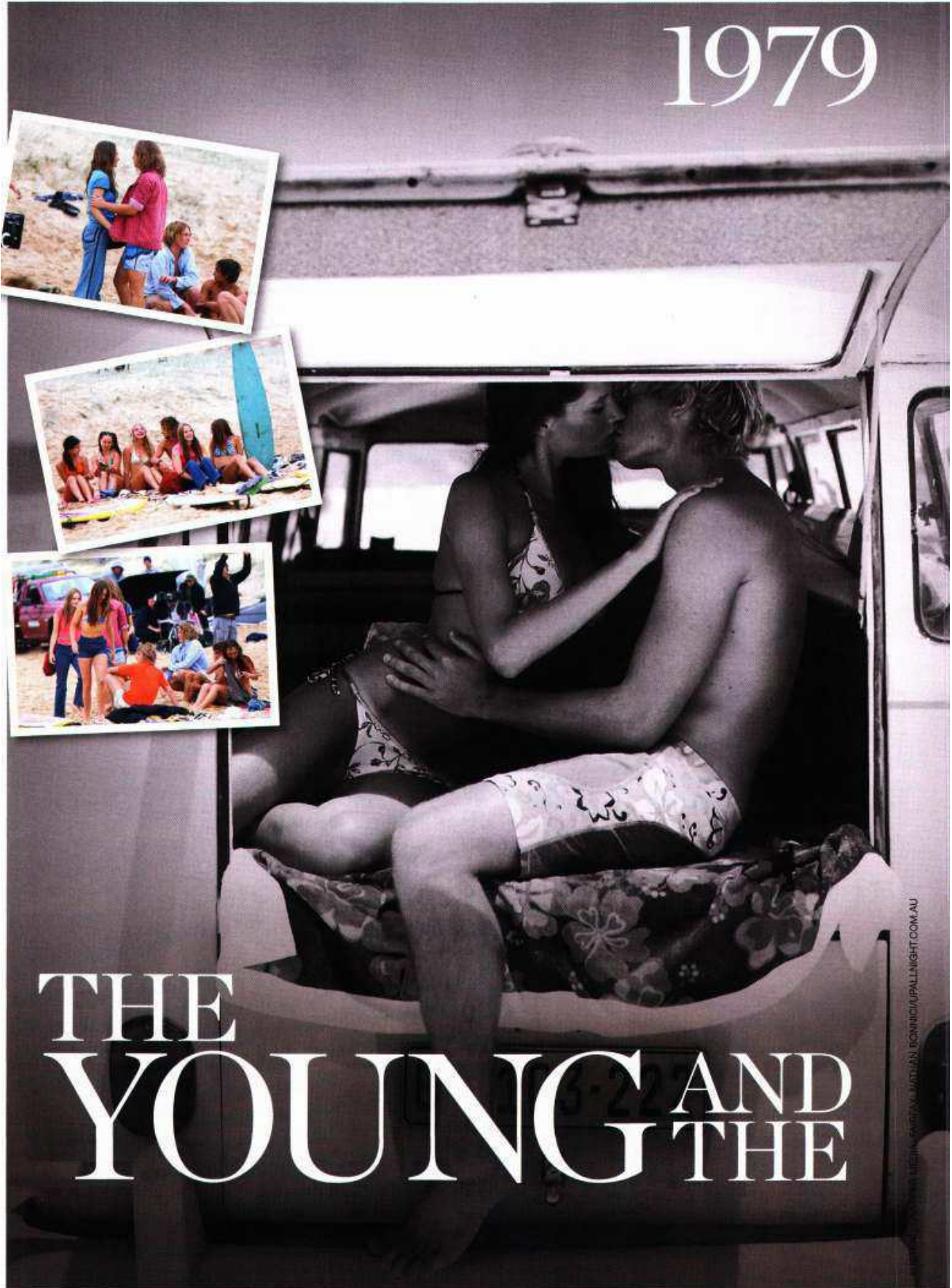




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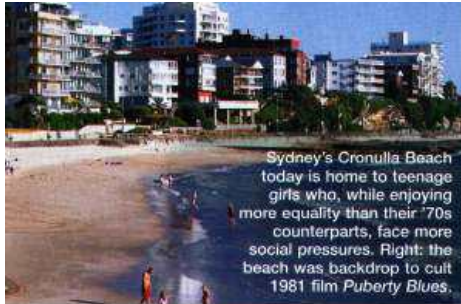
2012



# RECKLESS

In the 1970s, lives of Australian teenage girls were stripped bare in the classic novel *Puberty Blues*, revealing risky sex, drugs and misogyny. With a TV remake of the film hitting the small screen this month, Anneke Ray asks, what's changed?





