

Feminist writer Naomi Wolf (*New College* 1985) is arguably the most widely-recognized female Rhodes Scholar to date. The author of six books, including the bestsellers *The Beauty Myth*, *Fire with Fire*, and *Promiscuities*, Wolf has written for *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, and *The Huffington Post* (blog), among other publications, and served as an advisor to Al Gore's 2000 Presidential campaign. She also co-founded the Woodhull Institute for Ethical Leadership.

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Behind the Name: A Critical Look at Author Naomi Wolf

Colette Gunn-Graffy

Naomi Wolf bothers a lot of people. For one thing, she is an attractive woman who had the gall to write a book lambasting society's obsession with beauty. She is also a feminist who does not hate men, a capitalist who sounds like a hippy, and a polemicist who writes memoirs.

But the trouble that most critics have with Naomi Wolf is that they think her theories are neither transcendently deep nor terribly original.

This is not to say that Wolf does not pose some controversial ideas; her suggestion in her third book *Promiscuities*, that schools teach "petting" as part of their sex-ed curriculum, has been passed around by conservative pundits as evidence that Wolf is "a permissive, condom-loving liberal who pushes sex on kids."¹ Still, it is true that much of what she writes has been heard before. We know that women are held to a higher standard of physical attractiveness than men, that anorexia is disproportionately a female disorder. We know that girls who publicly claim to enjoy sex, who express desire, are often labeled sluts. We have heard of the benefits of "natural birth," of the ordeal of postpartum depression.

And yet, for all her critics, Wolf has a wide following. She is the author of six books, and has written for numerous publications. Wolf also guest lectures at colleges and universities, and she is the co-founder of a not-for-profit organization that provides women with professional development and leadership training.

Clearly, Wolf has a public presence and appeal far exceeding that of most Rhodes

¹ William Saletan, "Beta Wolf." *Slate*. 4 November 1999. 1 October 2007.
<www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=45523>.

Scholars. What is it about her that provokes such strong reactions?

The Beauty Myth

The Beauty Myth, the book that first catapulted Wolf into the public arena, is her least personal. Her central argument, that society's obsession with women's "beauty" is holding women back, rests primarily on numbers drawn from industry and survey results, analysis of current events and deconstruction of beauty advertising.

As an attempt to prove how the "beauty myth" interferes with all aspects of female life, Wolf's research and analysis are sprawling. In one of her shrewder remarks, Wolf takes Betty Friedan's claim in *The Feminine Mystique* — that the "really crucial function" of women for advertisers is, as housewives, to "buy more things for the house" -- a step further, arguing:

*When the restless, isolated, bored, and insecure housewife fled the Feminine Mystique for the workplace, advertisers faced the loss of their primary consumer... [W]hy is it never said that the really crucial function that women serve as aspiring beauties is to buy more things for the body? Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry and sexually insecure state of being aspiring "beauties."*²

Wolf insists that the "beauty myth" took over where the "cult of domesticity" left off, enslaving women — and, importantly, their pocketbooks — to the cultivation of a physical ideal. Women's magazines, she argues, "consciously or half-consciously, must project the attitude that looking one's age is bad because \$650 million of their ad revenue comes from people who would go out of business if visible age looked good."³ She censures the cosmetic surgery industry for "[reclassifying] ... whatever is deeply, essentially female — the life in a woman's expression, the feel of her flesh, the shape of her breasts, the transformations after childbirth of her skin ... as ugly, and ugliness as a disease."⁴ Particularly provocative is her comparison of cosmetic surgeons to nineteenth-century doctors who encouraged hypochondria and invalidism among wealthy women and thereby secured for themselves a regular demand for house calls.

² Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: The Random House Group Ltd., 1991), p. 66.

³ *The Beauty Myth*, p. 84.

⁴ *The Beauty Myth*, p. 232.

Many second-wave feminists, including Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer,⁵ praised the book as important reading for the next generation of women. Other critics noted Wolf's tendency to overwrite – particularly, to over-generalize the roots of the “beauty myth” (“a political weapon,” “a replacement shackle”)⁶ – and a few have questioned the validity of her data.⁷ Yet, what is most troublesome about the book is that it often reads as a conspiracy theory. Certainly, the malignant impact of the “beauty myth” should not be underestimated, but to paint it as a conscious and orchestrated “backlash” against women is crucially to ignore some of its finer points – what, for instance, of the role of an expanding mass media in a society obsessed with image?

