by hurting and exploiting women. I wanted to respect women's rights and make sure they consented to everything. Even if they were in the room and the clothes were off, the

women needed to feel comfortable and safe at all times, and if not, they could bail."

New Zealand became the first country in the world to decriminalise sex work in 2003. But just because it was legal doesn't mean that Antonia didn't face hardship and stigma while getting her business up and running.

**"I went in pretty wide-eyed"**  
- ANTONIA

She had trouble finding a venue to rent, and when she finally did set up shop within a few rooms in a hotel, an electrician refused to come to do some lighting work.

"In retrospect, I went in pretty wide-eyed and innocent

and was shocked at the discrimination we faced," she explains. "It was a struggle to even get merchant services. Even though it was a legal business, a lot of the banks rejected me on morality clauses. How is that legal?"

Some of these issues, and how she managed to balance motherhood with being a madam, form the plot points for a TV comedy-drama series, also called *Madam*, which will air on the Nine Network in 2025. Rachel Griffiths portrays a woman named Mack, who is based on Antonia.

"Rachel is extraordinary - she really researches her roles, so I spent some time with her," she says. "There is a scene where she is walking away from the hotel after just opening and has the weight of the world on

her shoulders - it really takes me right back to that moment and how it felt."

Prostitution is often referred to as the world's oldest profession. While it remains controversial, Antonia believes that sex work has a role to play in modern society.

"I think we were a force for good in that town," she says. "I can give you a sanctimonious answer that it's really important for people with disabilities and people with crippling shyness and people who, for whatever reason, cannot date to have human contact, and that's true. But I also think people enjoy sex and if consenting adults want to sell those services, why shouldn't they be allowed to do that?"

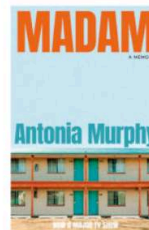
Taking it away, she argues, would just punish those who least deserve it.

"About 65 per cent of the women who worked for me were current or former nurses, caregivers or hospice workers. Women who had jobs but didn't quite make enough to cover things like their housing,"

she says. "Most of the others were single mums or women leaving a bad situation. Making it illegal pushes them into likely dangerous situations."

•By Kylie Walters

(*Madam: A Memoir by Antonia Murphy is out now*)



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