Sydney's Cronulla Beach today is home to teenage girls who, while enjoying more equality than their '70s counterparts, face more social pressures. Right: the beach was backdrop to cult 1981 film *Puberty Blues*.



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**B**ella\* sat nervously on the couch. *Juno* was on TV. She knew what was about to happen. Josh had placed his hand on her thigh and was edging it up slowly towards her denim skirt. She was trying to act cool, catching a glimpse of his hand out of the corner of her eye, and then, in a split second, her face was pulled towards his and they started kissing. He reached down inside her tight singlet top and grabbed her 15-year-old breasts and then he slowly climbed on top of her.

It was her first time. And it was nice. "I liked him and he was really good to me, he asked me a few times if I was OK and it was just really nice," she says.

Bella, blonde-haired and bright-eyed, had fallen for Josh when they met working at an ice-cream shop in the beachside Sydney suburb of Cronulla. He was one of the "Woolooware Boys", a group of roughed-up footy players from a nearby school. She was new to the area and instantly attracted to him.

It was no surprise that a night of watching movies at his parents' house turned into much more, and soon enough they were hanging out all the time. But, more than a year of "movie nights" later, she found out what the Woolooware Boys were really all about.

The Woolooware Boys (WB) had a tally and a ring. Once they'd slept with a certain number of girls, they'd earn a silver ring and their social status would instantly rise. Bella was just one notch among many. Josh had earned his ring a long time ago. "Some girls would have known, but some girls didn't," she says. "The WBs ruled the roost and I just felt like an idiot. A real idiot."

Brutal sexism and exploitation were the norm in Cronulla - backdrop of the seminal novel *Puberty Blues* - during the 1970s. It was, as the book revealed, a time when boys had to be good surfers and the girls had to be good roots. "The next day you may as well have been a baked dinner that he'd gorged - enjoyed and forgotten," wrote authors Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey.

Bella agrees. But her movie night encounter didn't happen in the '70s. This is Cronulla in 2012.

Sure, the terry towelling shorts and toilet-door scribble may have been replaced with platform heels and Facebook stalking, but for Bella, now 21, some things never change. "They're still always 'for the boys'," she says. "They're all about getting wasted and getting chicks, the majority of them. And so many girls fall for it."

In August, Channel Ten is bringing the cult classic back in a drama series that follows best friends Debbie and

total inertia and deep silence," wrote Greer. "In most of the endless streets of Australian suburbia absolutely nothing is happening except behind the closed doors of teenagers' bedrooms, on the Net and on the phone."

In this 1970s a setting of extreme sexism and abuse - where gang rapes were not only tolerated, but verging on encouraged - and girls fetched Chiko Rolls while the boys surfed, Debbie and Sue experimented with drugs, angled to break out of "dickheadland" into the cool group, and joylessly lost their virginities in a van. This was all in the hope of "going round" with a surfer guy long enough to get the "biggest thing in a girl's life" - a friendship ring.

*Puberty Blues*, so frank and honest it was censored for the 1981 movie of the same name, was a game-changer. "The kids were secretly reading it underneath

## THE BOYS ARE ALL ABOUT GETTING WASTED AND GETTING CHICKS

BELLA, 21

Sue, whose lives were loosely based on those of Lette and Carey, as they fumble their way through their teen years.

More than 30 years after the release of this brutal 1979 account of adolescence, how much has really changed for young Australian women? Have we left behind the casually sexist, conformist, white-bread world they lived in? Or, as writer Germaine Greer argued in a foreword in the novel's 2002 reprint, does the tribal society into which Debbie and Sue are so "painfully and destructively inducted" still rule in suburbia, be it in Cronulla, Copenhagen or California?

"The boredom that so terrorised Debbie and Sue has deepened into a

the bedclothes by torchlight, saying: 'Yes! That's our life.' And the parents were secretly reading it, too, saying: 'No! Is that their lives?'" says Lette.

So what should kids' parents be worrying about today?

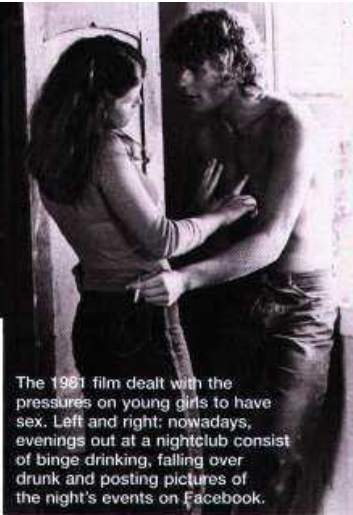
**S**harnie\*, a 14-year-old Shire girl ("The Shire" being the nickname/derogatory name for the southern beachside suburbs of which Cronulla is a part), costs her parents plenty of ►



Nowadays girls are as hard drinking as the guys, such as here in Cronulla on Australia Day in 2010. Left (and right); back in the days of the film *Puberty Blues*, a woman who got drunk at a party risked being labelled a "moll".

