

PERSONS OF INTEREST

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TRAD WIFE

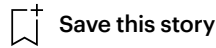
Alena Kate Pettitt helped lead an online movement promoting domesticity. Now she says, "It's become its own monster."

By Sophie Elmhirst

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Illustration by Nicholas Konrad / The New Yorker; Source photographs from Getty



The prize of Alena Kate Pettitt’s childhood Barbie collection, the item that she still searches for fruitlessly on eBay, was a dining table. Press a button, and—magic!—a turkey dinner swung around from underneath and landed on top. It is a totemic image of homemaking: a hearty home-cooked meal, served by an immaculate, apron-wearing hostess—an actual doll. “It was the best thing *ever*,” Pettitt said, of Barbie’s turkey, over coffee in her home town of Cheltenham, England. “I wish I still had it.”

Pettitt, who is thirty-eight, is a self-proclaimed “trad wife,” one of the earliest and best known in a burgeoning movement of women who spend their days taking care of their homes and families and documenting their activities on social media. Her fame was assured in 2020, when, on a BBC News video, she discussed her ambition to serve her husband, but her desire long predated that moment. After all, the contours of a traditional marriage, in which the man goes out to work while the woman stays home to cook, care, and clean, were shaped many decades ago. Pettitt, like a lot of the trad wives who fill various social-media platforms with photographs of outdoor clotheslines, has an intense nostalgia for the postwar period. “If you put me in a time machine back to the fifties, I’d have it made,” she told me. “Everyone wouldn’t be asking me when I’m going back to work.” Her point ran a little deeper: that era, she believed, was the last time the housewife was celebrated. She appeared in ads. Her domestic rituals inspired magazines. Whether she was happy was not for Pettitt to say, but “at least she was seen.”

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For readers of [Betty Friedan](#) or viewers of “[Mad Men](#),” the idea that the interior life of a mid-twentieth-century housewife could be anything but tormented is strange, but the trad wives want to reclaim the role and show it as a source of pride and happiness. Though

many trad wives voice suspicions of contemporary feminism, there is no singular model. The current queen is Hannah Neeleman, a homesteading mother of eight, who milks cows, bakes, dances, and takes part in beauty pageants, to the delight and incomprehension of her followers. Some, like the American Estee Williams, a quasi-Marilyn Monroe with white-blond waves and a cinched waist, advocate marital subservience. Others, like the Australian Jasmine Dinis, sell Biblical womanhood affirmations. One, the Canadian Gwen Swinarton, has pivoted from making porn videos for OnlyFans and A.S.M.R. content for YouTube to the trad-wife space. (In a recent TikTok testimony, she credited the transition to God.) Then there are more openly political, like Abby Roth, who splices mothering tips with anti-abortion content.

Pettitt, the O.G., is a rare Brit and a purist. She never had commercial aspirations for her content. Instead, she is more the movement's house intellectual: she wrote two books with no intention of making money, she told me, but to put something out in the world for girls like her. (The books, which her husband, Carl, helped her to self-publish, "certainly don't pay the mortgage," she said, but cover the odd grocery bill.) In the books, she set out her Christian beliefs and principles of womanhood long before the new generation of trad wives began filming themselves saucily kneading sourdough. Pettitt has watched the rise of the younger trad wives with fascination, then alarm. "It's become an aesthetic, and then it's become politicized," she said, of the movement in its new era. "And then it's become its own monster."



The first setting for Pettitt's trad-wifery was, inevitably, her Barbie Dreamhouse. On a damp autumn day in Cheltenham, a town with a nineteenth-century tree-lined promenade once patrolled by parasol-wielding women wearing dresses and bonnets, Pettitt explained that her parents separated when she was four years old, and, through years of weekend excursions to toy shops with her father, she collected almost the entire Barbie ecosystem. (She had yet to see the movie, concerned that it was overly political and would make her think differently about one of her idols.)

