

## Karen dash

Karen Moline's novel, *Lunch*, is set to propel her from the Hollywood in-crowd to international success, says Maggie Alderson. Photographed by Lara Rossignol

Karen Moline has endless closets. And they're full of clothes of unusual splendour. As you wander through her apartment in New York's Greenwich Village, colour, texture and pattern spill out of cupboards at you. A chartreuse wool suit by Thierry Mugler nestles up to a rich velvet Gigli jacket. A circular skirt with lavish embroidery fights for space with a floor-length silver



coat. There are yards of shoes, shelves of lingerie and boxes and boxes of costume jewellery, each piece with a glittering tale to tell. And the hats! There's a whole wall of cartwheels, cloches, straws, velvets and felts. Beautiful hats on a shimmering ocean-blue wall in downtown Manhattan, hats which only look more gorgeous when they are framing Karen's geometric bone structure.

The reason I know these closets so well is that fellow journalist Moline is my best American friend: let's air that fact before anyone stands up and cries foul. But there is another relevance to mentioning them. Karen's first novel, *Lunch*, is a sensualist's extravaganza that could only have leapt from the mind of someone capable of assembling such riches (and who never ever shops retail: she's a sample sale commando).

*Lunch* is a story of obsessive love – or rather lust – between an American portrait painter, Olivia, and an American movie star, Nick, but it's set very firmly in London. They meet during lunch at Orso. Their affair is conducted in a rented flat in Bayswater, to which Olivia walks through Hyde Park from her studio in Queens Gate. Already sold in eight countries, *Lunch* is set to attract the controversial attention common to first novels that receive massive advances (especially when they are written by journalists), further compounded by its decidedly politically incorrect erotic theme. Karen Moline has unleashed an exquisitely written paean to luxury sado-masochism. No grubby rubbery readers' wives and sordid suburban sinners here. This is the smart end of the whip. More platinum card than lunch vouchers. Sexual cruelty by appointment to.

The megastar anti-hero that can afford the bespoke handcuffs and interior-designed torment chambers is fantastically handsome, thrillingly rich, devastatingly charming and a total creep. An emotional deadzone, nothing makes Nick Muncie happier (and hornier) than the sight and sound of a lissom starlet tightly tethered

and whimpering at the lash of his whip while his aide and constant companion, the mysterious M, captures it all on video through a two-way mirror. Nice guy.

As if this weren't enough, what makes the book such an extreme exercise in thin-ice dancing is that far from being a casting-couch wannabe actress, the heroine is an intelligent, aware, self-respecting Nineties woman (doubtless fully versed in Susan Faludi and Naomi Woolfe) who nevertheless finds herself in her lover's nasty S&M games. And loving it.

Educated at the egghead University of Chicago in the radically feminist late Seventies, Moline is fully aware of the potentially toxic ideas she is juggling here. For one thing, she admits to being slightly alarmed by how much men are turned on by the sexual passages in the book. 'This is a novel that taps into people's fantasies and I know it's a loaded issue, but I didn't sit down just to write something titillating,' says Moline. 'I wanted to put that in the context of a story of people's behaviour, which I have observed and which fascinates me. Yet male friends have told me they sit there with the book in one hand and with the other... And I'm thinking, "Thank you. I really don't wish to know."'

But Moline stands by what she has written. 'I don't think many women have written books that are as blatantly sexual as mine, without being pornographic, but I don't want to be like Aline Reyes, which is the pseudonym of the woman who wrote *The Butcher* [the French erotic best-seller of 1991]. I couldn't justify my characters and what they do and not have the balls to put my name to it. I'm sure I'll have to get an unlisted phone number because the weirdos will come out of the woodwork, but this is not me, it's a work of fiction.'

