

What men want in a wife

What makes an ideal wife? Brains, beauty or child-bearing hips? Lisa Pryor asks three men about their search for the perfect partner.

When Jane Austen wrote it was "a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife", she was writing, even then, with irony. Two centuries on, the very term "wife", let alone the idea that a man may be looking for one, seems almost quaint. With the W word comes connotations of aprons, obedience and gossip over the back fence, not to mention unflattering variants like fishwife, housewife and trouble'n'strife.

But while the W word may seem archaic, marriage remains hugely popular. Most men still choose to marry, even though they do so later in life than previous generations. So what do they look for when they choose a wife? A best friend, a sexpot, a maternal figure or a trophy?

Do their true desires bear any resemblance to what women think men want? The answers are as varied as men themselves.

Nicholas Atgemis, Nightclub impresario

In a small journal, bound in black calfskin, Nicholas Atgemis keeps a list. A list of the 28 things he seeks in a woman. From "integrity", "charm" and "sophistication" to "perspective", "good skin" and "enthusiasm". Further down the list comes "culinary skills", "musical appreciation" and, finally, "heart".

"Every woman I go to bed with, ever, I'm thinking whether she'd make a good wife," says the 31-year-old. He has other thoughts on his ideal wife, beyond the list he keeps in his "make-it-happen book". For a start, there is the matter of how she balances work and family. Atgemis is fine with the idea of a wife with a career, so long as she stays home with the children for the first seven years or so; years he considers crucial to a child's development. He cites the example of a woman he knows with a "fabulous internet jewellery business she runs from home", which allows her to look after her children and maintain a career. "A woman's financial independence is emasculating - for me - but you have to deal with it."

Physical appearance is a factor, too, though less important to Atgemis than it once was. "It used to be all about beauty when I was younger," he says.

"It was, 'I want her to be hot; I want all my friends to want her.'" He would also prefer a girl who is not from his hometown - a previous girlfriend was Danish and his current girlfriend is Mexican. "I have for years not wanted a Sydney-based girl because, unfortunately, I find Sydney like a village," says Atgemis. "Reputation follows you around." He doesn't want to walk into a party with his girlfriend, knowing five of his friends have already dated her. And he doesn't want the kind of girl who is always nattering away to old school friends about ancient teenage gossip. "I want something a bit exotic, something no one else has got their hands on."

Oh, yes, and one more thing - "Ball breaking must be kept to a minimum," he says. "I mean, really, if a guy does everything you want, he shows you affection,

why break his balls?"

And they say women are picky. Atgemis is still to marry despite myriad opportunities to meet women, especially given his background as the co-owner of a Sydney nightclub called Shh, which is known for its parade of attractive young socialites who can only get in by tottering up a dirty laneway strewn with garbage and divulging a secret code. And this is despite, by his own admission, having had three girlfriends who qualified as marriage material. "My expectations have been crushed every time because women do not conform to your ideas of what is perfect and, for a lot of guys, it is a search for perfection," he says.

Atgemis recalls some advice his uncle gave him: "You're walking through a forest looking for a straight stick, but you're going to come through the other side empty-handed because there is no such thing as a straight stick." And his mother recently urged him to get on with it, prodding him about marriage. She pointed to his hairline, then his waist, before telling him, "You're going off. Find a wife, quickly."

When Atgemis thinks about the topic some more, he postulates that maybe, deep down, what he is after is someone not so different from his mother - a modern version of her, someone "patient, caring, dutiful". His Greek-Australian parents enjoy a marriage that is successful and harmonious, and he wonders whether this might make it harder for him to find a mate, harder to settle for something less. "Sometimes the worst thing that can happen is having successful role models in your family for relationships, because what you find doesn't match up, and you feel disillusioned," he says.

Back then, husbands and wives did everything together, Atgemis says, and there were no boundaries the way there are today, with young men and women advised to maintain their independence and separate sets of friends; with people "always letting you know this relationship will not necessarily last forever. We're always having it banged into us to have a Plan B."

"The Greeks of that generation generally stuck it out, whereas some of my friends have this philosophy: would you rather one woman for 60 years or three women for 20 years apiece?" says Atgemis.

