

The Sick Bastards That Run Facebook – Meta - Instagram

I read ‘Careless People.’ Now I know why Mark Zuckerberg tried to ban the tell-all memoir

However entitled you already thought these people were, they’re more so, according to Sarah Wynn-Williams in her memoir “Careless People.”

By Lily Janiak

The first thing a tell-all needs is juicy things to tell, and Sarah Wynn-Williams at least has those. In her memoir “Careless People,” which gets its name from a line in “The Great Gatsby” describing how Tom and Daisy “let other people clean up the mess they had made,” the former director of global public policy at Facebook has a chapter called “Lean in and Lie Back.” Here, Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg; a young assistant named Sadie whom Sandberg treats as a “little doll” or “lady-in-waiting,” complete with hair-petting and lap-sitting duties; Wynn-Williams and others are in a private jet flying back from Davos, Switzerland. A pouty Sandberg repeatedly tells Wynn-Williams to “come to bed” — the single large bed in the craft — for a sleepover.

Wynn-Williams really doesn’t want to and tries to pawn the job off on Sadie, whose last name isn’t given. Then, in a move that combines “Mean Girls” and a toddler having a bedtime tantrum, Sandberg says, “Sadie’s slept over lots of times and I’m not asking Sadie. I’m asking you.”

“Careless People: A Cautionary Tale of Power, Greed, and Lost Idealism” by Sarah Wynn-Williams. Associated Press

The best revelations in the book peek behind the smooth digital facades of Sandberg and Mark Zuckerberg to the actual people warped by increasingly infinite power, money and isolation — and they’re jaw-dropping enough that on Thursday, March 13, Facebook parent company Meta [won a temporary legal injunction](#) to halt promotion and distribution of the book.

More Information

Careless People: A Cautionary Tale of Power, Greed, and Lost Idealism

By Sarah Wynn-Williams

(Flatiron Books; 400 pages; \$32.99)

However entitled you already thought these overlords were, they’re more so.

Wynn-Williams, who worked at the company from 2011 to 2017, details decisions about unstable regimes or vulnerable youths that lead to preventable deaths, with responses that aren't even blinks. There's the meeting about an organ donation initiative when an oblivious Sandberg asks, "Do you mean to tell me that if my four-year-old was dying and the only thing that would save her was a new kidney, that I couldn't fly to Mexico and get one and put it in my handbag?"

Elsewhere, she praises Filipina nannies as "service-oriented" and expects her Facebook employees — the female ones, naturally — to do unpaid labor promoting her 2013 book "Lean In."

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg speaks during a joint hearing of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington, D.C., in 2018.

Facebook parent company Meta won a temporary legal injunction this week to halt promotion and distribution of the memoir "Careless People," which describes bad behavior by the company's leaders. Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images

In Wynn-Williams' telling, Zuckerberg is so used to his sycophants letting him win at board games that he just thinks he's amazing at them, and when she challenges him for real, his short-circuited brain can only conclude she's cheating. He's the kind of person who believes "something more important might come up" than being present for the birth of his child, or who, when one of his employees gets jailed in a foreign country, doesn't work to free that person but uses the situation to draft a self-aggrandizing Facebook post — one that could put the jailed employee at even more risk.

Such leaders create a workplace culture, in Wynn-Williams' telling, where moms get critical performance reviews when co-workers can hear babies during Zoom meetings or when they're insufficiently responsive on email when in a coma on maternity leave.

"The expectation at Facebook is that mothering is invisible, and the more skilled you are, the more invisible it is," she writes.

"Lean In" author and former Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg speaks at the Fortune Global Forum conference in San Francisco in 2015. A new memoir by a former Facebook employee describes Sandberg and other company leadership as being warped by power, money and isolation.

Liz Hafalia/The Chronicle

It's an office where women with "director" in their title are expected to get on their hands and knees to look for items their male superiors have dropped or get fired after they complain about their boss' sexual harassment.

It's a place of moral turpitude — that enables human rights violations in Asia, that grants China surveillance power over all Facebook users, that targets ads to teens based on their emotional state and is proud of doing so. “We shout this from the rooftops,” an advertising exec tells the author.

“Careless People” author Sarah Wynn-Williams.

Flatiron Books

But if Wynn-Williams has dishy “all” in her tell-all, her telling often muddies it. Her overreliance on sentence fragments makes for a choppy ride through a paragraph. It's like getting continuously kicked off the back of a horse and having to remount.

And not only does she tell instead of show — abstracting instead of supplying the detail that could empower you to draw conclusions yourself — she repeats points as if speaking to a remedial class. Does a single page need to inform us both that Sandberg and others “ruthlessly manage their own labor, extracting as much work out of each day as humanly possible” and that “her ferocious work ethic and endurance are astounding”?

A tell-all about a toxic workplace needs still another ingredient to succeed, and that's a teller who strikes a tricky balance. We seek a narrator far enough outside of the cult to truly see and critique it, but not one so intent on settling scores that we can't trust her. At the same time, she can't oversell her virtues, and this is where Wynn-Williams, who worked in diplomacy before joining Facebook, falters. The subtext of chapter after chapter — whether the subject is China, Myanmar, U.S. elections or teen users' mental health — is: “If only Facebook had listened to Sarah!”

Mark Zuckerberg delivers the keynote address at the Facebook F8 developers conference in San Jose in 2018. A memoir by a former Facebook employee claims the company culture included women being fired if they complain about sexual harassment.

Paul Chinn/The Chronicle

You might object that maybe Wynn-Williams really was the lone person farsighted enough to predict how Facebook could become as powerful as nation-states, guided only by the caprices of some ill-informed, callous billionaires accountable to no one. Even so, it doesn't always make for great reading. The book, instead, reads less as memoir than as cover letter for her next gig.

The closest she gets to sounding sinful like the rest of us is when she admits, “When a woman I work with closely expresses surprise upon learning I have a child, she tells me, ‘Good job!’ — openly admiring of the fact that she'd had no idea — and I feel a flush of pride.”

Yet perhaps this tightrope that exposé authors must walk is just like the impossible demands we place on female corporate managers: Be relatable but also respectable. Be a feminist, but only at the right times. Hype yourself, but don't be pushy.

If the goal of all those unwritten rules is to get more women to become like Zuckerberg and Sandberg, "Careless People" paints the apex of digital power as a lonely, unhappy, dehumanizing place. With any luck, some readers will choose to lean away.

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