In the Dreamhouse, Pettitt could enact her ideal home life. After her parents' separation, Pettitt and her mother often spent their evenings at her grandparents' house, in Feltham, on the outskirts of London. Her grandparents cooked and gardened, and the family gathered to eat at a round table pooled in warm light from a pendant lamp. Pettitt adored it. But once dinner was over Pettitt and her mother would return to their flat, where, in her memory, it was always cold and dark. No one had been there all day. Pettitt's mother, Winnie Rushby, worked full time and would then have to start on the laundry, a vision of obligated stress. "I think that made her realize the path she wanted to go down," Rushby told me. "She knew that to have to do both is really, really hard." For Pettitt, the lesson was stark. "I'd see that and think, No, I want family," she said. "I want to be *in my home*."

In late-nineties suburbia, Pettitt struggled to find a model for this future life. The culture at the time was high on girl power, the Spice Girls, Britney Spears, and teen magazines offering advice on how to give the perfect blow job. Pettitt—an introverted "good girl"—felt adrift. "There wasn't a shy, bookish Spice Girl," she said. Then, when she was twelve, she suffered a double loss: her father moved abroad, and her mother threw out all her Barbies. Not long afterward, her mother found a new partner, and Rushby and Pettitt moved into his large country house, with his teen-age kids. Pettitt's new stepsiblings liked to party. To fit in, she played along, feeling deeply insecure. After leaving school (she attended college but did not graduate), Pettitt did what she felt was expected of her in the early two-thousands and Carrie Bradshawed her way to the city, where she got a media job, drank heavily, and had casual sex.

In secret, Pettitt began researching the life she actually wanted. She ordered Debrett's book for girls. Debrett's—an eighteenth-century British publishing outfit specializing in society etiquette—was associated with the aristocracy and reflected a country both riven by and obsessed with its own class system. There was no family that Pettitt looked up to more than the Royal Family, which made Debrett's the most reliable guide for her aspirations. But even Debrett's seemed to be infected by the times: one of its tips for girls was how to behave in the aftermath of a one-night stand. "I was, like, *What?*" Pettitt said. "Surely this is what the Queen reads!"

Pettitt had something else in mind: a life she'd seen in TV shows like "Bewitched." ("Yes, she was a witch," Pettitt acknowledged, "but she was just in her home.") Or on "The Darling Buds of May," a British series that charted the sunlit, rural lives of the Larkin family. ("Who wouldn't want to live on a Kentish farm in the nineteen-fifties?") Her vision was fictional, built on the uncertain foundations of nostalgia. If this wholesome life did not or perhaps had never existed, she would simply have to forge it for herself.



To stay at home—that is, to not work—requires a certain privilege. After all, someone has to pay the bills. By her early twenties, Pettitt had left London, which she'd found lonely and miserable, to work in a marketing job in Cheltenham, which she'd also found lonely and miserable. Her then boyfriend, Carl (who declined to be interviewed), wrote her resignation letter for her.

Pettitt began sharing her experiences of being a stay-at-home girlfriend on a late-two-thousands blog called Mrs Stepford. “Nothing thought-provoking,” she recalled. “It was more, ‘I’ve figured out the nicest way to fold a towel.’” But she felt embarrassed not to be working. She was worried about being financially reliant on Carl, because, as she put it to me in an e-mail, “we are told NEVER to do that.” After a few months, she took another job and then became pregnant. She and Carl sat down and thrashed it out. “What do you want?” Carl asked. Pettitt said she wanted to stay at home with the baby. Carl said this was what he wanted, too. “And we were, like, ‘Oh, glad we finally communicated!’”

When their child was a year old, they moved out to a suburb of Cheltenham, where they could afford more space and grow a garden, and Pettitt could make the Dreamhouse a reality: a round table, warm light, home-cooked food. But, like many new mothers, she felt isolated, still wrestling with the insecurity that had beset her since her teens. At a playgroup one day, a woman, who Pettitt said seemed to have light emanating from her body, approached her and asked her to tea. The woman invited her to join her church.

Eighteen months later, Pettitt was baptized in a modern Pentecostal outfit, where the services were relaxed and progressive, led by song. During the baptism prayers, she recalled, she felt her body fill with a honey-like substance packed with thousands of words. It was a sign: she had to write a book. She worked while her son was at preschool, the words pouring onto the page. In 2016, Pettitt published what turned out to be something between a guidebook to traditional womanhood and a memoir of self-transformation through faith. Pettitt called the book “Ladies Like Us.”

