Ariel Levy identifies and analyses a disturbing cultural development in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, depicting a cultural phenomenon seemingly as prevalent in New Zealand as in Levy’s America. In recent months I have noted the increasing number of girls and young women proudly wearing clothing and accessories bearing the Playboy logo, with some young women even sporting permanent tattoos of the Playboy motif; had a conversation with a young primary school teacher who declared that she idolised Paris Hilton (a celebrity whose star really started to burn bright when her ex-boyfriend released on the internet an amateur porn video they had made together); and noted the popularity amongst young teens of t-shirts that declare the wearer’s sexual availability and aggressiveness (such as the ten- to twelve-year-old girl I saw recently who wore a t-shirt that declared ‘This bitch is turned on’).

As Levy notes, it seems to be ‘trendy’ for women to present themselves in a highly sexualised manner, as well as to participate in and consume forms of entertainment that sexually objectify women.

The use of female sex appeal to sell products is hardly a new phenomenon, yet a quick perusal of music videos, movies and magazines reveals that female identity is often portrayed almost solely in terms of sexuality. Whilst sexuality is undoubtedly a central component of both male and female identity, the emphasis on a ‘fetishised’ female sex appeal and sexual availability in popular culture, to the exclusion of other aspects of female identity, seems to suggest that any sense of gender equality is being eroded. While the Destiny’s Child song ‘Cater 2 U’ (which declares, ‘I’ll keep my figure right. I’ll keep my hair fixed…keep rockin’ the hottest outfits. When you come home late, tap me on my shoulder. I’ll roll over.’) made me almost wonder if the feminist movement had ever even occurred, watching the Pussycat Dolls (a former burlesque troupe turned pop group) dedicate their hit song ‘Don’t Cha’ (which includes the lyrics, ‘Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?’) to ‘all the girls out there’ whilst performing on Top of the Pops made me wonder just how on earth the notion of ‘girl power’ or female autonomy had been solely translated into the expression of ‘sexual power’.

Levy points out that this ‘raunch culture’ does not enable women to negotiate sexuality on their own terms because it is ultimately oriented towards male pleasure. Furthermore, she illustrates how raunch culture is predominantly a product of capitalism, with female sexuality being ‘commodified’ by women as much as men for financial gain. These are the women who Levy terms ‘female chauvinist pigs’; women who become successful in the business world by selling female sexuality and pointedly denouncing conventionally female interests (such as an interest in fashion and make-up) as ‘too girly’. These women profess to prefer hanging out with ‘the boys’ and going to strip clubs to prove to guys that they
Now people, when the consumers look at this dish sponge I don't want them to think 'washing up' I want them to think 'sexy naked nymphettes greased in oil sliding down giant frying pan handles.'

GOT IT!!!
are not uptight, feminist or buying into a victim culture. Levy analyses the emergence of the raunch phenomenon, suggesting that it can, in part, be traced back to the split within the women’s movement between ‘sex-positive’ feminists, who sought to encourage women to enjoy and have control over their sexuality and who accepted some forms of pornography, and anti-porn feminists, who sought to ban all porn because it objectified women. This analysis is useful for those unfamiliar with the history of feminism, but Levy fails to thoroughly explain how raunch culture is a backlash to feminism.

While Levy suggests that raunch culture is partly a backlash to feminism, it seems to me to be both a backlash and an interpretation of feminism as the fight for women to be able to act like men. On the one hand, the stereotype of feminists as sex-hating, men-hating women has led many women to hastily declare (especially to men) that they are not feminists. Levy comprehensively analyses this aspect of the backlash but, in my opinion, does not adequately address the accompanying notion that feminism is a cause that met its objectives. This line of reasoning seems to go along the lines of ‘Right to vote — check, right to education — check, right to work — check, right to control fertility — check. Mission accomplished’, ignoring that feminism is also about countering more deeply embedded cultural beliefs about gender that unnecessarily inhibit individuals’ behaviour or choices. It seems to me that it is this notion that feminism is ‘completed’ that really fuels raunch culture, because it shuts down any discussion of societal understandings of gender and enables the sexual objectification of women to be presented as a source of female empowerment. Empowerment becomes ‘the right to be sexual’ (based on the assumption that in pre-feminist times women were expected to be asexual — I would argue that while, pre-feminism, women may have been required to appear sexually naive, women were expected to be sexual when ‘culturally’ appropriate, i.e. married, and, due to cultural pressures, had little control over their sexuality in terms of both expression and reproductive control), which is not necessarily the same thing as ‘the right to control one’s own sexuality’. In this way, empowerment is interpreted as women expressing their sexuality as men have always been able to (i.e. reproductive control and the ability to be overtly sexual and/or sexually knowledgeable); that is, women gaining the right to act like men.

