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## OPINION

# *Anna Murdoch told me succession would bring heartbreak. How right she was*



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September 20, 2024 – 11.57am

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Nearly 25 years ago, I travelled to a place I never thought I'd visit for a magazine I never thought I'd write for to interview a woman I never thought would talk. Not to a journalist anyway.

The place was The Hamptons, that seaside cluster of communities on Long Island, known for its grand beachside homes and the jetsetters and powerbrokers who make it their summer retreat.

The magazine was *The Australian Women's Weekly*, once described by Dame Edna Everage as the "Gideon's Bible of Australia" because – at least in its halcyon days – it was so chubby "it took a week to read".

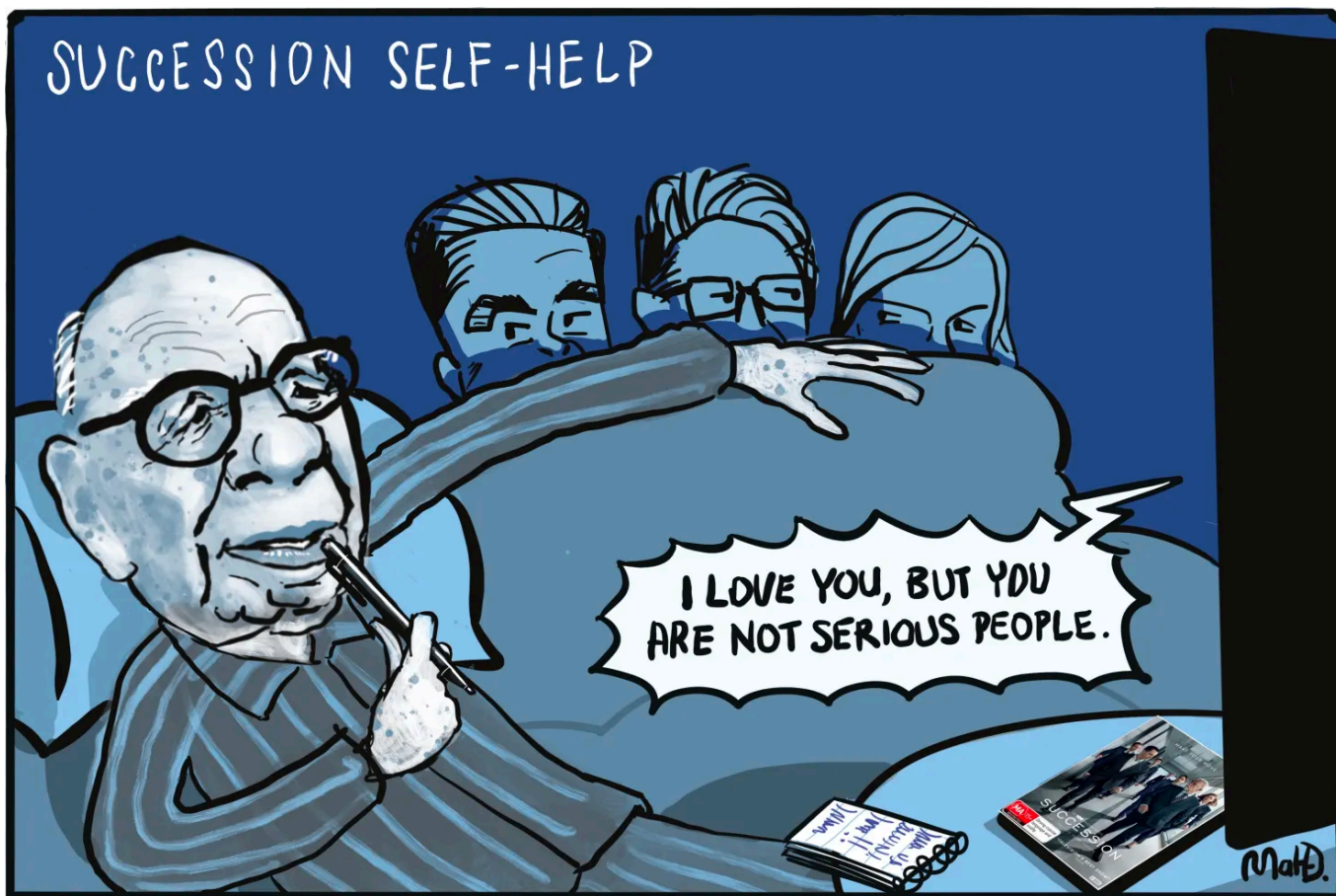


That was then ... The Murdochs, Lachlan, James, their mum Anna, Elisabeth and dad, Rupert.

The woman was Anna Murdoch, the Scottish-born second wife of Rupert and mother to Elisabeth, Lachlan and James, whose nearly 31 years of marriage to the world's most powerful media mogul had exploded in spectacular fashion three years earlier.

In the intervening years, Rupert Murdoch had married Wendi Deng, the Chinese-born daughter of a factory director from Guangzhou, 38 years his junior, at a secret wedding 17 days after finalising his divorce from Anna on June 8, 1999. Anna, in turn, had married the 72-year-old Wall Street financier William Mann four months later at a ceremony in the Lady Chapel of New York's St Patrick's Cathedral.

It was hardly an unusual storyline – betrayal, deception, grief, anger, renewal – but Anna Murdoch was still carrying some of the indignities she'd been forced to endure during the unravelling of her marriage, indignities she had kept to herself – and those closest to her – until now.