Perhaps the most interesting consequence of the publication of *The Beauty Myth* was the furor it created, not only over the book's premise, but over its pretty, young author; in 1991, Wolf was not yet 30. Although the book received much praise and became a bestseller, the ensuing media focus on Wolf's appearance has created its own enduring myth about what the book actually is: an attack on the superficial nature of beauty. People who had not read *The Beauty Myth* recoiled at what they decided was a hypocritical message from an eccentric author. One journalist said, “It was difficult being told to let it all hang out, physically speaking, by a creature so obviously ... buffed.”⁸ According to Lionel Tiger, author of *The Decline of Males*, “she [Naomi Wolf] came onto the stage all glossy-eyed and glossy-mouthed, telling all the ugly girls that it didn't matter if Prince Charming wasn't attracted to them. ... But beauty is a real force, not a myth. And it's cruel to say otherwise.”⁹

A Rallying Cry

Wolf must have anticipated some of the media fall-out that accompanied the publication of her first book.

⁵ Gloria Steinem called it, “A smart, angry, insightful book, and a clarion call to freedom,” while Germaine Greer was so enraptured she proclaimed it, “the most important feminist publication since *The Female Eunuch*.” See Powell's Books: *The Beauty Myth*. 27 May 2008 <<http://www.powells.com/biblio?isbn=9780385423977>> And Macleans: *A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing*. 16 May 2008 <http://www.macleans.ca/article.jsp?content=20060327_123627_123627>.

⁶ The New York Times called it a “sweeping, messy, vigorous, callow but stouthearted book.” See Margo Jefferson. “Does Your Flesh Wobble and Seem Dimpled?” *New York Times*. 19 May 1991.

⁷ Caryn James, “Critic's Notebook; Feminine Beauty as a Masculine Plot.” *New York Times*. 7 May 1991.

⁸ Rachel Cooke, “Daddy knows best.” *The Observer*. 15 January 2006.

⁹ Lionel Tiger, as quoted by Maureen Dowd in her article “Liberties; the Alpha-Beta Macarena.” *New York Times*. 3 November 1999.

In *The Beauty Myth*, she writes that:

[The] trouble with any debate about the beauty myth is the sophisticated reflex it uses. It punishes virtually any woman who tries to raise these issues by scrutinizing her appearance ... Since the media routinely give accounts of women's appearance in a way that trivializes and discredits what they say, women reading or watching are routinely dissuaded from identifying with women in the public eye – the ultimate antifeminist goal of the beauty myth.¹⁰

In her next book *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It*, she admits that the controversy over *The Beauty Myth*, and the personal attacks, left her flattened and confused. Published two years after *The Beauty Myth*, *Fire with Fire* picks up where Wolf left off – with an appeal to her readers to create and take part in a feminist movement that is inclusive and empowering.

At the end of *The Beauty Myth*, she acknowledges “the terrible truth:”

That though the marketplace promotes the myth, it would be powerless if women didn't enforce it against one another ... The toughest but most necessary change will come not from men or from the media, but from women, in the way we see and behave toward other women.¹¹

Fire with Fire is Wolf's attempt to lead the charge, and it is her most refreshing piece of work. Whereas she claimed her first book was a “very Marxist analysis” written with a young feminist's “black and white” reasoning,¹² her second is a cool assessment of Second Wave Feminism, to “try to clear away the dead weight of what is truly not working.”¹³ Throughout the book, Wolf writes in the first person; that these are her views could not be clearer. The voice that narrates *Fire with Fire* is not that of a young woman searching for affirmation, nor even that of a

¹⁰ *The Beauty Myth*, p. 274.

¹¹ *The Beauty Myth*, pp. 282-3.

¹² “Naomi Wolf: From body to soul.” Sunday Profile. Julia Baird (Presenter). ABC Australia. 11 June 2006.