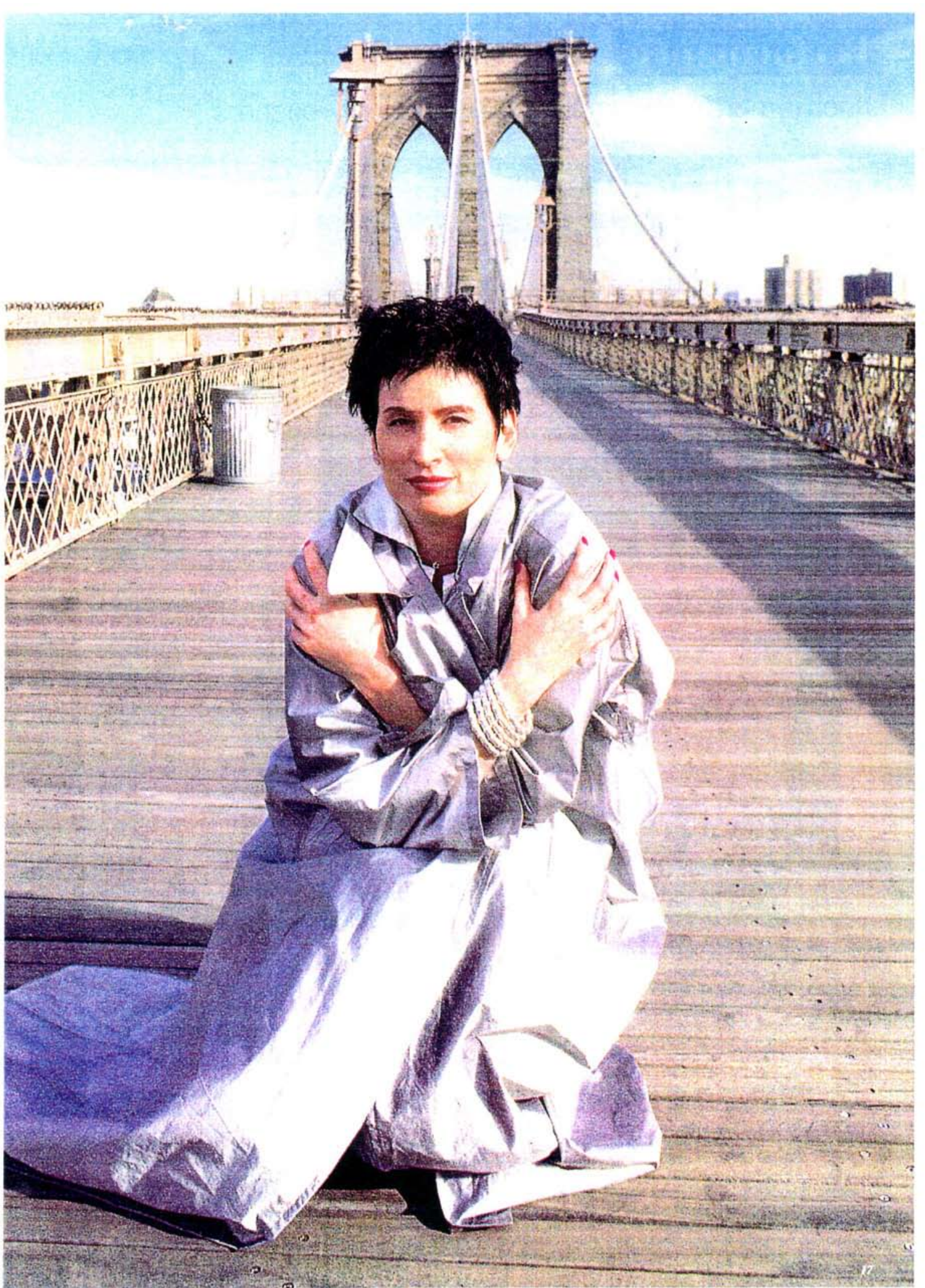
Even if you find some of the content unsettling, the sheer style of the book is extremely seductive. Moline stimulates every sense with her descriptions of the lust nest Muncie has his helpmate M create as the stage for his doomed affair. It is an adjectival world of red and gold Murano glass vases, hothouse peonies, Porthault sheets. Regency tables, gilt-framed mirrors, fat duvets, down pillows and plump towels. Beds are hung with thick silk tassels, 'braided cords backed with velvet... because they do not chafe on sensitive wrists.'

She writes about sex with the same attention to detail (and full stage directions, Hollywood please take note). 'He is still laughing, biting her breasts. He is too strong, he has both her arms pinioned hard, too hard, with one hand like a band of steel, the other caressing her as her legs flail helplessly till he pins them with his own in a scissors' grip. She is helpless... that delirious helplessness that is opium to his fevered senses... She knows he >



'I'm sure I'll have to get an unlisted phone number because the weirdos will come out of the woodwork', Karen Moline, on Brooklyn Bridge, wears silk trench coat, 1990s, by DONNA KARAN at Browns, 23-27 South Molton Street, W1. Silver ball bracelet from a collection by Elizabeth Freeman at Liberty. Styled by Mercedes-Louise Hall by John Birchall at Marina Jones. Make-up by Helene Andersson at Ivy Bernhard.







