

The pain for pleasure principle

Rebecca Abrams

Exposure

by KATHRYN HARRISON

219pp £12.99

Fourth Estate

House Rules

by HEATHER LEWIS

323pp £9.99

Secker & Warburg,

Lunch

by KAREN MOLINE

372pp £9.99

Macmillan

True Romance

by HELEN ZAHAVI

263pp £9.99

Secker & Warburg

MAINSTREAM publishing has traditionally cackewed the gloomier corners of female sexuality. Women writers and their publishers, with few exceptions, have left that sort of thing to men — and to *Cosmopolitan*. Now they are making up for lost time. Nearly every week brings another sexually-explicit novel by a female author into the bookshops.

The fuss started with Maureen Freely's novel *Vulcania* (Bloomsbury, £4.99, reviewed by Jenny Turner in these pages on May 10), a light-hearted and rather absurd book about a leisure centre with a difference, a place for bored and frustrated women to get something more than their hair fixed. The book was badly written, not very sexy, and distinctly repetitive (a common fault of sex in fiction as in fact). Freely's pleasure ladies all seemed to suffer, in fulfilling their fantasies, from a severe lack of imagination.

Since then, any novel by a woman that contains a fair portion of explicit sex has been hailed as belonging to a new genre — pornographic writ-

ing by women for women. This month there are four fresh ones: all heralded by their publishers as exciting new works of fiction, all written by women, all situated in contemporary western society, all dealing with the sexual abuse of a female protagonist, and all doing so in considerable detail. But is there really any value in talking about this kind of writing as a genre?

The best of the four is *Exposure* by Kathryn Harrison, a powerful and subtle depiction of a young woman's emotional breakdown. Ann Rogers is a successful New York photographer who can no longer keep the memories of her childhood at bay. Her increasingly agitated attempts to control the present are set against the powerlessness she experienced in the past. Sex and sexual abuse are central to the book, but Kathryn Harrison never succumbs to using either for cheap effect. She weaves them into the texture of the novel, whose larger theme is the nature of boundaries — between parent and child, between lovers, between the different layers of our own consciousness.

Heather Lewis's first novel, *House Rules*, is also about the violation of sexual boundaries in childhood. Narrated by 15-year-old Lee and set in the world of American show-jumping, it offers an unpalatable cocktail: sexual violence between adults, child sexual abuse, sadistic lesbianism, and a good measure of cruelty to animals. This is Jill Cooper without the jokes, J D Salinger without the affection. Lewis does not glamorise the brutality she depicts, but she uses it as part of a larger purpose — to portray the sexual legacy of incest. The cumulative effect of the graphic descriptions are disturbing, and clearly meant to be so.

More perplexing are *Lunch*, by an American journalist, Karen Moline, and *True Romance*, by a British writer, Helen Zahavi. *Lunch* charts the sexual relationship of a famous film star with a portrait painter. The star is an emotionally damaged individual with devastating good looks and Sadeian sexual preferences. The painter, who is sensitive, intelligent, beautiful, well-balanced, and happily engaged to someone else, allows herself to be seduced. Over a series of lunchtime assignations, she is drawn into an increasingly violent and abusive relationship, which she seems powerless to leave. The seduction is not simply of her body, but of her will; its climax is the rape of her drugged body, left senseless in a car.

Lunch is a well-paced, well-crafted and deeply unpleasant book. It sits uncomfortably close to pornography, combining both its language

and its techniques. As in pornography, a woman's "no" means "yes", her pain is presented as a form of sexual pleasure, and the action takes place in specially prepared rooms with carefully appointed cameras. The sexual encounters are watched and narrated by the film star's bodyguard, through two-way mirrors. But he is not the only on-looker, and the novel raises some interesting questions about the nature of voyeurism. But then a standard porn mag raises those issues too, for anyone who cares to think about them.

Zahavi's *True Romance* is possibly even nastier than *Lunch*. An illegal immigrant in London is taken in by two men who subject her to their sadistic appetites. We learn nothing of the woman's background or personality. She remains a nameless, faceless, selfless instrument of their sexual pleasure. Zahavi has declared *True Romance* to be a study of female collusion with male abuse: admirers have found the book both funny and ironic. I found it unilluminating on the subject of collusion, and neither entertaining nor (except for the title) ironic. As with *Lunch*, it employs too many of the conven-

tions of pornography to be effective as critique.

