

Careless People: A Story of Where I Used to Work by Sarah Wynn-Williams review – a former disciple unfriends Facebook

This account of working life at Mark Zuckerberg’s tech giant organisation describes a ‘diabolical cult’ able to swing elections and profit at the expense of the world’s vulnerable

Shortly after her waters broke, Sarah Wynn-Williams was lying in hospital with her feet

in stirrups, typing a work memo on her laptop between contractions. Facebook’s

director of global public policy needed to send talking points from her recent trip to

oversee the tech giant’s bid to launch operations in Myanmar to her boss [Sheryl](#)

[Sandberg](#). Then she would give birth to her first child.

Wynn-Williams’s husband, a journalist called Tom, was livid but, as men tend to be in labour rooms, impotent. The doctor gently closed her laptop. “Please let me push send,”

whimpered Sarah. "You should be pushing," retorted the doctor with improbable timing. "But not 'send'."

This incident typifies how, in this 400-page memoir of her seven years at [Facebook](#) from 2011 – as it mutated from niche social network to global power able to swing elections, target body-shamed teens with beauty products and monetise millions of humans' hitherto private data – Wynn-Williams had become part of what reads like a diabolical cult run by emotionally stunted men babies, institutionally enabled sexual harassers and hypocritical virtue-signalling narcissists.

The cult vibe of this birthing story is made stronger by Wynn-Williams channelling Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. She quotes Sandberg's injunction to pregnant working women – "Don't leave before you leave" – taking its implication to be that she should work right up to the point that the baby's head emerges into this fallen world. It doesn't occur to her that *Lean In* feminism might serve as a fig leaf covering self-exploitation and soul-depleting workaholism.

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A couple of pages earlier, Wynn-Williams writes like a wide-eyed convert: "It still feels exciting and important to spread this tool around the world and improve people's lives." An evidently clever former New Zealand diplomat, she was ideal fodder to help spread Facebook's secular gospel, as her backstory reveals. After surviving a shark attack as a teenager, she resolved to spend her working life helping humanity. Upon witnessing how the nascent Facebook kept Kiwis connected in the aftermath of the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, she believed that Mark Zuckerberg's company could make a difference – but in a good way – to social bonds, and that she could be part of that utopian project.

Her naive faith reminds me of what Jon Ronson wrote about in [So You've Been Publicly Shamed](#): at their inception both the internet and social media seemed, to some, unalloyed good things. It's instructive for someone like me – who disdains social media and sees in tech giants the lucrative weaponising of hate masquerading as free speech,

and the asphyxiation of democracy by the enabling of post-truth populists – to encounter such cockeyed optimism.

The “tool” Wynn-Williams talks about is not Facebook per se, but Zuckerberg’s cherished internet.org app (which has operated under the name Free Basics since 2015), devised to deliver the internet to connectivity-deprived countries, such as Myanmar, as part of what sounds like a system upgrade of Britain’s oxymoronic imperial mission to civilise black and brown persons.

What internet.org involves for countries that adopt it is a Facebook-controlled monopoly of access to the internet, whereby to get online at all you have to log in to a Facebook account. When the scales fall from Wynn-Williams’s eyes she realises there is nothing morally worthwhile in Zuckerberg’s initiative, nothing empowering to the most deprived of global citizens, but rather his tool involves “delivering a crap version of the internet to two-thirds of the world”.

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§ Mark Zuckerberg: ‘a tech-bro Henry VIII’. Photograph: Christian Sinibaldi

§ But Facebook’s impact in the developing world proves worse than crap. In Myanmar, as

Wynn-Williams recounts at the end of the book, Facebook facilitated the military junta

to [post hate speech](#), thereby fomenting sexual violence and attempted genocide of the

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country's Muslim minority. "Myanmar," she writes with a lapsed believer's rue, "would have been a better place if Facebook had not arrived." And what is true of Myanmar, you can't help but reflect, applies globally.

Before she was disabused, Wynn-Williams fawningly adored Sandberg, as the pair crisscrossed the globe in private jets, bringing the good news of Facebook to foreign leaders. "The tears streaming down her face," Wynn-Williams writes unctuously as she reports on Sandberg's meeting with Shinzo Abe to convince the then Japanese premier to allow politicians to use Facebook in political campaigning, "somehow make her even more impossibly lovely."

