



COVER SHEET

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Sara-Marie as Feminist Fairytale: From *Big Brother* to 'Big Sister'.

By D. Bruno Starrs.

Grandma Greer, Aunty Faluda, Sister Madonna, and ... Bunny Girl Sara-Marie. In 2001 many Australian girls would have described all four women as important feminists, with the last being the most accessible role model of them all. Twenty-two-year-old Sara-Marie Fedele was a finalist in the first series of Australian television's *Big Brother* and has been identified by Catharine Lumby (2002) as, "A figure who allows young women the opportunity to discuss, and to some extent, return the media's gaze, along with the gaze of experts, parents and educators who seek to speak on their behalf." Lumby sees parallels in Sara-Marie's stance with the genre of reality television itself; she forces the viewer to examine and celebrate the everyday humanity within. In a fairytale rise from obscurity as the manager of a strip-club to national celebrity and without the credibility of education, power, or position, Sara-Marie wrestled away the voyeuristic *Big Brother* cameras to pan critically not over her physique but over their own sexist agenda. She seemed to scream, in wonderfully gentle and wise tones, the life-affirming ethos that the obsession with body image which the media would have young women embrace - with its concomitant expenditure on weight-loss products and fashion - is quite simply mentally and physically unhealthy, and, indeed, laughable. Lumby continued:

You'd expect feminists to be out dancing in the streets over the popularity of Sara-Marie. On the face of it, she's a poster girl for youthful female confidence. She's fat and she doesn't care, she hates housework so she leaves it to the guys, she doesn't take any cheek from men, and she's comfortable with her sexuality. (Catherine Lumby 2001)

Describing herself as "Happily single" (*The Best of Big Brother* 2001), Sara-Marie proclaimed "A bit of flab never hurt anyone" (*The Best of Big Brother* 2001). Her self-deprecating yet self-confident donning of pink bunny ears gestured cynically to the misogynistic Playboy cliché and this un-fashion accessory was taken up by hundreds of the show's female fans. Unlike the big feminist of American television, Roseanne, whom Kathleen Rowe (1977, p. 74) described as "Roseanne Barr-as-sign, a person we know only through her various roles and performances... [and who] describes her 'act' as 'who she is'," Sara-Marie is neither sign nor act; she is the real/reality thing. Her simple words of wisdom seemed to materialise from nowhere; unforced, unscripted, and natural, further consolidating her status as a realistic and believable role model. In her 2002 monograph *Big Bother: Why did THAT Reality-TV Show Become Such a Phenomenon?*, Toni Johnson-Woods said:

Women [viewers] particularly seemed to warm to her and to defend her because of her no-nonsense stance with the males in the house ... She kissed men and women in the house, but she didn't have a romance. She flashed her body and let people play with her breasts but wasn't sexualised. (Johnson-Woods 2002, p. 127)

Sara-Marie frankly discussed anal sex and penis size with straight and gay housemates and laughingly enjoyed her voluptuous curves with her famous "bum dance" - much-copied by thin and large alike - and her breast-held bottle-pouring ability. She was immensely popular and despite the common-held opinion that female viewers controlled the outcome by voting for the "available" heterosexual male housemates (the final two were the handsome straight boys Ben and Blair), Sara-

Marie was described as the “bum-dancin’ blonde [who] lost a game-show but won the game” (Johnson-Woods 2002, p. vii).

In addition to the effect of subverting and returning the whole reality TV gaze of intrusion, Sara-Marie’s defiance survived well after her exit from the house into the world outside. Swapping the hidden cameras for studio shots, she maintained her admirable position of non-militant and accessible feminism. Johnson-Woods continued:

The Australian material girl played up to the camera. The photographs collapse Marilyn’s sexuality with Madonna’s commodification ... She poses [for the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine] defiantly: hands on hips, thrusting out her body... defying the fashion magazine browser/buyer not to consider her body as acceptable. (Johnson-Woods 2002, p. 128)

Sara-Marie continued to effortlessly champion healthy body image in the face of cultural pressure to conform to the fashion industry fantasy ideal of size 8 waifs, by mocking the fashion magazines’ hypocritical photo poses and contexts. She declined high heels for her own comfortable flats in what can be seen as an analogy of her entire worldview. Sara-Marie’s *Cosmopolitan* shoot highlighted her ordinariness and appealed to the everyday woman: “Her section included photos of her hugging the editor and two fashion designers; rival covergirl Britney Spears is not hugging anyone... even her make-up is accessible; Sara-Marie wears Avon; Britney Spears wears Clarins” (Johnson-Woods 2002, p. 128).

Sara-Marie’s status as feminist icon is not mere conjecture; scientific research proves it. “The reason they loved her wasn’t because she was a good role model or because she was fat, they didn’t care about that,” Lumby said, summarising her government funded ARC Discovery Grant study of some 200 young women titled “Girl Cultures” “They liked the fact she just liked herself regardless of what she looked like” (“Big Brother Touches Lives of Teens” 2002).

So liked was the at-ease-with-her-body Sara-Marie, the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*’s section entitled “Sydney Confidential” signed Sara-Marie for a five week period as “Big Sister” to dispense advice of an ‘agony aunt’ style in which she “tackled lazy boys, bitchy girls and cooking fish fingers” (Fedele 2002). The columns are expected to eventually result in a book entitled *Sara-Marie’s Guide to Life*.

Returning in 2002 as a celebrity housemate, the by-then Big Sister fearlessly challenged fellow celebrity housemate and soon to be World Champion boxer Anthony Mundine over his sexist views and perceived physical superiority. Exuding disarmingly frank charm she beat the man known as “The Man” in one-on-one basketball and secretly painted his toe-nails. Humbled and re-educated by his experience in the *Big Brother* house, Mundine said, “To all the kids out there - if ‘The Man’ can do the washing up so can you” (Dale Paget 2002).

The final word from Sara-Marie resides on her homepage which shows her *Big Brother* bedhead, now owned by a proud Aussie girl, bearing the bunny-eared feminist’s autograph and the timeless advice: “Do what you want and be proud” (Fedele 2002).

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