Rupert Murdoch watching Succession on DVD, taking notes. MATT DAVIDSON

Now, she wanted to correct the record because the announcement of her marriage break-up in April 1998 by gossip columnist Liz Smith in the Murdoch-owned *New York Post* had assured readers the separation had been “amicable” – so amicable that Anna was going to remain a non-executive director of the News Corporation board.

It was bunkum. The separation was far from good-natured. According to Anna, her former husband had not only lied about his affair, he’d dismissed her – from both board and marriage – in ruthless fashion.

She’d remained silent because, first, she never wanted to come across as a victim and, second, she was incapable of articulating the shock she felt over her ex-husband’s behaviour. She’d literally lost her facility for words, and this from a former journalist and novelist.

But in 2001, she decided to talk and – given her love for Australia and the number of concerned inquiries she had received from here during that period – she chose *The Australian Women’s Weekly* as her platform for disclosure. I had just joined the *Weekly* after six years with *Good Weekend* and, thanks to the *Weekly*’s then editor-in-chief Deborah Thomas, just been handed a world exclusive. Truth be told, though, I had no idea of what – if anything – Anna Murdoch was going to say of substance.

Twenty minutes into our interview I began to find out. “I think that Rupert’s affair with Wendy Deng – it’s not an original plot – was the end of the marriage,” she said, fixing me with her piercing blue eyes. “His determination to continue with that ... I thought we had a wonderful happy marriage. Obviously we didn’t.”

Publicly, Rupert Murdoch had claimed during the previous three years that his relationship with Deng had only begun after his separation from Anna in April 1998. Anna was having none

of it.

“He behaved badly,” she said “However, for my children’s sake I have said nothing ... I’ve waited all this time for him to make it right again, but he never took the opportunity.”

Asked about her departure from the News Corp board, she claimed: “I wasn’t given a choice. I was told.” How did he put it? “You get off the board ...” What did you say in reply? “Well, there’s no point being there if you’re of no use and it’s embarrassing to everyone else on the board. They’re nice and good and strong people [on the board] ... and my children were involved too. My son was on the board ... Lachlan. So I thought that it was better to be dignified and resign.”

After speaking to the board and wishing News Corp well, Anna walked to the elevator with Lachlan and departed the company she had worked for since she was an 18-year-old cadet journalist in Sydney.



Rupert and Anna Murdoch on their wedding day in 1967. FAIRFAX MEDIA

Since that interview in 2001, I have been asked countless times by journalists here and around the world to recount my moment with Anna Murdoch, for the simple reason that Anna Murdoch has never spoken publicly since.

Who could have known that this would be the one and only time she would speak? Certainly not me. Who could have known – *no one until now* – that the wind blowing off the North Atlantic that historic day was going to snag some of the crucial words I had recorded Anna Murdoch saying on her verandah, causing me to call her next day from Los Angeles in a panic to clarify her quotes.

So it was infidelity that led to the separation? “Absolutely.” What actually was the lie? “That his affair with Wendy Deng started after the separation.” How do you know that? “I do know that. I know it as fact.” Can I push you a little further there. I mean how ...? “No, that is too personal.”

Right, so you are saying that Rupert lied about it? “Yes he did.”

During our face-to-face interview, she had also talked about the divorce settlement and how she had sought to protect her three children’s inheritance, along with Prudence MacLeod’s,

Murdoch's daughter by his first marriage. The successor to her former husband would not come from Murdoch and Wendi Deng's two children, but rather from the eldest four children, all of whom would have equal voting rights through an "irrevocable" family trust arrangement. Anna had made sure of that, or so she thought.

Today, Rupert Murdoch wants to change that family trust so that, upon his death, Lachlan, his eldest son and currently chairman of News Corp, gets to control the company on his own; this to preserve his father's conservative legacy. (It is widely assumed that the other three children would steer the company in a more liberal direction were the terms of the trust to remain in place.)

This battle is now being waged in secret hearings in a Nevada courtroom and, although it bears uncanny resemblance to the gripping HBO hit series *Succession* – itself loosely based on the Murdoch family – the consequences for democracy and how the news gets reported – and distorted – are all too real and far-reaching.

One only has to recall Fox News' recent \$US1.6 billion (\$2.35 billion) defamation battle with the electronic voting company Dominion Voting Systems in the US to know that Rupert Murdoch and certain Fox News employees allowed the airing of election-denial conspiracies in the wake of the 2020 US presidential election. Fox admitted as much and settled out of court for nearly \$A1 billion.



The Australian Women's Weekly exclusive interview with Anna Murdoch.



Rupert Murdoch and his third wife, Wendi Deng, in 2012. BLOOMBERG

But who could have foretold this back in 2001? Certainly not Anna Murdoch. Her concerns were simply those of a mother. I'll never forget the moment when I asked her who would be best suited to taking over from her former husband. "Actually," she'd replied sorrowfully, "I'd like none of them to. I think they're all so good that they could do whatever they wanted really. But I think there's going to be a lot of heartbreak and hardship with this [succession]."

I have not spoken to Anna Murdoch in nearly quarter of a century, but I would wager big money that, right now, she would be horrified to have been so right.

**David Leser is an author and journalist. He is a regular contributor to and former staff writer with *Good Weekend*.**



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