If the trad-wife community's sacred text is the Bible, "Ladies Like Us" is surely high on the list of further reading. The Book of Proverbs, Chapter 31, sets out some fundamentals, including rising in the dark, fearing the Lord, having strong arms, and working with flax. This is the homesteading strand of trad-wifedom; "Ladies Like Us" is more concerned with ideals of femininity. In a chapter titled "Find a Mentor," Pettitt lists her own: Jacqueline Kennedy, Audrey Hepburn, Jane Austen, Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey, and "my favourite of all, Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge." Pettitt loved Catherine, now the Princess of Wales, for her style, the "conservative yet flattering knee length dresses," and her ability to handle the pressure of her role as "a commoner done good." She seemed to represent one of Pettitt's messages—that anyone can become a lady, if they learn the right skills. "There is nothing wrong with the dream you had as a six-year-old," she wrote, "wanting to be wooed, to wear girlish and feminine things, marry your true love, bake pies, raise babies and live happily ever after."

A Christian publisher was keen to put out the book, but Pettitt decided that, with Carl's help, she would do it herself. Branding was required. Pettitt, deploying her marketing nous, came up with the notion of the Darling Academy, a kind of online "finishing school" for traditional young women. She never offered classes, but she created a Web site, where she posted long, instructive articles: "How to be beautiful"; "Why nice girls will always finish first"; "Ladylike ways to deal with sneezes and sniffles."

Pettitt's next book, "English Etiquette," followed in 2019. The idea was to rescue the idea of etiquette from the clutches of snobbery—to make it less about social climbing and more about kindness. The instructional tone continued: the book included advice on public conduct, entertaining, and modest clothing, and a list of the precise items required in a man's wardrobe, including dress shirts and oxford shoes.

In a section on obeying the head of the household, Pettitt set out her position clearly. Marriage might be a partnership, but "there will always be one top dog," and, in a traditional English family, that job is occupied by the father. The husband pays the bills and

supports the family in “strength and defence,” making him the head of the household. The wife supports his decisions, assuming they are made fairly. When I asked her to expand the point, Pettitt used the analogy of a company: “It’s basically like trusting the Finance Manager to help run your business,” she told me, in an e-mail.

Her output, enhanced by a dogged Instagram effort, caught the attention of the press. In early 2020, a BBC film crew arrived at Pettitt’s house and showed her ironing Carl’s shirts on a floral-covered board, then standing in her kitchen, decorated with British-flag bunting, while explaining how the couple split the roles in their marriage. Multiple newspapers picked up the story, and a week later Pettitt appeared on “This Morning,” a popular U.K. breakfast show, where the female host, Holly Willoughby, looked aghast as Pettitt revealed that she would have to consult her husband before buying a sofa.

Pettitt didn’t use the term “trad wife,” but it didn’t take long for others to link her to what was, at this point, still a niche social-media meme. Her pronouncements, on marriage especially, provoked outrage among women, including newspaper columnists and viewers who waded online to air their responses. (It’s “like a frilly version of fascism,” one YouTube commenter said.) In the press, some made the link between the American trad wives and the alt-right or even white supremacists, who, Hadley Freeman wrote in the *Guardian*, “are extremely down with the message that white women should submit to their husband and focus on making as many white babies as possible.”

At the Darling Academy, Pettitt wrote of a growing “apron-clad army,” fighting back against the haters. “I am part of a community of women who are from a vast array of ethnicities, cultures, and faith beliefs—and we all have a good laugh at this nonsense,” she said. “It isn’t racist or overtly conservative to want to be a good housewife and mother, it’s just common sense!” To the press, in which she was now appearing on a regular basis, she issued a broadside: “So long as you, the mainstream media, continue to try and cancel traditionalism, and the at-home role of the wife and mother—you’ll see me in the opposite corner ready to fight for it.”

Declare war and you’ll soon discover enemies. Pettitt was met with dark looks in supermarkets. Messages on social media questioned her nonworking credentials, given that she appeared to have written two books. Most of all, there was an outpouring of bewildered fury from women who believed her promotion of marital submission undid much of the feminist work that had been accomplished during the past half century. But, amid the trolls, Pettitt told me, she began to receive what she called “War and Peace” e-mails, epic in length, from women who felt seen: their secret domestic desires were finally voiced. Pettitt

realized that she was no longer alone: other women felt as she did. She consulted her husband, who told her she had to carry on.

