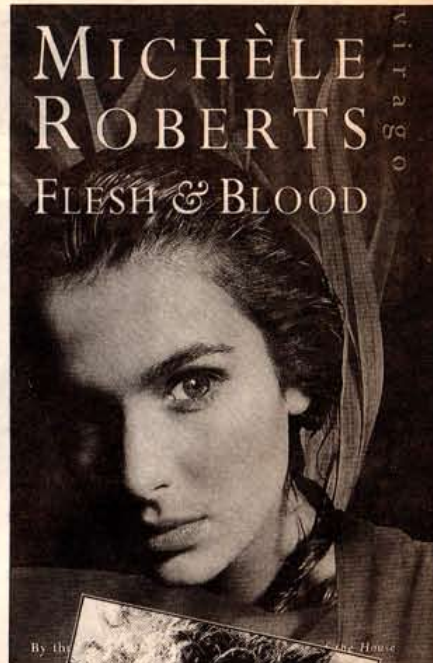


MAEVE HARAN

'An entertaining writer with a delicious lightness of touch'  
SUNDAY TIMES

## IT TAKES TWO

Maeve Haran:  
'You have to pull out what you really feel'Gaia Servadio: a pastiche of the cult classic *The Story of O*Michèle Roberts:  
'Women can be sadists too'

## WOMEN'S OWN EROTICA

More and more feminist writers are producing novels about sex for the mass market. **E Jane Dickson** leafs through the newest fantasy fiction

**T**HE RELATIONSHIP between erotica and feminism has traditionally been an uneasy one. In her 1940s essay, *Eroticism in Women*, Anais Nin wrote: "One point is established, that the erotic writings of men do not satisfy women... It is time we wrote our own... There is a difference in erotic needs, fantasies and attitudes."

It is worth noting that Nin was writing unguardedly erotic fiction in the Forties and Fifties, around the time that Doris Day was promoting the cult of the perpetual virgin. With the advent of the women's movement in the late Sixties, however, Nin's brand of unreasoned iconoclasm was no longer enough. The relationship between erotica and pornography was being called sharply into question.

For proto-feminists, healthy heterosexual sex involved a precisely drawn up power-sharing agreement between men and women, whereas the compulsive nature of eroticism depends to a significant degree on that balance being tipped. Also, having been defined almost exclusively in terms of their sexuality for centuries, the women's movement was eager to break from the idea of woman-as-sex-object.

Such thorny points of dogma have never troubled the bestsellers market in which the "bonk-buster" novels of Jackie Collins, Shirley Conran and Julie Burchill elevated the designer label to an erotic fetish and reduced sex to a social currency.

Sex punctuated such narratives to the point of monotony, but the complicated issues surrounding female sexuality were largely ignored. In the United States, novelists such as Marilyn French and Erica Jong went some way towards popularising sex-

ual politics, but, in Britain, this remained the preserve of a small core of serious writers, often published by the women-only press, Virago — writers such as Michèle Roberts and Margaret Atwood.

Lately, however, as the financial problems currently besetting the publishing industry have shrunk Virago's list, there has been a discernible trend for women with established literary credentials and backgrounds in feminism to write novels about sex for the mass market.

Maureen Freely's *Under The Vul-*

*cania*, published last month by Bloomsbury, is a satire on the workings of erotic fantasy. Freely's heroine finds herself living out a long-forgotten fantasy when she visits a high-tech brothel for women, staffed by pliant young men. The subversion of traditional sex roles between prostitute and client is a mischievous experiment, but a straight swap between female exploitation and male exploitation hardly cuts the ideological mustard. This, it turns out, is precisely why Freely wrote it.

"*Under The Vulcania* was a res-

ponse to my desire to do something wicked," says the American-born journalist and novelist. "I arrived at Harvard just about the time when the women's movement was starting to be a big deal in universities. We set out with these impossible ideals, and we worked very hard for them, but we're just not getting the results we hoped for and there is a whole generation of us who are getting tired of being 'good'."

"A lot of feminist or quasi-feminist writing is very socially responsible, and for years I tried to be obedient to

that. When I wrote about sex in my earlier novels (*Mother's Helper*, *The Life Of The Party* and *The Stork Club*), I was always earnestly examining how the characters 'revealed themselves' in the bedroom.

"This time, I just wanted to have fun. I wanted to do something that didn't read like it had been written for a particular church or anti-church. It was just a jokey idea — to turn the tables on men. But quite a lot of people, of both sexes, haven't seen the joke."