Feminism in post-war Britain and America has been an enthusiastic advocate of women's right to sexual self-expression. This way liberation lies, it confidently declared, encouraging us to develop and explore our sexual identities, and to plumb our sexual imaginations. But feminism, like poor old Dr Frankenstein before it, seems to have unleashed a beast less beautiful and less manageable than it bargained for. The experience of reading at least three of these four books is not liberating at all, but profoundly depressing. Women are writing about sex, oh yes! But what they are describing is not the joyous burgeoning of sexual possibility, but the burden of sexual misery, of deeply rooted collective memories, of degradation, subjugation, and victimisation.

Women novelists are claiming the sexual suffering of their gender through the process of writing about it: this is the literature of catharsis. In the process, however, they run the risk of perpetuating the very myths and stereotypes that caused the suffering in the first place. Is the graphic description of a man raping

a drugged woman any less dubious because it is written by a woman? Obviously not. It is the quality of the writing that counts, not the gender of the author. But this is exactly the distinction that is blurred by the current fashions about a new genre of women's writing.

I have nothing against explicit descriptions of sex in literature; nor am I as ardently opposed to pornography as, say, Catherine Mackinnon, but I do object to pornography posing as good literature merely because it is written by a woman.

While good literature may enlighten, "pornography", as Henry Miller put it, "only adds to the murk". What makes a novel like *Lolita* something more than a sordid story of a paedophile, and transforms it into a work of great fiction, is that characters and action take place within a social and psychological context. Nabokov hurls us into understanding Humbert Humbert's attraction to Lolita, but against his self-justifying passion is set her pathetic dependency, her confusion and physical distress.

In pornographic literature, the emphasis on the victim's helplessness increases the erotic element: in

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the wind between the poles of pleasure and danger; porn could only be either on the one hand an ever present threat to women's very lives or on the other a bit of harmless fun or even, heaven forbid, good for you.

Now, as often happens, history has come to our rescue. In the fascinating set of essays edited by Lynn Hunt, pornography is revealed as "a category of thinking, representation and regulation". This may sound daunting, but the meaning is simple: the endless attempts to define

pornography, and, right up until the French Revolution, pornography played an important political role. Licentious writing was almost always bound up with political satire and general attacks on authority, especially that of the church and the aristocracy. Until the 18th century, attempts at censorship were more concerned to suppress the political than the sexual aspects of pornographic writings. It is only later that purely commercial and apolitical pornography takes over.

Pornography was also bound up

and often they leave the reader to decide where the straws should go, as in the case of "A most surprising evening with John Ireland" where the emphasis perhaps falls on "surprising", given that he was unusually drunk.

This was part of a change in the status of women during the 18th century, when new ideals of romantic marriage, domestic happiness and tenderness towards children modified the ideologies of female sexuality.

Ideas about male homosexuality underwent a perhaps even more decisive change. Whereas the "sodomites" who appear in 18th and 17th century pornography were those

yet not quite suitable for the coffee table.

Inevitably lacking the focus of the more academic work, and, surprisingly perhaps, less entertaining, it nevertheless illustrates the enormous variety of erotic writings in western culture, and gently attempts to dislodge the artificial barrier between "erotica" and "porn".

Elizabeth Wilson is professor of media studies at the University of North London, and author of *The Sphinx in the City* (Virago)

The food of love

John Bentley

The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner
edited by CLAIRE HARMAN
384pp £25
Chatto and Windus

Jennifer Ryan's photomontage entitled *You: Act 3*, from *What She Wants: Women Artists Look at Men*, edited by Naomi Salzman (Vervo, 160pp £39.95pbk £11.95pbk)

Lolita, it precisely and severely diminishes it. Neither *Lunch* nor *True Romance* distance themselves sufficiently from the violence they depict to rise above the level of sophisticated pornography. Publishers and readers should not be conned by gender into thinking otherwise.

In the meantime, we can only ponder the seeming accuracy of Camille Paglia's unpopular assertion that "whenever sexual freedom is sought or achieved, sadomasochism will not be far behind... Sex is a far darker power than feminism has admitted." My hope is that the eruption of sexual violence in women's writing is but a phase, a kind of mourning; and that once the pain has been acknowledged, raged over and wept for, it can be left behind — and perhaps something more interesting will take its place.