Like any leader, Pettitt now had a public image to maintain: a stream of podcasts and radio shows on which to appear; insatiable social-media platforms to fill with content. It was obvious what worked. When she wore jeans and a T-shirt on Instagram, the reaction was muted. When she appeared as “an idealistic, pretty, wrapped-up-in-a-bow housewife, the likes would go through the roof.” Pettitt would respond with flawless algorithmic logic and post another pretty picture. “And so it goes.”

Feed the algorithm or die. Any ambitious social-media user knows this (and if they don't they can buy Jasmine Dinis's guide, “The Road to 30K: A Stay-at-Home Mom's Ultimate Guide to Growing Your Instagram,” for \$14.99). Pettitt did her hair. She wore the dresses. Soon, she was living the merciless existence of a full-time influencer, without the income. Her family often found themselves unable to eat the homemade banana bread until she had captured it adequately for her feed.

Swept up in the quest for likes, Pettitt lost perspective, until e-mails of a different kind started to arrive in the wake of the early media interest. Women who were goths, gay, overweight, or disabled wrote to her saying that they also loved being homemakers but felt they didn't fit the brand. Pettitt was mortified: “I was, like, ‘Oh, my goodness, it's not about what you *look* like. It's about your life style and how you are happiest and how you serve your family.’ ”

The tone turned, too. By 2022, Pettitt was aware of a growing number of self-proclaimed online trad wives. In some ways, she found the expansion exciting: trad wife was a hashtag, a trend, a topic of conversation. But the new generation of trad wives appeared to be getting “younger and younger, and more polished than realistic.” She also noticed “a shift in the movement from being something that the community talked about intelligently, to having it hijacked by others for ‘notoriety’ or fame.” The movement appeared to be turning into something between a money-making exercise and an amped-up, kink version of

cottagecore with political and religious overtones. Hannah Neeleman (who sells multiple products, including subscription meat boxes, sourdough kits, and three bags of farm flour for thirty-nine dollars) now has nearly nine million followers on Instagram and close to seven million on TikTok, and has been described as a new Kardashian.

One of the most prominent of the newer crop, the twenty-six-year-old Estee Williams, started making content in 2022; her TikToks on hair curling and Christian veiling soon reached hundreds of thousands of viewers. “She went off like an explosion, that one,” Pettitt said. Williams, in turn, remembered Pettitt the way you might recall a favorite but outmoded pop star from your teens: “I used to follow her—I thought she was *great*,” she told me on the phone, from her home in Virginia. “So classy, so sweet.”

When Williams started posting, she thought of her own offering as life-style content, not a contribution to a cause. She’d liked performing as a kid, and it felt like a natural step to film herself modelling aprons. But, in early 2023, as more women started responding to her posts, she changed her view. “I *do* believe it’s more like a movement, in the sense that this is gaining a lot of traction,” she said. After posting a video about being financially dependent on her husband, she received an outpouring of messages, some vicious but many supportive: “I was, like, ‘Oh, there’s a *community*.’”

Both Pettitt and Williams maintain that their intentions were never political. “I would not say I go into politics at *all* on my channel,” Williams told me. She knew what people said—that trad-wife content often appeared to be a hair’s breadth away from white-supremacy culture. “I do not stand for that, and I do not tolerate that,” she said.

Some of the newer trad wives are more openly political, even if they prefer not to admit it. One of Abby Roth’s most popular videos from 2020 is “Conservative women: it’s our time,” which contains the exhortation, “Let’s take the culture back.” Now she has two children, and her content is more focussed on motherhood and a traditional life style. “I’ve always felt that the fight for culture is more important than a direct focus on politics,” Roth wrote in an e-mail. But, when Roth posts skeptical TikToks about “the problem with Barbieland” or about women who say they don’t like cooking, she is making political statements. As the historian Kathleen Belew put it to me: “At bottom, trad-wife culture has implicitly or explicitly in it a distrust of the modern social order.”