PHOTOGRAPHED BY AAP; FAIRFAX; GETTY IMAGES; HEADPRESS; \*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED





The 1981 film dealt with the pressures on young girls to have sex. Left and right: nowadays, evenings out at a nightclub consist of binge drinking, falling over drunk and posting pictures of the night's events on Facebook.

sleep. She drinks, smokes and experiments with weed and ecstasy.

"There are so many good girls, but there are heaps of people that, in Year Six and Seven, are focused on school and sport and family and stuff, and then just lose it in Years Eight and Nine," she explains. "People are always fighting to be top of the ladder. You've gotta know the right people. It's kinda ridiculous."

Sharnie is brunette and beanpole skinny, with a pair of ripped denim hotpants slung low on her hips. Spending hours a week vetting photos on Facebook, drinking herself stupid, sneaking out to the city on school nights and chain-smoking cigarettes outside Westfield Miranda, she could give Debbie a run for her money. But, unlike Debbie, she has big aspirations. She plans to take a gap year in Tibet to teach Buddhist children English. After that she plans to enrol in teaching.

Bella, who was a few years above her at the same school, is proof that there is life after the Woollooware Boys. In between champagne-fuelled nights at Fusion nightclub and Sundays on Cronulla Beach, Bella and her two BFFs, Courtney\* and Brianna\*, work hard, keep fit and look after one another.

Bella is studying to be a journalist. Courtney, 22, is an aspiring lawyer, while Brianna, 21, works for one of Sydney's biggest hospitality companies.

Never before have women been so assertive and all-rounded, argues Dr

horse bareback, having one of the boys "punch you in the guts", or, even worse, telling your father.

Today, however, the enforcement of sexual discrimination and abuse laws has provided some protection for young women. Teen pregnancies in Australia have fallen from 55.5 births per 1000 teenagers in the '70s, to just 9 today.† While fewer than a third of teenagers finished school back then, 81 per cent of women now complete Year 12.† Even in the Shire, often considered a peculiar bubble of white bread, working-class beach babes, women are making the most of their opportunities.

Far from being seen as cooking, cleaning, rooting machines, women who succeed in new realms, whether it be surfing, politics or banking, are often a turn-on for men. "Our self-esteem was lower than Britney Spears's bikini line," says Lette of Shire life in the '70s. "Young women today are more determined to be treated as equals."

More girls are surfing too, yet Nell Schofield, a keen surfer who played Debbie in the *Puberty Blues* movie, says women are still outnumbered 10 to 1.

unwanted sex at some time in their lives‡ and the number is rising.

Whether it's surfies, footy players or college dorms, Lumby says the pack mentality among boys still pervades, complete with the bonding rituals, drinking and sex without meaningful consent. "We've got a long way to go," she states. "We still live with an awful double standard where women are blamed and shamed for having sex, but are then frigid if they don't."

At 3am on the Northies dance-floor, it's easy to see what she means. Brianna is sloshing wine on her cobalt mini dress and wiping strands of hair from her mottled face. Last weekend, Courtney went home, ostensibly for sex, with a random guy. "I was like, 'No I don't think I want to do this', and he was like, 'Nah, come on, it'll be fine' and I just thought he's going to be pissed off that I led him on and probably tell all his friends that I took him home and didn't do anything. So I did it."

The girls straddle a fine line between assertiveness and weakness, finding satisfaction from a variety of things, yet still deriving a sometimes all-consuming self-worth from male attention. For Sharnie, it's no different. Plenty of her friends are having sex with guys they hardly know. Some will perform oral sex on four at one party, she says. "It's because they can. I can't think of any other reason. I guess it makes them feel wanted and they get to boast about it."

Lette admits it was a far more carefree world in the '70s when Debbie was spreading Vaseline between her legs to ease the pain of another panel-van sex attempt. "Young women today have more pressures on them than ever - to be catwalk-beautiful, pretzel-thin, a domestic goddess, with a couple of venture capital portfolios tucked up each sleeve, an earth mother juggling kids and career, and never dropping anything," she points out.