This belief that empowerment is the right to act like men extends to sexual attitude as well as sexual behaviour. Levy’s discussion of the Playboy empire and interview with Hefner is fascinating and reveals the complicated relationship between sexuality and feminism, but I wish Levy had picked apart Hefner’s comments in more detail because they reveal how empowerment is often interpreted as women being able to act like men. Christie Hefner (Hugh Hefner’s daughter and Chairman and CEO of Playboy) describes the current generation as follows:

[The] post-sexual revolution, post-women’s movement generation that is now out there in their later twenties and early thirties — and then it continues with the generation behind them, too — has just a more grown-up, comfortable, natural attitude about sex and sexiness that is more in line with where guys were a couple generations before.

Levy suggests that women are behind men in development and that feminism is about women acquiring the right to be ‘the same’ as men, rather than campaigning for gender equality (so that femininity is not seen as inferior to masculinity). By saying that this generation has a more ‘grown-up’ attitude, she implies that the result of feminism has been a process of attitudinal development for women from immaturity to maturity (a stage which men had already reached), resulting in the freedom to be sexy — rather than any cultural change in societal perceptions of gender. (Note also that she describes women as still developmentally behind men, since women are described as having achieved an attitude similar to what guys had a couple of generations before.) Buying Penthouse, going to a strip club, or posing for Playboy does not magically enable women to express their sexuality, because these types of porn are formulaic productions created, primarily, for men; nor are such actions really evidence of women’s freedom to ‘act like men’. (Men do not seem to need to pose nude to express their sexuality, one ‘empowering’ reason Hefner suggests women choose to pose for Playboy.) All that these actions suggest is that women are free to engage in male-centred expressions of female sexuality: raunch culture.

Levy’s suggestion that a woman either buys into raunch culture or is considered ‘uncomfortable’ with and ‘embarrassed’ about her sexuality is perceptive (p40). It is difficult for a woman (or man) to express concern with or distaste for raunch culture without being considered some kind of prude. There has been a lot of commentary on the pressure for women to combine family and work; raunch culture is another potential source of anxiety, creating the trifecta of cultural pressure: taskmaster in the boardroom, domestic goddess in the kitchen, and sexual freak in the bedroom. This pressure is not necessarily just felt by women; it could be argued that raunch culture creates
a stereotype of men as one-dimensional as the one it creates of women.

Cultural analysis such as gender studies is invariably specific to a certain cultural context, and this is at times evident in this book. While there are many similarities between the culture Levy depicts in America and that in New Zealand and Australia, there are also many differences. In America, a popular culture that encourages young women to view women’s identity and value only in terms of sexuality exists within a morally conservative society: the federal government only funds sex education that promotes abstinence; there is a cultural fixation on virginity (with more emphasis on girls’ virginity — while Jessica Simpson and Britney Spears both capitalised on declaring their virgin status I cannot think of any male pop stars who have declared that they are waiting until marriage); and there is a conservative push to severely restrict or complicate access to birth control and abortions. Levy makes an important distinction that I suspect is more relevant in the US context: women are caught in a cultural paradox which promotes the necessity for women to appear overtly sexual/sexually attractive whilst simultaneously retaining sexual naivety until they are married. As an example, Jessica Simpson and Britney Spears gloried in their respective media-sanctioned virginities even as their videos blatantly played on the idea of sexual availability, indicating the cultural dissonance between ‘appearing’ and ‘being’ sexual. New Zealand and Australia are heavily influenced by American culture but have more liberal attitudes towards issues such as sex education, virginity, contraception and gender identity, leading me to suspect that raunch culture takes different forms and has different consequences here.

The similarities that do exist between Australia and the US have much to do with the globalised popular culture, and Levy’s discussion of Playboy, Girls Gone Wild and Jenna Jameson (a famous porn star) highlights how raunch culture is primarily a commercial product, emphasising the difficulty in countering the cultural power of the amorphous and populist commercial world. Women are willingly buying into raunch culture and it is easy to dismiss the popularity of raunch culture as ‘what women actually want’, an argument which can seem hard to counter. The idea that popular culture is somehow inherently democratic and merely responding to the whims of the market (i.e. the people) ignores the ways in which popular culture also influences society. Levy details how young girls often unquestioningly internalise the values of popular culture, dressing or acting in a sexually provocative manner because it is ‘cool’, even if they are not actually emotionally or socially comfortable with their sexuality. Older women may, as Levy suggests, have an historical context that allows raunch culture to be perceived as a form of empowerment or a way to make it clear that one is ‘not a feminist’ but I am not certain that Levy’s analysis is entirely correct. For some older women, raunch culture might be entwined with issues of female empowerment or the rejection of feminism, but I suspect that it is as much their unquestioned cultural reality as it is for young girls.

Levy’s argument that raunch culture is actually stereotypical and ‘fetishised’ sexual conformity, not a source of empowerment, is powerful and convincing, and her straightforward writing style belies the complexity of the issues she engages with. Whilst inevitably culturally specific, Female Chauvinist Pigs makes many interesting points that either translate to the Australian or New Zealand experience or provide a point of departure for further debate. This book provoked many animated discussions with friends, so that even as I disagreed with elements of Levy’s thesis, I appreciated the way in which this book provokes readers to consider constructions of female sexuality in contemporary popular culture and the reciprocal relationship between society and contemporary popular culture.