Scroll down from Roth’s Instagram profile to the automated suggestions for other accounts you might like to follow, and you may find her brother, the conservative commentator Ben Shapiro; Russell Brand; Breitbart; and Turning Point USA. It didn’t take long after looking at Estee Williams’s profile—a pipeline of three clicks—to find racist and homophobic

memes on more niche accounts. It's not the trad wife's fault that Instagram pushes her followers to more extreme or nakedly political accounts. But, Belew pointed out, "were I to be saying, 'I'm not involved in any kind of racist project,' I think I would at least be concerned by what they click on after they click on my content."

The association with such content, whether by accident or design, is hard to escape. Ever since Pettitt's first BBC interview, in 2020, she found herself having to convince radio hosts that she is neither homophobic nor racist. She became "very stressed about communicating quite strongly with news outlets" that she was not associated with the alt-right. More generally, she felt such discussions distracted from her point: "I'm there to talk about my role in the home and my marriage dynamic, not whether I'm anti-vax or pro-vax or who I vote for."

At the core of Pettitt's frustration seemed to lie a belief that her values were apolitical. And yet politics exist in any space where there is more than one person, especially if those people share duties and money. As the author Phyllis Rose put it in her introduction to "Parallel Lives," an account of five Victorian marriages, marriage is "the primary political experience in which most of us engage as adults." Never mind your views on reproductive rights or financial independence: being a wife of any kind is a political act.

Last year, Pettitt made the most radical decision possible for anyone who has constructed a personal brand based on visual cues. She left Instagram. The trad-wife movement, she felt, had lost its way, moved on to the fresh pasture of TikTok, and become a superficial, fetishized farce that had left her defending its supposed core values. The media circus had made her unwell. Not psychologically, she insisted—there were "never any tears," as if tears might undermine her postwar stoicism—but there was a deep sense of disillusionment. The movement, *her* movement, had been hijacked by extremists and grifters.

Her departure didn't appear to dampen the energies of the newer trad wives. On TikTok, Gwen Swinarton recently wondered if making sourdough could cure mental-health

problems. Estee Williams questioned whether women should go to college. Jasmine Dinis pointed her followers to an Amazon storefront showcasing her favorite baking accessories and vacuum cleaner. (She'll receive a commission if you buy one.) Young women continued to follow their deftly curated social-media fantasy, lured, perhaps, by the hustle of the anti-hustle, the opt-out from job dissatisfaction and economic insecurity, or tempted by the promise of a single, coherent identity gathered around a distant, simpler time. ("I just found your channel and I'm loving it. I can't wait to be a tradwife one day," one commenter wrote, under an Estee Williams TikTok. "I was a trad wife for a while but then financial issues arose and I couldn't any more," another said.)

When we last met for a walk around Cheltenham, along streets once walked by traditional wives who could neither vote nor own property, Pettitt wondered if her contribution to the movement had been worth it. She wasn't even sure she'd call herself a trad wife anymore, but she knew that the label would stick. In fact, she wished the whole concept could be renamed to "move away from the ridiculousness." "Old-fashioned homemaker," she suggested later over e-mail, or "modern traditional wife." Pettitt and her family were about to move to Australia, but her online identity would follow her wherever she went. "I can't escape this for the rest of my life," she told me, "unless I change my name."

Leaving Instagram had at least reminded her that her personhood was more than a collection of staged photographs. Now, when she looks in the mirror, she sees her actual face rather than a potential image for her feed. She can wear what she likes. Her family can tuck into the banana bread without having to wait for her to find its best angle. Much had changed: she'd even watched "Barbie" and loved it. "I smiled to the point where my face hurt," she said. "I've been begging my husband to see it."

Now, with the upcoming move, who knew what would happen? Her son was growing up, soon to start high school, becoming independent. She might go back to work; she'd always wanted to open a coffee shop. She and Carl could get divorced! I expressed surprise at this notion, given her life's work. "No one knows what the future holds!" she replied by e-mail. "I just choose the path of happiness for my family today and for right now, rather than worrying about the future—and have protected myself financially should death or divorce occur. It's what smart traditional women do." Here, she inserted the winking emoji. "Perhaps that's not really 'trad' at all." ♦

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
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