Maeve Haran, whose first best-selling novel *Having It All* (1991) offended some feminists by challenging the *Superwoman* syndrome, recently published her third book *It Takes Two*. Until now, Haran has only ever written about sex as a factor within a whole relationship. "This time," she says, "sex itself is the subject."

Haran is staunchly revisionist in her approach to what she terms "post-feminist sex". "The kind of book I'm writing could not have been written without feminism; it's only because of feminist theories that women can live the way they do now. But there comes a time when you have to trust your own mature reflection; you have to throw off what you've been told to believe and start pulling out what you really feel."

"Now, for the first time, women of my generation [Haran is in her forties] have the necessary blend of theory and experience to reclaim their sexuality on their own terms."

A reappraisal of female sexuality is also at the heart of Yvonne Roberts' thoughtful and witty first novel, *Every Woman Deserves An Adventure*, which is published next month. Cheated on once too often by her insufferably vain husband, Roberts' 44-year-old heroine, Kay, starts out

## WOMEN ON SEX

**Marie de France (12th century):**

"So sweet is the song I hear by night that it brings me great pleasure. I take such delight in it and desire it so much that I can get no sleep at night."

**Aphra Behn (17th century):**

"Abandoned by her pride and shame,  
She does her softest joys dispense  
Offering her virgin innocence  
A victim to love's sacred flame."

(From *The Victim*)

**Colette:**

"He had a frantic desire to touch Mimme's skin, the secret skin that never saw daylight, to pull open her white underclothes as one pulls open the petals of a rose..."

(From *The Innocent Libertine*, 1905)

**Pauline Réage:**

"... She liked the idea of torture, when she underwent it she would have seen the earth go up in fire and smoke to escape it, when it was over she was happy to have

undergone it, and all the happier the crueller and more prolonged it had been."

(From *The Story of O*, 1954)

**Anais Nin:**

"Then John saw that she wanted him, that she was offering herself, but instead of being stirred, he recoiled. 'Martha, oh Martha!' he said, 'what an animal you are, you are truly the daughter of a whore.'"

(From *Delta of Venus*, 1969)

**Michele Roberts:**

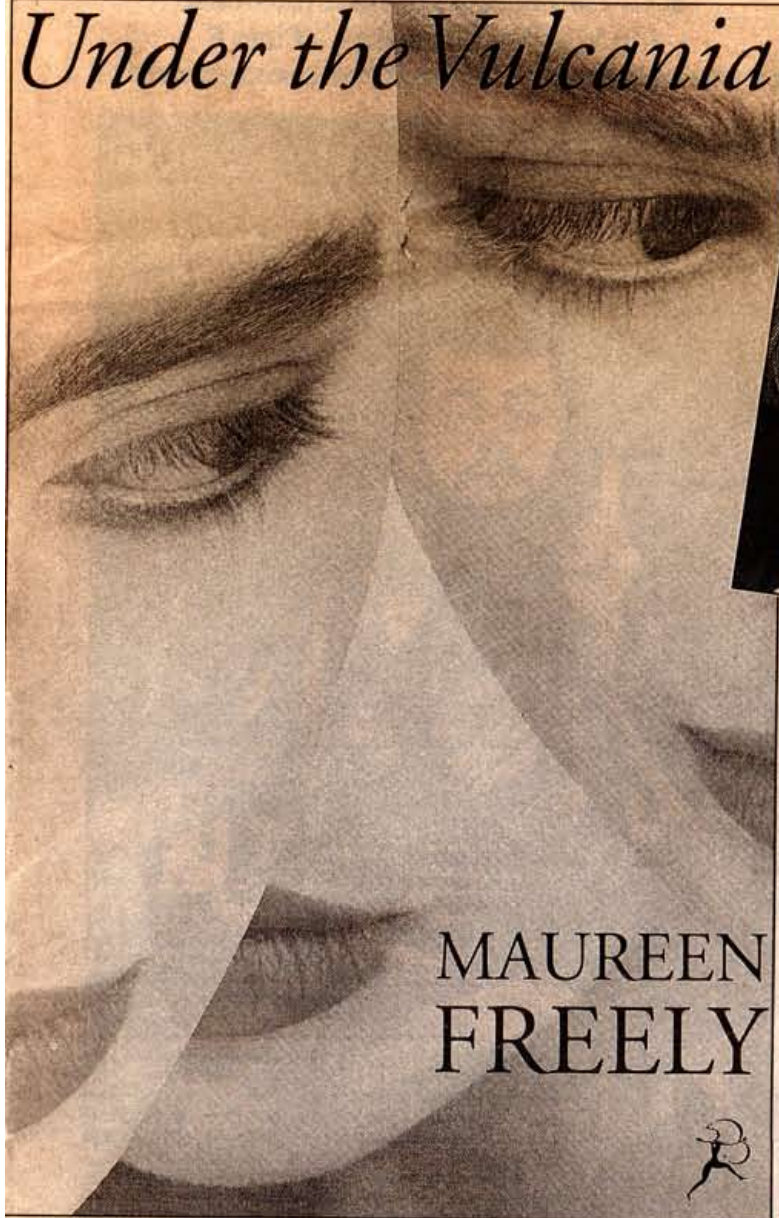
"She was caused to lie forwards, over the Abbess's knees, resting against them on the floor, her breasts against the knees of the Abbess and her head in her lap, in the posture of a child who is tired and seeks rest, or to be picked up."

