

# Claws rip the heart out of Wolf's theme

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**By Anne Summers**

Many years ago, when I was living in Canberra, a journalist colleague visited me at home one Saturday afternoon. With her husband sitting beside her, holding her hand, she tearfully recounted how her editor in Sydney was sexually harassing her. She had come to me for advice because I had published a book about women and was known as a feminist.

What could she do? What should she do? Do nothing, I counselled. It will hurt you more than it will hurt him if you take any action. I cringed from the shock and contempt I saw in both her and her husband's eyes. They had expected more of me.

They had wanted me to back them in being brave enough to denounce a man who was exploiting his position of authority to extract petty sexual favours from a staff member. I failed them. I was reminded of this incident as I read the torrent of abuse being hurled at Naomi Wolf in the media these past few days.

Wolf admits she had "not been brave enough" in 1983 to denounce a famous professor at Yale University who was her teacher and who had put his hand on her thigh while they were supposed to be discussing her poetry. She felt guilty about her "collusive silence" in this matter because it meant this man, and others like him, were free to perpetrate such behaviour with little fear of there being any adverse consequences.

Finally, all these years later, Wolf reacted to Yale's constant entreaties to her to fund raise or to otherwise lend her celebrity to the university's promotion efforts by deciding to investigate whether it now had in place adequate procedures to deal with allegations of sexual misconduct. The result is a 6000-word article published last week in *New York* magazine in which she reports on the university's abject failure - still, 20 years later - to protect its students in such situations.

You would never know any of this from reading the press over the past few days. We have been subjected to a string of articles, without exception lamentably overworking "crying Wolf" into their headlines, that have so blatantly distorted what Wolf has said that you cannot but conclude that she has been the victim of malicious misreporting.

The reporting has made two principal allegations. First that Wolf has accused Professor Harold Bloom of sexually harassing her 20 years ago, and second, that she has kept quiet about it until last week. There has been any amount of indecent speculation about her motives for now revealing this incident, much of it centring on her alleged need to be the focus of continual media attention.

The whole tawdry episode has breathed new life into the ailing career of another former Bloom student, the toxic Camille Paglia, whose main claim to fame is her

history of denigrating and defaming other feminists. Paglia has managed to get herself quoted all around the globe on the back of the Wolf story and, in many articles, has even succeeded in stealing the story from Wolf.

But let's return to the allegations. Wolf does not accuse Bloom of harassment. She talks about "encroachment" and "transgression" - words, she says "are so much more accurate, emotionally as well as legally, than 'harassment'". What she says about the incident is this: "What Harold Bloom's hand on his student's thigh set off was not a sexual crisis. I was sexually active - and not even especially modest. An unwanted hand on a thigh from a date was nothing. Nor was it an emotional crisis. I wasn't that vulnerable. What it set off was a moral crisis, shaking my confidence in the institution I was in."

She did not keep quiet about the incident for 20 years. Right away, she told her parents who tried to get a colleague of Bloom's to speak to him about it, and she told a number of women friends on campus, all of whom counselled her not to complain officially. He is untouchable, they warned. You will suffer.

So Wolf did nothing. Instead she became demoralised, her grades suffered, she felt unable to attend Bloom's class again (he gave her a B anyway) and she worried how she would get the financial aid she needed to finish college and attend graduate school if she became known as a troublemaker.

You would know none of this from reading the press. Worse, you would not know that the main thrust of Wolf's 6000-word article is to document the cases of a number of named women who have since complained to the university of assault by faculty members. One of them, in 1992, involved the rape of a graduate student by a tenured professor.

In each case, Yale put institutional self-preservation ahead of its duty of care to female students. The rape victim was thanked for not "making a crusade" out of what happened. Instead, pressure was put on the professor to resign and the woman was offered \$30,000 which she declined.

Wolf tells her story in the context of making the case that "Yale's public face is not what it seems". (You can read her compelling article at <http://www.newyorkmetro.com>) If that is true of an esteemed liberal Ivy League institution such as Yale University, what do we say about other institutions such as rugby league clubs?

"I was not traumatised," she says, "but my educational experience was corrupted." She argues that there is "something terribly wrong with the way the current sexual-harassment discussion is framed - those bringing complaints have had to prove that they have been harmed emotionally. Their lawyers must bring out any distress they may have suffered.

"Thus, it is the woman and her 'frailties' under scrutiny, instead of the institution and its frailties. This victim construct in the law is one reason that women are often reluctant to go public."

I doubt that even the savvy Wolf could have anticipated the personal savagery which her article has unleashed. Sadly, most of this misogyny has been from other women, many of whom seem unwilling to grant Wolf the right even to speak on the subject of sexual harassment. Their hostility, and their wilful misreporting of what Wolf actually wrote is an unwelcome reminder of the distance we have yet to travel before women's right to work or to study without harassment is universally accepted.

"Powerful men and women who belittle and humiliate their subordinates manage not to belittle or humiliate their supervisors," Wolf says. "Neither men nor women tend to harass upward in a hierarchy."

In the end, it's all about power. Who has it and who does not. Overwhelmingly, it is still men who have it but the willingness of women to disbelieve other women indicates an alarming degree of collaboration in their own potential victimhood.

Twenty years ago, my journalistic colleague left the industry rather than continue to endure the humiliation. Her harasser, while no longer an editor, remains a man of some influence. But no one will ever know now what he did. If someone as celebrated and brave as Naomi Wolf can be pilloried for seeking justice, what hope do the rest of us have?

<http://www.annesummers.com.au>