¹³ Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), p. xv.

social critic — it is the voice of an impassioned (if possibly naïve) leader, striking out on her own because she has nothing to lose.

The first problem she addresses is that so many women are refusing to identify themselves as “feminists.”¹⁴ There is a sense that feminism “has become a checklist of attitudes ... [M]any women identify feminism with specific issues that may or may not include them, rather than with a theory of self-worth that applies to every woman’s life without exception.”¹⁵ The result is that women who do not subscribe to the “correct” feminist ideology are made to feel unwelcome by those who do.

Despite their recent political gains, Wolf argues that women are still ambivalent about claiming power — and unless they actively begin wielding their political clout and reach aggressively for positions of power and leadership, nothing will change. Her response to this crisis is “power feminism,” a movement in which women would support each other in acquiring financial literacy and autonomy as a means to political change. Unlike “victim feminists,” women who “trap ourselves in a ‘helpless victim’ self-image that blinds us to our strengths,”¹⁶ power feminists are not afraid to claim their achievements as their own, to contribute monetarily to women’s organizations, to network and expand opportunities for other women, particularly those of lower socioeconomic classes.

Although reviewers raved over this “impassioned manifesto” for “flexible feminism,”¹⁷ Wolf notes in the preface that its thesis had already been criticized by “traditional” feminists for being simplistic — which was something:

No one could argue with. To me that is its virtue. The essential tenets of feminism are simple and familiar, even American values that most people, men and women, do agree with. Like any decent movement for social equality, feminism’s main premise is the golden rule ... One would have to be a fascist to disagree with a feminism that is the logical extension of

¹⁴ Women willing to identify themselves as feminists ranged from 56 percent in a 1986 Newsweek-Gallup poll to 51 percent in 1987 (*Times-Mirror* study) to 33 percent in 1989 (Time/CNN Yankelovich) to 38 percent in 1992 (British *Cosmopolitan*). Additionally, a 1991 survey in *The Guardian* found that nine percent (of 11,000 respondents) thought feminism was seen positively. See *Fire with Fire*, pp. 58-9.

¹⁵ *Fire with Fire*, pp. 60-1.

¹⁶ *Fire with Fire*, p. xvii.

¹⁷ From a review by *Publisher’s Weekly*, reprinted on the inner cover of *Fire with Fire*.

democracy.¹⁸

Reclaiming the First-Person

Wolf's next two books *Promiscuities: the Secret Struggle for Womanhood* (1997) and *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Way to Motherhood* (2001) explore female rites of passage. In both, Wolf's exploration stems from her own experiences, which she mines for anecdotes. She concludes that from burgeoning sexual desire to burgeoning motherhood, society continues to send women mixed messages about what they are to expect and how they are to behave. Of the two works, however, *Promiscuities* is decidedly the more controversial.

Wolf notes that western literature, film — even pop culture — are full of stories of sexual coming-of-age told from the male point of view. What similar roadmaps, she wonders, do we offer to girls to help them understand and make the transition to womanhood?

Wolf relates how in certain tribal societies, girls are publicly “transformed” into women through the use of ritual; the entire society celebrates the event. By contrast, in Western culture, “girls are turned into women through what happens to them, and what they choose to do, sexually.”¹⁹ Even after the sexual revolution, girls are offered no initiation rites to mark the passage to womanhood other than the sexual act itself — an act too often associated with silence and shaming. They are left on their own to forge their own understandings of what it is to be a woman.

Promiscuities is thus an attempt to reclaim the power of female sexuality for women by providing them space to tell their stories their way. Although the stories told are familiar, the book itself is controversial precisely because it is written in what Wolf calls “the first-person sexual.” This book is “not a polemic but a set of confessions.”²⁰ In addition to the stories she gathers from former friends and female acquaintances, all of whom grew up in San Francisco in the 1970s, Wolf offers an account of her own sexual awakening, from her encounter with and escape from a potential molester as a child, to her awkward preadolescent yearnings, to the anticlimactic loss of her own virginity.

Several years after this book was published, Wolf was revealed to be a “secret” advisor to

¹⁸ *Fire with Fire*, p. xix.

¹⁹ Naomi Wolf, *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997), p. xv.