She approvingly quotes another *Lean In* message, that you should "bring your authentic self to work". But what that means in Facebook reality becomes clear when, in her first performance review after giving birth, Wynn-Williams is told that co-workers are uneasy that her baby can be heard on business calls. The poor poppets. "Be smart and hire a Filipina nanny," counsels Sandberg. Wynn-Williams does just that, but then something shocking happens. One day, Tom is checking the home camera when he notices a firefighter in their living room: the nanny has locked herself out and the baby inside the flat. But when Wynn-Williams later relates this disturbing event to colleagues, she feels as though she has made a faux pas – distracting them from their noble mission with personal guff. "The expectation of Facebook is that mothering is invisible," she writes. Facebook cannot tolerate too much authenticity.

The book's title comes from F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness." For Wynn-Williams, Zuckerberg's "move fast and break things" philosophy is just such entitled carelessness, leaving Facebook staff and their customers to sweep up the wreckage. But the Facebook she describes is not run by careless people, not really, but rather by wittingly amoral ones who use technical genius and business acumen to profit from human vulnerability. For instance, she claims Facebook – now [Meta](#), which owns Instagram and WhatsApp – identified teenage girls

who had deleted selfies on its platforms, and then supplied the data to companies to target them with ads for putatively tummy-flattening teas or beauty products.

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Sarah Wynn-Williams. Photograph: Sarah Wynn-Williams

Wynn-Williams's shtick, often presenting herself as the only conscience in the room, does wear thin. I tired of reading of how shocked she was at some Facebook policy, while continuing to spread its values worldwide. "I'm astounded at the role money plays in elections in the US," she writes at one point, as the 2016 Trump campaign gears up with political ads and targeted misinformation from which Facebook massively profited. Are you *really* so naive? I wrote in the margin. "I'm also against exporting this value system. But Facebook is effectively bringing this in globally by stealth." And you're part of it! I wrote in the margin. If only she'd taken to heart the critical messages of, say, David Fincher's movie [The Social Network](#) or Dave Eggers's novel [The Circle](#), she might have leaned out earlier.

And yet her memoir is valuable, not just as indictment of the Facebook cult but of bosses' entitled behaviour that will resonate for many. She depicts Zuckerberg as a tech-bro Henry VIII, a thin-skinned angry child whose courtiers let win at the board game Settlers of Catan during flights on his private jet. She charges him with lying to Congress

about the extent of Facebook's compromises to woo China and allow it to operate there, suggesting that his company was developing technology and tools to meet Chinese requirements that would allow it to censor users' content and access their data. He was, she claims, much more in cahoots with Xi Jinping's authoritarian regime than he let on to US senators.

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On another private jet, relates Wynn-Williams, Sandberg imperiously invited her to sleep in the same bed. Wynn-Williams declined, but thereafter worried that she had upset her boss by not yielding to a presumably sexual demand, which she depicts in the book as the ex-Facebook COO's entitled modus operandi with several women subordinates.

And then there's what Joel Kaplan, currently Meta's chief global affairs officer, allegedly did to Wynn-Williams at a boozy corporate shindig in 2017. She claimed that he called her "sultry" and rubbed his body against hers on the dancefloor. This wasn't a one-off incident, she claims: indeed, there was a group at Facebook called Feminist Fight Club, whose members compared notes on such reportedly prevalent cases of sexual harassment by execs. An internal investigation cleared Kaplan of impropriety and soon after Wynn-Williams was fired for making misleading harassment allegations.

Last week, Meta responded to this book, calling it "a mix of out-of-date and previously reported claims about the company and false accusations about our executives". The company has denounced its former employee, claiming that she was not a whistleblower but a disgruntled activist trying to sell books. Most likely she is both.

Wynn-Williams notes that Facebook changed its name to Meta in 2021. "But leopards don't change their spots. The DNA of the company remains the same. And the more power they grab, the less responsible they become." That culture of irresponsibility and carelessness should worry us more than ever, she suggests at the end of the book, as Zuckerberg's Meta is at the forefront of artificial intelligence, a technology even more potentially calamitous than the one he dreamed up in his Harvard dorm a couple of decades ago.

Careless People: A Story of Where I Used to Work by Sarah Wynn-Williams is published by Pan Macmillan (£22). To support the *Guardian* and *Observer* order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply