



Naomi Wolf Makes Much Ado About Nuzzling At Yale

by Rachel Donadio



Naomi Wolf was on the phone on Feb. 24 speaking about her cover story in this week's *New York*, in which she accuses literary scholar Harold Bloom of having placed his "heavy, boneless hand" on her inner thigh when she was an undergraduate student in 1983. In it, she also depicted Yale University as an environment where sexual "encroachment" is tolerated, and where, to this day, students are afraid to come forward about their troubling experiences.

Would she pursue things further?

"Not with Professor Bloom, God bless him," Ms. Wolf said tremulously. "I've done what I need to do for my own conscience's sake The larger issue is the ongoing corruption of the grievance procedures and the silencing of women who have been harassed or assaulted at Yale University. That is what matters."

But in opening up a 20-year-old case of sexual harassment at Yale, Ms. Wolf had also opened up any number of questions: about the university, about Professor Bloom, about her own journalistic techniques, and about the reliability of using older anecdotal memories brought to bear on long-buried circumstances.

The night before, Ms. Wolf had appeared on CNN. So, involuntarily, had Harold Bloom, as CNN cameras had zoomed in on the professor on Friday looking upset as he closed the door of his New Haven home, hunted down in the TV-newsmagazine manner. Mr. Bloom has declined all comment on the matter, but sources close to Mr. Bloom say that Ms. Wolf's charges have upset him and his family.

Ms. Wolf was being interviewed from her home in Manhattan, having expertly microwaved an instant drama, attempting to be a simultaneously avenging and sympathetic angel.

She rationalized the story as a blow on behalf of other sexually encroached Yale women. "This is not fun," she said. "The only reason to go through something like this is my duty to the young women," she continued, adding that young women frequently approach her with stories about being sexually harassed, that she had received an upsetting e-mail that very morning from a Yale student who claimed that her freshman counselor had drugged and raped her, and that the nameless student knew of another young woman who had been raped by a student, who "was let off with a reprimand" and went on to rape again.

Apparently banking on the fact that Ms. Wolf's celebrity—as well as that of her accused sexual "encroacher," literary scholar and Yale professor Harold Bloom—would blind readers

to the fact that neither Ms. Wolf nor *New York* magazine made any attempt to find any other accounts of Mr. Bloom behaving in a sexually inappropriate manner toward a student, the piece converted Mr. Bloom instantly from best-selling Shakespeare authority to sexual predator. *New York* didn't offer Mr. Bloom a conventional journalistic forum in which to respond, such as by having a disinterested reporter report and write the piece; instead, Ms. Wolf acted as a combination memoirist and reporter.

"This is not about my feelings, not about Professor Bloom's feelings, not about President Levin," she said, referring to Yale president Richard Levin.

"*She's* what counts," Ms. Wolf added, speaking about the alleged rape victim.

But the opening of the 20-year-old allegation, and a day-long series of conversations with *The Observer*, seemed to bring up a much more gnarled relationship between professor and student than Ms. Wolf's piece. And in her 1997 memoir *Promiscuities*, Ms. Wolf published another account of that evening that differs in several key points from the *New York* account.

In it, she calls Mr. Bloom "Dr. Johnson," and identifies him as "a visiting philologist from New Zealand who taught Colonial and Post-Colonial literature." In *Promiscuities*, Ms. Wolf writes that he came over for dinner "after he had established that her two roommates were out." In the *New York* account, she writes that the four of them had dinner, and then the roommates left. She then presented him with her poetry manuscript. "The account in *New York* magazine is correct in all its details, because I was not having to protect the identities of anyone," Ms. Wolf said. "Whereas when you write a memoir, the lawyers ask you to change enough detail so that no one will be identified, and that's what was happening in *Promiscuities*."

In *Promiscuities*, she writes that after her professor put his hand on her leg, she went to the sink and vomited out of "disgust and drunkenness." In the *New York* magazine article, she simply "found myself vomiting."

"I am sure that drunkenness and shock were both equally part of it," Ms. Wolf said. "One thing I tried to do was to be completely honest about my own responsibility for the situation" —a somewhat puzzling statement, since she left the drunkenness out of the more factually accurate *New York* piece.