²⁰ *Promiscuities*, p. xiv.

Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore. The “scandal” was less about the fact that Wolf’s role had been kept quiet than the media’s interpretation of her as a “whoopie girl sex writer.”²¹ Commentary about her contribution to the campaign and whether or not she warranted her \$15,000-a-month salary tended to be adorned with references to (and frequently distortions of)²² her personal disclosures in *Promiscuities* — an ironic (and clearly unintended) affirmation of the book’s argument that women are not permitted a sexual voice.²³

Wolf’s similarly personal reflections on her own birthing experience caused much less of a stir. Although *Misconceptions* includes stories of her pregnant peers, the conclusions Wolf draws are as much a product of her own experience as theirs. Pregnancy, she said, “was the most solitary journey I’d ever undertaken. No one else could carry this baby for me or take my place at my appointment with the birthing table.”²⁴ As with women’s sexual coming-of-age, Wolf laments that little recognition or support are given to this self-altering aspect of pregnancy:

*The tension was this: I was mourning, protesting a point of departure in the road that I could never retrace. An ‘I’ would go forward, swept irrevocably on by the tide of the natural order, and that ‘I’ would sit on the sofa hour after hour and be someone’s Lithium, someone’s Lethe, someone’s Popsicle — someone who would come to be the love of my life, but whom I did not yet know. And the ‘I’ would reconfigure eventually around that need, and take joy in it, and spin a new identity. But it would never again be the ‘I’ it had been before.*²⁵

Deploing the “collection of sugar-coated niceties” she was offered while pregnant, Wolf sets out to give it to other mothers “straight.” She chronicles in blunt detail the changes — physical, psychological and emotional — that the expectant mother goes through each

²¹ Melinda Henneberger, “Naomi Wolf, Feminist Consultant to Gore, Clarifies her Campaign Role.” *New York Times*. 5 November 1999.

²² “Howler History! Spinning Wolf (Part 1)! The press discovered Wolf in plain sight – then delivered a smut-laden trashing.” *The Daily Howler*. 3 March 2003. 15 October 2007 <www.dailyhowler.com/dh030303.shtml>.

²³ A few months later, a little remarked-upon article in *USA Today* noted that another presidential hopeful, Senator John McCain, was paying his own controversial advisor, Richard Quinn, \$20,000 per month. See Jim Drinkard, “Rebel Flags in the McCain Camp.” *USA Today*. 8 February 2000. See also, “A Time When Less Was More.” *The Daily Howler*. 15 March 2000. 15 October 2007 <http://www.dailyhowler.com/h031500_1.shtml>.

²⁴ Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (London: The Random House Group Ltd, 2002), p. 69.

²⁵ *Misconceptions*, p. 88.

month.

She also attacks the modern medical model of pregnancy, presenting a litany of “misconceptions” about the kind of treatment women can expect to receive from traditional obstetrical practices: that women can expect to be treated by compassionate medical personnel, that they will be fully informed of the risks to the fetus of procedures such as amniocentesis, that lying on one’s back is conducive to labor, and that epidurals and episiotomies are typically necessary. “These silences and myths, working together so severely, whitewash women’s experience of first-time pregnancy and birth, and keep them powerless to improve the conditions of becoming a mother in our society.”²⁶

One of the criticisms leveled against Wolf — particularly as regards these two books — is that the experiences she chronicles, the injustices she exposes, tend to belong to the white middle-class. For someone who has set out to spread a more all-embracing version of feminism, this may be a valid point; and yet feminism itself has often been criticized as a “luxury” of white, middle-class women.

Controversy in Newsprint

Wolf’s journalism echoes the themes of her books. From the sexual estrangement caused by pornography, to women’s capacity for sadistic cruelty, vividly demonstrated by the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, to the Democrats’ failure to win over female voters in John Kerry’s ill-fated presidential campaign: Wolf seeks to explode cultural myths about women and the ways in which they are valued.