It's a supercharged world of impossible paradoxes for girls like Sharnie: don't be overweight, but don't be anorexic. Be free to be sexual, but don't be a slut (but don't feel ashamed if you are). Get a job, but don't let it get in the way of having fun. Be happy with yourself, but be better than everyone else. ▶

## OUR SELF-ESTEEM WAS LOWER THAN BRITNEY SPEARS'S BIKINI LINE

KATHY LETTE

James Arvanitakis, of the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney. "There are so many positive role models for young women, everything from Lady Gaga to a female prime minister, and I think that's amazing," he says.

When Debbie lost her virginity, she hadn't got her period yet and "didn't even know where my hole was", as she says in *Puberty Blues*. Gangbangs frequently happened on rainy days or when the surf was no good. Unwanted pregnancy was a given. And an abortion was fixed by riding a

Girls who surf, says Sharnie, are "the sporty ones that are a bit on the outer".

While more overt forms of sexism departed with Brandivino (a '70s wine/brandy drink) and flares, the loutish, sex-obsessed male who'll use and abuse a woman is far from an extinct species. Sex may have become safer and most girls know where their "hole" is before they see a hormone-fuelled boy coming towards it, but, as media commentator Catharine Lumby argues, the ethics around sex have remained murky.

More than one third of sexually active young women have experienced

PHOTOGRAPHED BY HEADPRESS; NATHAN BONNICIGLIALLI@COM.AU; NATHAN WONG@PALLI@COM.AU. \*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED. †BIRTHS AUSTRALIA 2010, AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (2011). ‡STATE OF AUSTRALIA'S YOUNG PEOPLE; AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICE FOR YOUTH (2009)





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**THEN & NOW**

**1979 FASHION**

For girls: straight-legged Levi's 501s; thongs; little white shirts covering little black bikinis.

For guys: boardshorts, straight-legged Levi's; blonde hair.

**2012 FASHION**

For girls: short, short dresses; platform heels; denim cut-offs; itsy-bitsy bikinis. For guys: skinny-leg jeans; expensive sneakers; a flat-brim cap.

**1979 VERNACULAR**

Fish-face moll; packin' shit; deadset moll; slack-arsed moll; (the names for the Western Suburbs' kids - Bankies; Dubbos; Towners; Billies).

**2012 VERNACULAR**

Bogan; bitch; DTF (down to fuck); babe; BFF; slut; (the names for the Western Suburbs' kids - Westies).

**1979 ENTERTAINMENT**

The beach; the drive-in cinema; house parties; drinking Brandivino; smoking. The boys ate Chiko Rolls and drank milkshakes. The girls warmed up the towels, while the boys chucked endless re-entries in the surf.

**2012 ENTERTAINMENT**

Music festivals; the beach; coffee shops; house parties; shopping malls; gigs; drinking vodka and beer; taking pills; drinking coffee. The girls: shop; sunbake; hang out. The guys: play footy, surf; drink.



The average age to start drinking alcohol has dropped five years, to 14 years of age, since the 1970s. Right: smoking cigarettes in the school loos was huge back in the '70s. Left: Debbie (left) and Sue in the movie version of *Puberty Blues*.



Parade, they were terrified they'd get a reputation as "molls". But you don't have to spend long cruising Cronulla on a Saturday night, or anywhere for that matter, to see that it's no longer taboo for women to be drunk in public.

While Bella, Brianna and Courtney are face-planting on the Northies dance-floor after downing several bottles of vodka at a pre-party, Sharnie's mates are getting drunk in a park or friend's house. They haven't learnt from their first dalliance with alcohol two years ago, when, bored of watching movies, they hit the wine cellar. One girl was hospitalised for alcohol poisoning. Sharnie was almost killed when she threw herself in front of a car in a dramatic outburst for reasons she "can't remember".

The average age to start drinking has dropped five years in three decades, according to the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, and by the time teens hit 14, one in two have had a drink. The consequences are not pretty: liver cirrhosis is affecting women even earlier, brain development is being impaired and many young people look forward to nothing more than getting smashed on the weekend.

But what, if any, scars will be left on young women?

Debbie and Sue eventually realised the whole scene "sucked". They bought surfboards and took to the waves despite knowing they'd be dropped by their boyfriends and disowned by the gang for being "deadset molls".

Carol Provan, the mayor of Sutherland Shire, has watched many girls grow up in her 40 years in the Shire and she believes those with good families emerge unscathed. "We're made from good stock," she says. "I've seen girls go off the track, but if that grounding is there, that'll get you through."

Parents are negotiating new frontiers with as much insecurity as their teen daughters, but Bella is optimistic.

"I don't regret anything that's happened to me, it's all part of the ride," she says, knocking back a tequila shot and planning her next career move, one night stand, and fitness regimen in the same breath. "At least I know what a movie night means now. It's never just a fucking movie night these days." ■