In an earlier draft of the *New York* article, provided to *The Observer* by the magazine on Friday, Ms. Wolf also writes that at that dinner, after Mr. Bloom had put his hand on her thigh, she backed up against the sink, and he "came at me." In the version published on Monday, Ms. Wolf said that Mr. Bloom "moved toward me." Why the change? "I thought it was fairer to Professor Bloom to put it in a more neutral way," Ms. Wolf said. She rebuffed the suggestion that he may have been trying to help her, since she was physically unstable. "I don't know what his intentions were, but I was frightened and I was upset and I wouldn't wish it on anyone," she said.

According to sources close to Mr. Bloom, on at least one occasion Ms. Wolf came to Mr. Bloom's home and left an erotic poem there for him to read. Questioned about that, Ms. Wolf said, "For God's sake. Some of my poetry was racy and erotic. Some was about the Bible and Greek myths. I'm sure that I dropped off manuscripts of my poetry with all the people who were mentoring me with my poetry at the time. I dropped off the same manuscript with John Hollander," another professor and her adviser at the time. (Reached by

The Observer, Mr. Hollander would say only that "I had remembered her as a talented and interesting student. But I have not read any of her subsequent work.")

"I certainly hadn't been there several times," Ms. Wolf said of Mr. Bloom's house. "I didn't know Professor Bloom well. I admired him."

"I was well known with my poetry at Yale; it was what I took most seriously," Ms. Wolf said. But did she drop off the poetry at Mr. Bloom's house? "My memory is, I dropped off a manuscript of poetry at the English department office," Ms. Wolf said. After the encroachment evening? "Yes," she said. "That is my best memory. I can't imagine that I dropped it off at his house. I have to say it was 20 years ago. My memory isn't perfect, but I can't imagine that this is the case."

Sources who knew Ms. Wolf and Mr. Bloom in the early 80's said that Ms. Wolf enjoyed her rapport with the eminent professor.

"I believe we were very cordial," Ms. Wolf said. "I'm sure that I was delighted that he was taking an interest in my work. I was absolutely thrilled. I was a young poet, and he was the most brilliant man at Yale, and I was delighted. I can't stress that enough. No question. I was delighted as a student. I'm sure I told people how happy I was."

And this may just be the crux of the matter. In *Promiscuities*, Ms. Wolf writes that when she gave Mr. Bloom her manuscript of poems, it was "the most important gift I had ever given any man." Between the lines of Ms. Wolf's *New York* article, another picture begins to emerge of an aspiring young poet who now believes that an unfortunate encounter with a professor she revered blocked her path toward a bright future as a writer.

"It's interesting that you mention that," Ms. Wolf said. "I know I never wrote a poem again after that."

Before she could explain why, Ms. Wolf burst into tears and wept for several minutes. "I'm sorry I'm having difficulty with that question," she said, adding that she had to hang up and compose herself. When she called back a few minutes later, she was still weeping.

"Professor Bloom is not a bad guy! He's a good guy in many ways! That's something I tried to make clear in this piece," Ms. Wolf said. "One stupid action shouldn't demonize someone or victimize someone. I'm trying to reframe the debate. I've talked to many people who have glowing things to say about him and whom he'd mentored. I wish I could have been mentored by him."

Throughout the day, Ms. Wolf also called to say that she would have victimized women who had come forward after the article was published contact *The Observer* to tell their stories. One woman, a post-doc, had called to share a story—which it was not possible to corroborate by press time—about a consensual relationship with a lab adviser who, she said, tried to get her fired after she broke up with him.

Despite its headline, "Sex and Silence at Yale," Ms. Wolf's *New York* piece was not about rape, not even about sex: It was a dramatic reenactment of Ms. Wolf's traumatized memory of an encounter she had with Mr. Bloom, whose name will now carry at least a partial smudge from the blood-red background of the *New York* cover line: "She was a Yale senior. He was a star professor ... his unwanted seduction attempt—along with her failure to report it—prompted a crisis of conscience that simmered for 20 years. NAOMI WOLF on

HAROLD BLOOM, sexual misconduct on campus, and why universities like Yale still don't get it."