Justin Moffatt, Anglican minister

Justin Moffatt did not consult a list when looking for a wife. "One feels their way through this," he says. "It's very intuitive, how you see people, which is true of all friendships." He points out that people don't ask, "What do I want in a friend?" So why should they ask this question of a spouse?

Laurel, his wife of nine years, ticks



many boxes - she is "beautiful, smart like crazy, she has a PhD in Shakespeare - she did her thesis on the idea of nothing in Shakespeare - she's competent, she's a great mother", but to him these are bonuses. "It is very possible to be shallow and myopic. It is possible to say, 'Here are my five things that I want in a wife and she meets four of them so I'll get married to her' and not understand the promise you are making."

This 39-year-old Anglican minister believes the individual love story is part of a larger narrative of love in the world. And it was an understanding of that larger narrative, the Christian narrative, which he sought more than anything in a wife. "Because

I believe in a God who loves, is faithful and is graceful, I want to marry someone who knows that story of love, faithfulness and grace."

After spending several years in Manhattan with his wife and three young children, Moffatt, 39, is now a senior minister within the Anglican Church. One of his jobs is to counsel young couples before they marry. "The first thing I say to couples when they walk in the door is, 'Look, the wedding dress might rip, Aunt Beryl might cause a storm, your groomsmen might say silly things at the reception, the cars might not arrive, but there is one thing that is important, and that is the vows.'"

Moffatt explains that along with the two individuals involved, the wedding itself, and the vows made, is the third dynamic in a marriage. He cites Kevin Rudd's hero, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote of marriage as "a status, an office", and something more than personal. "It is not your love that sustains the marriage," Bonhoeffer wrote to a couple about to wed, "but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love."

"If it's just you and your spouse what happens when you hit a rough spot?," says Moffatt. "Instead of 'till death do us

part', it becomes 'as long as our love shall last.'"

But what about the more practical concerns when seeking a wife - the daily business of dividing work and family? The Bible is "mercifully scant on detail", says Moffatt. "It doesn't say who takes out the garbage, who fills the car up and who makes dinner, so every couple has to work out what it means."

Luke Keller, Construction manager

For Luke Keller, 28, the ideal marriage is like a sports team with two players: the husband fields the ball to his wife, and she scores a goal. Then the roles are reversed. "Any good relationship is like teamwork," he says. "When you're up, you bring your partner up. When you're down, your partner brings you up."

Keller sees his future wife as a low-maintenance type who just gets on with things. Not too much of a princess; someone pragmatic and unafraid of getting their hands dirty - unlike a girlfriend he had, who wouldn't stay the night without her make-up.

"I think a lot of girls get caught up in trying to be perfect," he says. "Wearing the right things, saying the right things. The bottom line is, if you want to spend the rest of your time with them, you don't want someone who's always on guard - you want someone you can relax around."

Already a senior manager for a mining and construction business, Keller is happy to be with a woman who is similarly ambitious, or at the very least, a woman who has "some form of direction, some kind of career or interest". From what he sees from the men around him, this is not a universal desire. "I know guys who are very chauvinistic, who wouldn't want their wives to work. I know other guys who are New Age, who want to be a house husband."

Sex is significant, too. "Sexual compatibility is one of the most important things from a guy's perspective. If you've got a girl with a higher or lower libido than yourself, it creates all kinds of friction," he says.

"For some guys especially, sex is how they share their intimacy. If they don't get that, it's no good."

Though many of his friends are tying the knot, Keller is in no rush. He attributes this to modern religious freedom, the choices available to men his age - "being in your late 20s on a reasonable salary, you've got a lot of choice; it's out of control" - and the reticence that comes from having divorced parents. He notices a similar pattern among friends. "All the ones who came from happy marriages, they pretty much married young, while the ones who come from divorced families don't want to rush into it."

Keller sees marriage as something that will happen in a few years time, when he is ready to think about a family. In contemplating whether someone is marrying material, he is also contemplating whether they are mothering material. "The older you get, the more important it is with kids," he says. "You start thinking what would your kids look like, whether they'd take after you or her, and what kind of a mother the woman would be."

And as he gets older, Keller is thinking less about looks. But attractiveness still plays a role, as can be seen from the way he describes his current girlfriend. "Just for the record, she's a glamour, all right."