Two articles, however, stand out. The first, written in 1995 for the *New Republic*, is Wolf’s treatise on abortion.²⁷ Although staunchly pro-choice, Wolf is concerned that the movement “has relinquished the moral frame around the issue of abortion.” In the early abortion-rights battles of the 1970s, women’s advocates had to depersonalize the fetus in order to combat the idea of woman as a mere “vessel,” and her fetus, the “life” that was at stake. That these views and rhetoric have persisted, Wolf finds a “bitter legacy.”²⁸ Encouraging the pro-choice movement to recognize the duality of women — as autonomous beings, as well as vessels for new life — she

²⁶ *Misconceptions*, pp. 3-5.

²⁷ Naomi Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls.” *New Republic*. 16 October 1995.

²⁸ “Our Bodies, Our Souls.”

argues that while abortion *must* remain a woman’s right, it should not come at the expense of having to “lie to ourselves about what we are doing at such a moment. Let us at least look with clarity at what that means and not whitewash self-interest with the language of self-sacrifice.”²⁹ If, to some, Wolf seemed the voice of reason on an issue so polarized, which has become a litmus test for political affiliation in the United States — to others, she was merely straddling the fence.

In 2004, Wolf received a mixed response to her article accusing celebrated professor Harold Bloom of sexual harassment while she was a student at Yale. In the article, published in *New York Times Magazine*, she explained that the “transgression ... devastated my sense of being valuable to Yale as a student, rather than as a pawn of powerful men.”³⁰ Although some were sympathetic, generally the media wondered why Wolf had waited twenty years to make her allegation. The woman who had once argued so vehemently for “power feminism” now seemed to be casting herself in a “victim” role.

Yet, Wolf insists, her mission was not to drag Bloom’s name through the mud, but to demand that Yale offer adequate grievance procedures to students who have been sexually encroached upon. Two decades after Bloom allegedly caressed her thigh, she claims she broke her silence because she “had an obligation to protect others.”³¹ Most of the article details her attempts to seek redress from the University. She also describes the sexual assault and harassment of a half dozen other women, all former Yale students, and their disappointing attempts to seek redress.

Wolf alluded to this encounter with Bloom in her book *Promiscuities*, arguing that it is not the simple acknowledgment that one has been sexually violated that makes one into a “victim;” but using that violation as an excuse to remain silent. In this, she may have been expanding upon her definition of “power feminism”: suggesting women’s advancement relies not only on their financial autonomy, but on their willingness to submit their experience to public scrutiny so that others may be spared similar ordeals.

A Liberal Upbringing

One of the most enduring criticisms about Wolf is that, for a polemicist, she does a lot of navel-gazing. At times, her writing can come across as self-absorbed. Claire Dederer of *The*

²⁹ “Our Bodies, Our Souls.”

³⁰ Naomi Wolf, “The Silent Treatment.” *New York Magazine*. 23 February 2004.

³¹ “The Silent Treatment.”

New York Times offers this viewpoint:

*Maybe it's time to rethink what, exactly, this maddening writer does. Maybe we should stop thinking of Naomi Wolf as a political theorist, and instead call her a memoirist [In] the context of memoir, Wolf's personal writing no longer seems self-indulgent. It seems vital, and in a sense radical, in the tradition of 1970's feminists who sought to speak to every aspect of women's lives.*³²

The evolution of Wolf's writing is as much about the evolution of her own life; although, for such a personal writer, she has always kept her relationship with her children and ex-husband David Shipley relatively private. She has been much more open, however, about her brother and parents, particularly her father.

Wolf writes in *Promiscuities* that the "postdivorce, post-sexual revolution, post-moral relativism world [of the 1970s Bay Area] created the conditions of [my] childhood."³³ Born in 1962, she lived with her parents and older brother Aaron in a house just above the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Sex, drugs, self-liberation and their repercussions were on display to young and old alike. Yet Wolf's parents, while bohemian and eccentric, were surprisingly stable, especially compared to many others. As Wolf puts it, "the parent-child lines of authority [in our family] were somewhat more old-fashioned."³⁴ Her father Leonard, a first generation Romanian immigrant turned beat poet, taught at San Francisco State University. Her mother Deborah, a graduate student during Wolf's childhood, and later an anthropologist and therapist, was fifteen years younger than Leonard.