"With one arm the Abbess held the penitent in a gesture of tenderness and with the other she wielded a whip and whipped her."

"Not over-hard. Just enough to hurt her enough."

(From *Flesh and Blood*, 1994)

# Under the Vulcania



MAUREEN  
FREELY



**Maureen Freely: 'This time, I just wanted to have fun'**

out to be about 150 ways of catching herpes, or else insisting that if a woman hasn't had an orgasm she is in some way 'oppressed'."

Given the resistance to oppression that is etched into the feminist or post-feminist consciousness, the recent spate of women writing about sado-masochism is one of the more startling aspects of the new erotica. In Helen Zahavi's much-hyped new novel, *True Romance*, an illegal immigrant woman is systematically stripped of dignity and will by a pair of male sadists. Zahavi's first book, *Dirty Weekend*, was hailed by some and reviled by others as "feminist revenge splatter fiction". In *True Romance* she twists the themes of racial and sexual subjugation into a tourniquet of hatred that leaves the reader choking — and somewhat confused as to the author's intentions.

Sado-masochism is also the subject of New York journalist Karen Moline's first novel, *Lunch*, which stormed the US bestsellers list with its exploration of the blurred area between complicity and dependency. The Italian writer Gaia Servadio's *The Story of R* (published this month) is a pastiche of Pauline Reage's 1954 S&M cult classic, *The Story of O*. In Servadio's version, it is the turn of men to be reduced to "man-objects" by an international ring of high-flying dominatrices.

Perhaps the most striking revisionist treatment of "the divine Marquis's" theories is Michèle Roberts' latest novel, *Flesh and Blood*, which Virago will publish in September. In a lovely, unforced, narrative that somehow marries the shades of de Sade and the period romance of Georgette Heyer, Roberts takes a sly swipe at the clichés and conventions surrounding female sexuality.

"Writing about sado-masochism isn't just a device for apeing male-female relationships, in which the woman is traditionally cast as the masochist. Women can be sadists, too. I think S&M might be a way of exploring the relationships within families — particularly the mother-daughter relationship, which affects us all so powerfully as children.

"Clearly, the recent interest in S&M is related to an age when sex is dangerous, and possibly fatal, but this is not the only reason why more and more women are writing about sex. It's not just self-indulgent or exhibitionist. I'm trying to write about sexual pleasure and pain without using pornographic, or what I call, patriarchal language, and that is difficult.

"Since we no longer write about the union with God, writing about sex has become the ultimate test for the writer: to communicate the incommunicable."

YVONNE  
ROBERTS



*Every Woman  
Deserves  
An Adventure*



**Yvonne Roberts: 'This is a book about sex, not a sex book'**

about imprisoning women rather than freeing them," says Roberts, who is well known for her campaigning journalism on women's issues. "You will never divorce sex from morality and, if you do, you will end up emotionally damaging yourself. But now that there is no one moral code that has a consensus behind it, the question is: How do we find our way through the sexual maze without harming ourselves or others?"

"It has to be said that some feminists have had a hand in turning sex into a problem; either by writing books with titles such as *You and Your Body*, which you think are going to be about sensuality and turn

on a sexual picaresque of her own, bouncing from lover to lover, old, young, male, female — and, in one instance, mechanical.

Descriptions of sex are unembarrassed, often erotic and always believable, but Roberts stresses that "this is a book about sex, not a sex book". For all its marvellously metallic cover, *Every Woman Deserves An Adventure* is essentially a morality tale.

"Sex has traditionally been used as part of a false morality, which is