## Lunch is more platinum card than luncheon vouchers



**MOLINE CUISINE** Karen in her kitchen, wearing satin pyjama top, £375; trousers, £275, by DONNA KARAN at Harvey Nichols

◁ wants to hear her scream. It is easier to drown. Her eyes close, and she gives in, utterly.'

If there is at times a whisper of Mills and Boon fantasy-land, where defenceless women swoon into the arms of 'real' men and everyone is beautiful and famous, Karen Moline has a very good answer to those who may accuse her of losing her grip on reality. She knows of what she writes. As well as those crammed closets, there's another thing you'd notice in Karen's brownstone. In between the hats and the art, the walls are furnished with framed photographs and snapshot collages. The faces in them look very familiar, because you've seen them at your local cinema. Her personal address book reads like the nominations for Oscar night.

As a fellow journalist who has also interviewed scores of actors and never become friends with

any of them, I have always been fascinated by how – and why – Karen genuinely does. 'I have absolutely no idea. Who knows what is the alchemy of friendship, but when they become friends they stay friends. They trust me. They know I don't want to be an actor. I understand their world but I don't want to be part of it, therefore I am not a threat. I think for a lot of these people who are insecure, it is good being around someone who understands their lifestyle but doesn't want to take anything from them.'

Thus her main character is a movie star because she knows what movie stars are like and that generally they are fascinating, complex characters. And let's face it, novels about movie stars are more bankable than novels about accountants. But Moline is adamant that this is not a roman-à-clef. 'Nick is not based on one

person. He is really the archetype, a composite of not just actors I've met, but directors, producers, publicists, rock stars, people in Hollywood who have outsize egos. A lot of actors I've interviewed are very damaged people and came from real poverty and clawed their way up. They have this "I'm gonna show you" attitude and I put a lot of that into his character.'

Moline herself so had first-hand experience of obsessive love and the attentions of not entirely normal men. Believe me, I've met a lot of her boyfriends. I'll never forget a dinner with one (I thought) deranged English actor who deliberately opened all the Christmas presents I had brought her. And I happen to know that incidents from his dodgy sex life (with other girlfriends) have informed some of the more graphic scenes in the book.

Whether it is her imposing height (five foot ten), Snow White colouring, the Russian bone structure or those extraordinary clothes, things just do seem to happen to Karen Moline. She has an exotic magnetism. To successful and charismatic men, used to getting everything they want, she looks like she'd be a challenge.

The incident that inspired the book is a good example. 'I was sitting in Orso having lunch with an editor when this group of guys sat down at the next table. One of the men – an actor – just sat there and folded his arms and started looking at me. Like I was lunch. He was literally stalking me in Orso, and sitting at the next table. He didn't move a muscle but made it clear that he had decided I was something he wanted. I was desperately creeped out, but it was absolutely fascinating. I remember thinking, this is a really good way to start a novel about obsession. I'll call it *Lunch*. What a great title.'

On another memorable occasion she was sitting in the bar of the Bel Air hotel in LA, having drinks and rubbing her calves, sore from a step class, when (one name she is prepared to name) Sean Penn came in. After an interval his companion was sent over to invite her for a drink. Mr Penn's companions dissolved and he asked the waitress for some butter, which he proceeded to rub, without so much as a by-your-leave, into those aching calves. 'I was stupefied,' says Moline. 'I was thinking, he is rubbing butter into my legs and nobody is looking because he is a celebrity and he can do what he wants. How the hell am I going to get out of this one? So I told him I was happy to make his acquaintance but I wasn't about to accommodate him any further. Really, he was charming.'

With her first novel attracting so much attention and a film deal surely not far behind, I wondered if Karen intended to continue her journalism. 'Well, I have already started my second novel but I'd like to carry on doing journalism as well. I enjoy talking to people and, you know, I can never invent anything more bizarre than something somebody is going to tell me...' Except possibly the things that happen to this extraordinary woman in her everyday life. □