In *The Treehouse: Eccentric Wisdom From My Father On How To Live, Love, And See* (2005), Wolf describes how, in their household, imagination and poetic license held sway over practicality. As a child, and later as an undergraduate at Yale University, she wrote poetry. Her writing still shows a noticeable inclination towards lyricism — to the chagrin of her critics. As a Rhodes Scholar in the years 1985-1987, however, Wolf developed a more "radical" analysis of literature and the world. The problem with poetry, the young Marxist had decided, was that it

³² Claire Dederer, "What to Expect." *New York Times*. 7 October 2001.

³³ *Promiscuities*, p. 5.

³⁴ *Promiscuities*, p. 5.

“makes nothing happen.”³⁵ By the time she arrived at New College, Oxford, she claims, she had turned away from poetry and towards “words that slid home like a bolt.”³⁶ It was at Oxford that Wolf commenced writing *The Beauty Myth*.

In the late 1990s, Wolf co-founded the Woodhull Institute for Ethical Leadership, an organization that aspires to “bridge the gap” between a “woman’s private aspirations and her accomplishments” by offering leadership training, skills courses (e.g. financial literacy, public speaking), and mentoring.³⁷ She currently leads courses in media, non-fiction and op-ed writing, and public speaking at the Institute. For Wolf, adjusting to her new role as teacher was initially quite a challenge. She says in *The Treehouse*: “I was in over my head ... [S]hifting from talker and professional insurgent to listener and teacher meant accepting a more mature role ... I would have to learn to be bad at something again.”³⁸

It also meant separating herself from the hectic business of her normal life and returning to her poetic roots. In the year following 9/11, Wolf built a treehouse with her father Leonard, and asked him to instruct her as he would his pupils, so that she could convey these lessons to her own students. *The Treehouse* is a summary of these lessons, as well as an ode to and biography of the teacher. Of her father, Wolf writes:

*He changes people’s lives because he believes that everyone is here on earth as an artist; to tell his particular story or sing her irreplaceable song; to leave behind a unique creative signature. He believes that your passion for this, your feelings about this, must take priority over every other reasoned demand: status, benefits, sensible practices.*³⁹

Wolf interweaves tales of her father — as a young immigrant, a depressed soldier, a gallant poet, a creative mentor — with stories of friends and students at the Institute, each of whom is struggling to unlock her own creative identity. As a young Marxist, Wolf had rejected poetry; now two decades later her students have been socially conditioned to value

³⁵ *Promiscuities*, p. 29.

³⁶ Naomi Wolf, *The Treehouse: Eccentric Wisdom from my Father on how to Live, Love, and See* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 27.

³⁷ “Program Overview.” The Woodhull Institute for Ethical Leadership <<http://www.woodhull.org/introduction.php>>.

³⁸ *The Treehouse*, pp. 77-8.

³⁹ *The Treehouse*, p. 3.

their work only if it makes them money. By contrast, Leonard, the son of poor Romanian immigrants, came of age during World War II and began writing poetry during the Beatnik era. As a penniless outsider, his early experiences of art were momentous; they offered an escape that changed his life. *The Treehouse* is Wolf's gentle reminder that accepting one's "art" into one's life does change the world, if only in the way we see it.

The Optimism of Youth

For some people, the lessons offered in *The Treehouse* — "Be Still and Listen," "Destroy the Box," "Identify Your Heart's Desire" — may be like ipecac, only less practical. For others, they are revelatory, making intrinsic sense. Either way, Wolf's defining quality — as a writer and an advocate — is optimism. She appeals to her readers as the girl-(or woman)-next-door, who believes that even the most socially entrenched "conspiracy" can be overcome through awareness and grassroots cooperation. But if optimism is Wolf's greatest strength, the thing that draws people to her and that makes them eager to believe what she has to say, it is also her greatest weakness. All too often, she gets carried away, whether with the scope of her ideas or simply with the cadence of her own metaphors. Labeled a "yuppie feminist" by Camille Paglia and dismissed as "wacky" by Maureen Dowd,⁴⁰ Wolf irks those who find her solutions too simplistic for the complexities of the political arena.