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Vaughan Williams ("that cross between an old woman and an old mountain") that "I didn't do it sufficiently enough, but when I turned to writing I never had a doubt as to what I meant to say".

The diaries, however, begin with a tremendous display of nervous frivolity, her style transcending the mundane for all its worth. As in her marvellous *Letters*, these early entries exploit the pliable upper-middle class dialect of her time. Precocious stumbles, her stock-in-trade, always came easily to her. England being likened to "an old gentleman who married late in life, and married his cook", for example; or dinners compared to the order of creation; "fish first, then entrées, then joints. Lastly the apple as dessert. The soup is chaos."

Unused to moving in cosmopolitan literary circles (she always preferred the Dorset Powyses), she exercised a plucky sophistication and wit about it, typically teasing Virginia Woolf by telling her that modern witches use vacuum cleaners rather than broomsticks. By 1900, we find William Empson trying to excuse the sausages and soup he's provided for dinner, Warner observing that "he had learned to cook because his sister runs the Girls' Guides, which led me to refer to the meteor flag of England". He was extremely flabbergasted with the adjective; no doubt it would seem more striking to a scientist.

Such effects depend on the interplay of racy contemporary speech with Victorian literary incantation,

and often they leave the reader to decide where the straws should go, as in the case of "A most surprising evening with John Ireland" where the emphasis perhaps falls on "surprising", given that he was unusually drunk.

These are tactics familiar from her early novels, written under the influence of T F Powys's crotchety pastoralism — like *Mr Fortune's Maggot* of 1927 and *The True Heart* of 1929 (and the diaries supply more of the same, with outlines for unfinished novels; one can only take so many minor clergy preaching on Stock Exchange tips). "I don't seem able to escape from conveying a lovely sense of fiction", Warner writes in 1930. But if there was too much girlish mischief in this whitewashed detachment, help was at hand.

In 1930, just as the diaries are into their stride, the 38-year-old Warner was seduced by the poetess Valentine Ackland, 12 years her junior. Warner had never paused for introspection on her sexuality, and this first experience did not apparently change her habits. But the break in tone and manner is startling: Warner's ease with her sexuality is not, therefore, accompanied with a convert's zeal, but with a pungently vivid sensuousness, in sharp contrast to the ironic tenderness of her writings about men.

Although she recognised in Valentine Ackland her "one true love", the remaining 48 years of the diaries make it clear that, after a rapturous honeymoon that boats, hands down, anything in Warner's fiction, the two women made each other extraordinarily unhappy.

Valentine (not a good poet) never quite found her niche; trying not to envy Warner her success, she threw herself into a succession of fashionable causes — anything from Stalinism to Roman Catholicism, dragging Warner, often unwillingly, behind.

She was also repeatedly unfaithful to her, and, as Warner approached middle age, conducted a disastrous affair with an American woman, Elizabeth Wade White, which plunged Warner into a misery from which she was never to recover.

Warner's desolation after Valentine, by now a Catholic, had ceased to sleep with her makes for painful reading. In September 1949, during a critical month which Valentine was spending with White, she writes: "Her arm hurt. She said nothing of Eliza: she took a phenobarb, and came to my bed, walking in her sleep... she cried out 'I am so cold' in a despairing voice, and cast herself against me, still in her sleep. I lay with her head on my shoulder, and I tried to warm her; and as she warmed, the smell of love came from her, that smell of corn and milk that I shall never smell again except love for another causes it". It's in moments like this, when her pose breaks down, that Warner's very moving journal approaches great writing.

Yet her old detached tone, abandoned in the expression of her strongest feelings, returns in Warner's later years as a protective barrier against the deaths of her loved ones. "It is a curious sensation to get one's mother by post", she writes on receipt of the ashes. Her fastidious wit was her last comfort. At an exhibition in 1966 of Bonnard ("wonderfully expressive of the abandoned uncomfortableness of lying in a bath"), she discerns in his work "the power of painting a person or persons in a room and somehow conveying their relative fleetingness and fortuity. I don't know how this was done", she adds. "It is quite special". Precisely, and it's also the nearest she gets in this book to a description of the qualities of her own work.

John Bentley is a composer