Ms. Wolf's recollection of the night in 1983 when she and Mr. Bloom allegedly got drunk on Amontillado and he made an invasive pass at her was the first part of the story. She also included five examples of sexual misconduct at Yale in the past 20 years, and she recounted the strange dance between herself and Richard Brodhead, the dean of Yale College, in which Ms. Wolf made various demands while Mr. Brodhead kept "stonewalling" her. She had not wanted to file a lawsuit against Mr. Bloom, she wrote, but just wanted a "confidential meeting" to "make sure that Yale's grievance procedures are now strong."

But according to records that Yale has provided, the dance was even stranger than Ms. Wolf indicated.

On Feb. 10, 10 days before Ms. Wolf accused him of "stonewalling" her, Mr. Brodhead sent Ms. Wolf an e-mail apologizing for not getting back to her sooner: He was about to leave Yale to become president of Duke and had been, he said, "back and forth." Mr. Brodhead explained that it was "simply not possible" for Ms. Wolf "to enter a formal complaint about an allegation of sexual harassment from so many years ago."

In her article, Ms. Wolf quotes a flustered Mr. Brodhead as saying that he cannot reveal how many complaints had been brought to the sexual-harassment grievance committee. Yale, through a spokeswoman, Helaine Klasky, said that conversation took place before the e-mail of Feb. 10. In his e-mail, Mr. Brodhead said that in his 11 years as dean, the grievance committee had heard four cases, which varied in "nature," "gravity" and "the nature of appointment of the instructor the complaint was lodged against." He said that "since unsubstantiated complaints can be regarded as libel and since the complainants typically wish their privacy to be protected, we do not publicize complaints." Students themselves, he said, are free to make the information public.

"I took it that another of your concerns was to learn how robust and accessible our grievance process is, and here I'm happy to supply details," Mr. Brodhead wrote. He described how sexual harassment is discussed at "mandatory meetings during freshman orientation," and that freshman counselors and residential college deans are "well briefed on the issue." He said Yale occasionally distributed leaflets on dining-hall tables "to remind students of the issue and of the available recourse if they seek one," while "peer counselors trained by the Health Service give presentations in the colleges, athletics departments, fraternities and sororities, and they staff confidential hot lines that students are free to call."

Mr. Brodhead said that Yale's Undergraduate Regulations contained materials on the grievance procedure, as did the university's Web site.

Ms. Wolf had been in contact with Yale about its sexual-harassment procedures for months, mainly with the development office, which had asked her to raise money for them. Only in September did she make it clear that she was writing an article on the issue. Over the Jewish High Holy Days, she said, her conscience told her that "for 20 years, I had unethically turned away from my responsibility to younger women at Yale."

In reporting her story, Ms. Wolf didn't attempt to contact other students who might have had similar experiences with Mr. Bloom. In fact, Ms. Wolf said she had planned to use only two examples in her story—hers and one other—until the senior administrative assistant to the

Women's and Gender Studies Department put her in touch with a handful of other women with grievances against other professors.

The Yale spokeswoman, Ms. Klasky, said that the university didn't plan to seek legal recourse over Ms. Wolf's story, nor would it reprimand Mr. Bloom after the 21 years in which Ms. Wolf didn't open her old cask of Amontillado.


Which brings us back to the fateful night. Ms. Wolf's reasons for not filing a formal grievance against Mr. Bloom at the time are understandable: She feared filing a complaint would jeopardize her academic career, and her grades were already slipping; she was afraid to tell her residential dean because she had heard "a rumor" that the dean had torn down a handmade sign that the assistant in the Women's and Gender Studies Department had placed on her office door, alerting passersby "to a 'guilty' ruling from the Grievance Board in the case of a professor harassing a student."

Ms. Wolf also said that she didn't file a complaint because she was "terrified of being in a room alone with Bloom." Yet according to Ms. Klasky, under the grievance procedures in place at Yale since 1979, an accuser would never have to be in the same room as the person she was accusing.

Ms. Wolf told *The Observer* that she couldn't recall whether or not she had ever been alone in the same room with Mr. Bloom again. "I don't remember that," she said.

New York's spokeswoman, Serena Torrey, said via e-mail on Tuesday, "We stand 100% by the story."

You may reach Rachel Donadio via email at: rdonadio@observer.com.

 [back to top](#)

This column ran on page 1 in the 3/1/2004 edition of The New York Observer.



SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEW YORK OBSERVER



HOME PAGE OF THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

COPYRIGHT © 2004
THE NEW YORK OBSERVER
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED