

Has pornography become women's work? *Nicci Gerrard* looks at the feminists who are protesting loudly, writing dirty and making a lot of money

Battlefield of the body politic

Spot, if you can, the difference:

'The way other women look when they've been fucked hard and long, coming and coming, is how she looked: the way other women look fucked out, creamy and swollen, is how she looked.'

'He gripped her by the hips and pulled her even higher, so that the moist and waiting rump was jutting in the air and her back was forced to dip, and the nylon slip rode up.'

'"If the men under you at work could see you now! The big Boss Lady. You love it, don't you?" He laughed harshly and cracked the belt across her swaying bottom.'

'She is still begging when he slaps a gag on her pleading...there is nothing more satisfying than reaching for the whip stashed under the bed and bringing it down with a thin high whistle before it smacks her full on her behind.'

Well, the first quotation is taken from *Ice and Fire* (1986), a novel by Andrea Dworkin (she who suggests that intercourse equals violation and that 'pornography is the law for women', but whose own novels are banned as pornography from Canada, under a law she herself helped to draft). The next is taken from *True Romance*, a new and extremely unenjoyable novel by Helen Zahavi (whose message is, she says, 'fundamentally anti-liberal' and whose earlier novel, *Dirty Weekend*, was welcomed, by Dworkin, as 'a rallying call for women'). The third is from *Black Orchid*, an explicit novel, by Roxanne Carr, published under the Black Lace imprint



Helen Zahavi: 'She defends her first novel by saying that "everyone is a murderer, spectator or a victim"'

(whose first page always reads: 'Black Lace novels are sexual fantasies. In real life, make sure you practise safe sex'). The last one comes from *Lunch*, a much hyped novel by Karen Moline, which woozily sets out to explore the taboo areas of S&M and women's complicity in their pain. If you worried that you might not have been able to match the right quotation to the right author, don't worry. Dozens of writers – some favouring the high lands of censoring pornography, others wanting to explore its dark swamps, yet others scrabbling with liberal anxiety between the two – are frantically drawing-up boundaries between freedom and equality, pornography and eroticism, fantasy and reality, and trying to patrol them.

It's not an easy job, of course: the



Andrea Dworkin: 'She thinks that intercourse equals violation and that "pornography is the law for women"'

function of sex in literature slips away like mercury. It is hard to decide where writing descriptively about pornography becomes pornographic.

Aids has chased away carefree sexual activity, and into the vacuum has rushed a crowd of words and a mob of novels. Everybody's doing it: Maureen Freely (*Under the Vulcania*), Yvonne Roberts (*Every Good Woman Deserves Adventure*), Helen Zahavi, Karen Moline. Have we ever talked about sex so much?

For Catharine MacKinnon sex isn't even safe on the page. She is Professor of Law at Michigan, and in her recently-published book, *Only Words*, she fastidiously examines how words work (see page 20). She says speech can subordinate individuals, and can thus be described as action. She suggests that pornographic rape is actual rape, that a crime on film is like crime on the set, that watching violence is committing it, that doing it on the page is doing it for real. 'To say it is to do it and to do it is to say it.' (And if you don't agree that's because you're part of the corruption.)

This topsy-turvy view of the world was gloriously played out in America when, writing in *The Nation*, a male reviewer of *Only Words* parodically imagined raping the author. Outrage and lamentations. MacKinnon accused him of 'public rape'. MacKinnon's supporters swarmed in to cry foul. The *Nation*'s apology is being demanded. Subscriptions are being cancelled. So pornography is rape, and now book reviewing is rape. Have we gone mad?

Helen Zahavi's novels are part of the madness, in which boundaries between the real and the imagined are erased. Her first novel, *Dirty Weekend*, published two years ago, is the tale of a serial killer called Bella, who gloatingly murders several men because they harassed her. Their slow deaths – the stench and the squelch – are lovingly described. The characteristics of pornography (its abstraction, its fetishism) are deployed against it. The book provoked a rumble of distaste on



Karen Moline: 'Her novel lurches from sentiment to sado-masochism, though she claims to explore obsessive lust'

review pages, and Zahavi hit back against critics (including me). We put on our 'steel-capped boots', we 'mugged' her in print, we didn't want to 'allow' her book. I think we just didn't like it.

Zahavi defends her angry book by saying that 'everyone is a murderer, a spectator, or a victim'. She insists that if you want to stop being a victim you've got to be a murderer. (Well, you could decide to be a spectator, but then according to MacKinnon's

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law, that would be the same thing wouldn't it?) Like MacKinnon's work which has won vociferous supporters among the Moral Majority, Zahavi's novel has brought her strange champions. Michael Winner (enemy of committed anti-porn feminists) made a dreadful film of the book last year. It bombed.

Her new book, *True Romance*, treads the same joyless ground as its precursor, in the same repetitive, heavily ironic prose ('She could have spewed with glee, she could have vomited with joy, she could have retched in stateless ecstasy. They'd come for her. The boys were here. Her hard and luscious boys').

It describes a hermetic world where three people ('him and him and her') act out a ghastly carnival of male hatred and disgust of women. She is a refugee from Bratislava (note the familiar parallels between pornography and political subjugation); Bruno and Max are out to invade her with

foreign bodies and decolonise her. As the novel progresses through its short, arid sentences, she becomes supplicating but complicit piece of gristle, degraded into feeling a grubby pleasure. Zahavi's not out to titillate, but the devices of brutal desire are there: her intentions might be honourable; the effect isn't. I ended it unenlightened and queasy.

Karen Moline says that she's not out to arouse, either – just to explore obsessive lust. Ha! *Lunch* is a novel that lurches between clichéd sentiment (he's a beast, can she tam him?) and sado-masochism (he's a beast and doesn't she love it?). Moline writes well about the texture of clothes, the taste of food – but if she had wanted to write a novel of merit she shouldn't have started from here.

For pornography in literature is a bit like a lump of radioactive matter it's hard to handle or put to effect. It has its own terminal agenda. Short before he died, Anthony Burgess wrote an article in which he said that the 'crime' of most erotic or pornographic literature was that it was badly written. Auden once said pornography couldn't be successful as literature since it only functioned on one level and had one intention, suspect that's why Maureen Freely, *Under the Vulcania*, gives her novel a subversive feminist ending – not for the political message, but for the novelist inside her, which was struggling to give a point to brutal pointlessness.

The body politic is a crowded battleground. Writers in violent opposition are crushed against each other, so it's hard to see which side they're on. There's the Camille Paglia, the lewd and louche priestess of sado-masochism, proclaiming in *Sexual Personae* (1990) that 'no' often means 'yes'; here's Kate Roiphe, a self-righteous revisionist feminist, more in sorrow than anger arguing in *The Morning After* (1994), for an end to the victim-culture; there's Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1990) saying that women should go and get it.

Here's the British journalist journalist Yvonne Roberts trying to do just that in fiction, and Helen Zahavi and Andrea Dworkin sexual hateful on the topic of sexual hatred and Alina Reyes doing it, in *The Butcher* (1991), among the carcasses

And here am I wishing that they'd move on from the intoxicating freedom of going where the men (Nicholson Baker, Robert Olen Butler, for example) have gone before, and find other battleground Pornography is not just anti-art, it is anti-sex. For, as Angela Carter wrote in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), 'Pornography keeps sex in its place, that is, under the carpet. That is, outside everyday human intercourse.'

True Romance by Helen Zahavi (Secker and Warburg £9.99, out on June 27); **Lunch** by Karen Moline (Macmillan £9.99)

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