

KIDS: WHO NEEDS THEM?

WE NOMOS — NOT MOTHERS
— ARE OUT, WE'RE PROUD,
AND WE'RE BUSY MAKING
OUR OWN FRIENDS AND
SUPPORT NETWORKS,
SAYS SALLY HOWARD



When Dr Lucy Worsley, the 38-year-old TV historian and curator, mused last month on her decision not to have children, she noted: "I have become the poster girl for opting out of reproduction." Worsley, who is in a stable relationship with the architect Mark Hines, admitted no inclination to have kids, choosing instead to find much to fill her time and life with, namely, her busy career, hobbies, even squeezing in writing the odd bestselling book (or three). For her, it was a no-brainer: "I have been educated out of the natural reproductive function. I get to spend my time doing things I enjoy. I don't think my life is wasted. It seems to fascinate people."

Hooray for Dr Lucy — for I, too, am childless and proud. For me, it was instinct, of sorts, not to conceive. An instinct that has coalesced into an intellectual decision as I reached my thirties and discovered what made me tick: independence, travel and late-night conversations over good wine, all antithetical to the childed life. I also saw my child-rearing friends struggle: with the practicalities of motherhood; with waning careers; and with a society that didn't value their role. Most poignantly, I'd seen their relationships suffer as they crashed up against the failure of feminism to live up to its promise.

And it seems I'm not alone. After all, 20% of British women now in their forties are childless; according to a report by the Office of National Statistics, we are in the midst of an age of "healthy, married or cohabiting, sexually active females" who, like Worsley, choose not to conceive. And while the new

childless women are statistically more likely to be qualified to degree level than their mothering counterparts (echoing Worsley's "educating out" theory), it's more likely that education is simply a symptom of what is, for women in the West, a remarkable new world order. We are in the sweet spot of human history — post second-wave feminism, post oral contraceptive — where women have control, for the first time, over our reproductive choices.

Yet for such a prominent demographic group, childless women — at least, childless women who are open about their choice not to conceive — have been, so far, absent from view. America (where 37% of women in their thirties will remain childless) has plenty of prominent role models, among them Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice and Jennifer Westfeldt, Jon Hamm's girlfriend and star of the new film *Friends with Kids*, all blazing a trail for unapologetic childlessness by choice. Apart from Helen Mirren, namechecked by Worsley, who do we Brits have?

"Oh God, not bloody Ann Widdecombe," says Helen Green, 35, a self-confessed NoMo ("not mother"). Yes, from NoMos to Panks (professional aunts no kids), all the way through to Gateway Women (women who are childless by circumstance), these acronyms and epithets proliferate across web groups and self-help book covers. Finally, childless — or in the new, neutral lexicon, "child-free" — women are becoming a cultural force. Veronika Boruszko, 42, is the Czech-born, Brighton-based moderator of the UK Childfree Meetup group, which launched in 2009. Married to an American, she was a member of a similar group when they lived in Chicago. "Child-free socials and support groups are huge in America," she says. "There are



CHILD-FREE BY CHOICE
Far left, Dr Lucy Worsley has become a poster girl for child-free women in Britain. From left, Helen Mirren, Condoleezza Rice, Oprah Winfrey and Jennifer Westfeldt are high-profile role models

NoKidding, Childfree by Choice and ChildFree Singles groups in every American city.” But a child-free group Boruszko started in Prague broke up when “we were accused of being child-haters in the Czech press. I received regular death threats”. This does not surprise Melanie Notkin, 43, the founder of Savvy Auntie, an American website for women without children, who says: “Society, as I see it, has momopia. It’s the mom way or the highway, with all child-free women depicted as career nuts who don’t like kids.”

Happily, the UK Childfree Meet-Up, a monthly social convened in London pubs, is a pleasant experience. “After a certain age, we tend to make new adult friends through our kids,” Boruszko says. “Child-free adults don’t have this avenue, so this group aims to compensate. We talk about the implications of being child-free, but we mainly have fun.”

Offering another psychological boost to the child-free is Jody Day, the 47-year-old Brit behind Gateway Women (gateway-women.com). Day launched the support group three years ago after emerging from her own “15-year black tunnel, via divorce at 38, from being childless to child-free”. Day offers one-on-one counselling with those “in the tunnel”, as well as weekend workshops aimed at rekindling NoMo mojos. “As a child-free woman in a mummy-mad culture, it’s easy to get lost,” Day says. “My mission is to help NoMos find their way again”.

It seems many child-free women are now creating informal networks of friends in similar situations, as a protest against the pressures and absurdities of being childless in a pro-natalist British society. “My friends with kids live via my vagina,” says Becks Earle, a 39-year-old corporate high-flyer who has

actively chosen to be child-free. “It gets bloody irritating when they’re changing a nappy with one hand while asking for blow-by-blow reports of your latest conquests.” Kirsten McCorkell, a 42-year-old interior designer and child-free by choice, has a different bugbear. “Because I’ve been married for seven years and am childless, I get this damp sympathy face from women, who assume I’m infertile,” she says. Meanwhile, for Emma Jenkins, 44, a small business consultant in a long-term relationship, being child-free means some hard friendship decisions. “It’s brutal, but if anyone judges me for being childless, I just drop them. The tragedy of being childless is that you shed mates with kids, although some come back to you when the kids are grown up.”

Back at the Meetup, we’re still on the topic of our top 10 child-free role models — women on the record as being happily childless, out there carving out a new cultural template for the child-free woman. Since Mirren, we’ve clocked up the novelist Jane Fallon and Janet Street Porter. “Of course, we’re lucky that we have the choice,” Jenkins says. “You know, in her final days, my grandmother congratulated me on being childless. She said she’d never have had kids if she’d been born to our generation, post-feminism, post-pill. ‘Get out there and enjoy it for all of us who couldn’t,’ she said.”

It’s a sentiment Worsley echoes — and one she’s proud to stick by. “I am happy to stand up and be counted,” she says. “I had other priorities for what I wanted to do with my time. I couldn’t do all the exciting things I do if I had children, and I feel I have made that decision. It is a countercultural thing to do — and I enjoy being part of a beleaguered minority.”

A minority? Not for long, if the NoMos have anything to do with it. ●