

Suspenders of disbelief

For those who believe publishers are perpetually out to lunch, Karen Moline's first novel has an unfortunate title. Worse is the fact that its love triangle concerns a Hollywood star, a painter, and a bodyguard — all rich Americans temporarily living in London. Worse still is that its plot involves sado-masochism, erotic obsession and whipping. A more calculatedly commercial and repulsive concoction would be hard to imagine.

Yet it would be wrong to reject this book solely on those grounds, for its clever plot is graced by a fluency and an interest in character which places it somewhere between the elegant pop of Josephine Hart and the intelligent pop of Barbara Vine. Erotic obsession needs the suspenders of disbelief to be in twanging order if it is not to degenerate into the affectless absurdities of pornography: what is noteworthy of *Lunch* is that despite a tendency to meretricious settings and French phrases, Moline very nearly gets it right.

Narrated by M, bodyguard to the superstar Nick Muncie, *Lunch* charts the progress of a cruel seduction, and a parallel moral regeneration. Beautiful, gentle Olivia attracts the attention of Nick, "a living god" whose own beauty conceals a taste for sadism.

The sex scenes, curiously unerotic and mostly conveyed through dialogue, are a mixture of banality and insight which has a film quality — and indeed, the scarred and manipulative M does film their

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LUNCH

By Karen Moline

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Moline: fluent and clever

couplings. He alone knows the secret of Nick's self-invented past and, this inverted Cyrano writes the speeches with which Nick penetrates Olivia's defences. Yet their plans misfire when M falls in love with their intended victim, with consequences from which none escapes unscathed.

For *Lunch* is at least partially concerned with a question few will fail to recognise — to what extent does erotic obsession with another person alter the essential self? Olivia, like all Nick's prey, is blindfolded before her final torture, yet she sees through all the deceptions to the bodyguard's potential for humanity. This is a palatable version of *The Story of O* and one of the more interesting debuts so far this year. It will, however, make you feel queasy in a restaurant for some time.

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