But her optimism resonates with one audience. Robin Stern, a psychotherapist and co-founding board-member of the Woodhull Institute, took on Dowd's snide remarks about Wolf's "wacky" ideas in a letter to *The New York Times*: "Ms. Wolf's voice speaks to youth. She energizes them and inspires critical thinking, social awareness and responsible civic action. Is that wacky?"⁴¹

The loss of civil liberties is the topic of Wolf's most recent book *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*, in which she warns of the loss of civil liberties in the United States under the Bush administration. Having studied the major dictatorships of the twentieth century — from Germany and Russia in the 1930s to Chile in the 1970s to

⁴⁰ See Camille Paglia, "Hillary, Naomi, Susan and Rush. Sheesh!" 17 November 1999. 16 October 2007. <<http://www.salon.com/people/col/pagl/1999/11/17/cp1117/print.html>>. See also: Maureen Dowd, "Liberties: The Pals and Palettes of Al." *New York Times*. 10 November 1999 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400E4D9103AF933A25752C1A96F958260&scp=6&sq=%22maureen+dowd%22+&st=nyt>>.

⁴¹ Letter to the Editor: "Naomi Wolf's Ideas." *New York Times*. 14 November 1999.

China in the 1980s — Wolf draws parallels between current events and the political tactics historically used to shut down other open democracies. She argues that there is essentially a “blueprint for turning an open society into a dictatorship” that can be broken down into ten steps, all of which she thought were being implemented by the current administration.⁴²

The End of America is a good example of the best and worst aspects of Wolf’s writing. Unlike some of her other books, it does not suffer from passages of purple prose; it is impassioned, yet to-the-point, in its attempt to jolt readers out of old, staid ways of seeing. Wolf writes:

*Americans expect to have freedom around us just as we expect to have air to breathe ... We take our American liberty for granted the way we take our natural resources for granted, seeing both, rather casually, as being magically self-replenishing. We have not noticed how vulnerable either resource is until very late in the game, when systems start to falter.*⁴³

But Wolf still manages to negate some of her better arguments simply because she does not seem to know where to draw the line. Many of the resonances she identifies between past dictatorships and the politics of the Bush Administration — the rhetoric used to invoke a terrifying enemy, the spread of surveillance of ordinary citizens, secret lists of dissidents targeted for search and detention — are eerie. Less convincing is the comparison she makes, in the first few pages, between airplane security forcing passengers to drink from bottles of baby formula or breast milk (in the wake of the liquid bombers scare) and Mussolini’s “intimidation tactic [of forcing] citizens to drink emetics and other liquids.”⁴⁴

The book was on *The New York Times* Bestseller List for weeks, as much due to Wolf’s message as the controversy of the topic:

[T]he Founders did not mean for powerful men and women far away from the citizens — for people with their own agendas, or for a class of professionals — to perform the patriots’ tasks,

⁴² Naomi Wolf, “Fascist America, in 10 Easy Steps.” *The Guardian*. 24 April 2007.

⁴³ Naomi Wolf, *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2007), p. 4.

⁴⁴ *The End of America*, p. 7.

*or to protect freedom. They meant for us to do it, you, me, the American who delivers your mail, the one who teaches your kids.*⁴⁵

Setting aside the discussion of governmental checks and balances that *The End of America* must inevitably spark, Wolf's appeal to young people is obvious; she presents them with the idea that change is possible, that, even as individuals, they are not powerless. Search for "Naomi Wolf" on YouTube and several hundred videos spring up. Many are of Wolf's appearances on talk shows, many others, slightly fuzzier in quality, are of her lectures to university students. Comments posted below the videos reveal a lively debate.

It may be true that much of what Wolf writes has been heard before. But that does not negate what she has to say. The issues she writes about — the detrimental effects of the myths surrounding women's appearance, sexuality and role as mothers; our concerns about success, about liberty — are unfortunately still pertinent. And for the young women (and men) coming of age in a world where these "issues" can easily be mistaken for the status quo, it is not a bad thing to have an author whose cooperative, rather than divisive, approach opens their eyes and fires them up. Her occasional excesses do not materially detract from her accomplishments.

⁴⁵ *The End of America*, p. 5.