

No longer the victim

Cathy Nugent reviews "The New Victorians — a "Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order" by Rene Denfeld. Published by Simon and Schuster, £16.99

LINDA GRANT'S *Guardian* interview with Rene Denfeld (Women's Page, 11 May) was entitled "Could Do Better". Any one of Britain's feminists, Linda Grant amongst them of course, could, it was implied, write a better book than this one by a mere American. "Why import another big-haired American?" Grant asks, "Why not commission a young British feminist to write the same book?" While some British feminists have written cracking books in recent years — about the same sorts of issues covered in *The New Victorians* — I don't agree that any of them could have written a better book than Rene Denfeld, who has first-hand experience of the subject.

27 year old Denfeld has written a book to explain why young women, although they can be vehemently pro-women rights, no longer call themselves "feminist". They are, she argues, turned off by the anti-sex campaigns of some of the most prominent modern feminists. Denfeld has written a book about American feminism and American young woman. It is right that a young American woman and not a 44 year old British feminist, Grant, should write it! Grant then asks why British women should want to buy Denfeld's book, being as it is about all this American stuff. But British feminists have been writing — critically — about American and American-inspired feminism for years! That's how they've made their living.

Grant's piece is disingenuous and full of preconceptions fuelled by chagrin at a crop of (good-looking) American authors being hailed in Britain as new Germaine Greers (Susan Faludi, Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe). Did Grant not read Denfeld's book? Her objections are not only unfair but childish: Denfeld is young, has "big hair", and — how awful! — is marketed by her publishers.

I think Grant should go and slag off her agent for not doing a proper PR job on her books and leave Denfeld alone. We should be glad that there is, at last, a potentially well-known and critical voice amongst

American feminists.

One of Grant's implied criticisms is that Denfeld has written a non-complex and "sound-bite friendly" book simply because it is being marketed as a publication with a potentially popular readership. Not so. Denfeld's book is, on the whole, well-written, pugnacious, thoughtful, coherently argued, rational, sane, and on the side of the majority of women — working-class women. There are flaws which arise from the fact that she is a reformist, not a revolutionary. But this is a fault she shares with many of Britain's well-known feminists, including the socialist feminists.

Denfeld set out to study and then demolish the Women's Studies syllabuses now taught at most North American universities. This material is what constitutes feminist theory today and it dictates the framework for what is considered feminist activism in the States as well. This activism, Denfeld says, is far from being a mass campaign and is divorced from the concerns of the majority of women. So far so good.

However, when Denfeld come to look at what young women think of all this, she looks merely at the responses of young college-educated women, whose views she is representing. That is not condemnable in itself of course, but Denfeld is not conscious of her bias: she does not acknowledge it, talking all the time about "young women", per se. But "young women" are divided by class, race, political views etc etc. This insipidity is, fortunately countered by Denfeld's reformist (by American standard quite radical) viewpoint. She argues for decent pay, childcare and maternity leave. She is not reformist enough of course! For example she cites Emily's List — the upper-class millionaire-belt based pressure group to get more women elected as Congress Representatives — as a campaign "that speaks to women's actual concerns"!

But there is some fine material here. About Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon and the so-called mainstream feminist organisation NOW, Denfeld is downright rude. She seethes with justifiable anger as she attacks their insidious Stalinism and what she calls the "reverse sexism" of relentless male-bashing. She cites crass and offensive statements, like: "Men generally do not take sex with children seriously. They are amused by it, wink at it and allow adult-child sex to continue through a complex of mores which applauds male sex aggression" (Florence Rush).



Rene Denfeld is a freelance journalist and amateur boxer

Denfeld says: "the truth is that women feel empathy for the men in their lives, men who often face similar economic troubles and personal problems". She quotes approvingly the statement "[man bashing] is an excuse to vent your anger in a totally irresponsible way. In a sense, you're enfeebling yourself. You're saying, this man is to blame for my plight. No. We're all in this together. Pointing fingers makes us powerless — the victim. I think that man bashing is a total paradox. You're crying victim — the very thing you don't want to be."

But is Denfeld throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and understating the very real problems that women face with the men in their lives, from sexist remarks through to sexual harassment and physical violence? Maybe so, but is this not the inevitable consequence of focusing your firepower when writing a critique?

Denfeld's account embraces compulsory lesbianism (lesbianism as a political and intellectual concept rather than a sexual choice or even a sexual concept!); the way that some feminists (MacKinnon) have begun to question abortion rights as the availability of abortion encourages heterosexual sex which is *always* oppressive to women; the false depiction of pornography as being full of representations of violence against women and the assertion that pornography leads to violence against women including rape in real life; the victim-mythology of some feminists who deliberately inflate rape incidence figures.

The chapter on victim mythology I found very thought-provoking; it changed my mind about a few things. One of its main concerns is with the phenomenon of "date

rape" now so hotly disputed on American campuses. What is implied by the term "date rape"?

Firstly, it is based on the idea that rape is a very common phenomenon. Consequently many young women students are warned when they start college that there is a very high possibility of being raped whilst they are there and that the only realistic solutions are to get a chaperone or avoid men altogether! The statistic that is always bandied around — that one in four women will at some point in their lives be a rape victim — is derived from two very suspect and limited studies. Rape statistics are still, for many reasons, appallingly difficult to collate. The figures are high enough but they are *not* as high as one in four.

Secondly, the concept of "date rape" can be based on such loose definitions of rape that the experience of real rape, with all its horrible violence, is left without a word that can adequately describe it: the word becomes devalued. For example, sex when very drunk can be defined as non-consensual and, therefore as, rape. Many feminist accounts argue that women do not believe such experiences are rape because according to the feminist establishment they "lack familiarity with what consensual intercourse should be like". This is, as Denfeld says, simply insulting. "In the world of victim mythology, women can't win. Lost somewhere in our apparently pea-sized brains is the knowledge we've been raped. It is up to today's feminists to bring us out of "denial". Not only are we raped when we don't know it but, like a bunch of dumb beasts, we blunder back to our attacker, asking for more. Our daintiness prohibits us from either fight or flight, and our naiveté prohibits us from knowing exactly what happens to our bodies."

The main thrust of Denfeld's argument is this: "Running like a dark stream through current feminism is the assumption that women never want sex, that not only are we helpless innocents but if we should fail to live up to this image of chaste, sexless victims, there is something wrong with us." There is a close similarity with official Victorian bourgeois morality and the prohibitive codes of American feminists. In fact, many feminists, as we know, have linked-up in particular campaigns with the American new right.

It is important that we carry on asserting sexual freedom as being a proper and central concern of feminism. Denfeld's book helps us do that. At times she is naive about the ability of *all* women to stand up to sexism and the ability of all *young* women to see equality and sexual freedom as their right. Her programme of action for women's rights is, as I have said, somewhat weak and this may not now be a book of direct relevance to British women. However I would rather have this one lucid, sane, account asserting equality between the sexes than a million Andrea Dworkin opuses telling me that I shouldn't like sex or men, and spouting New Age bollocks telling me to get in touch with the goddess within me. ■

Phoenix!

I will not die!
I am the Phoenix
I have been drowned in fire and blood
By open foes, devoured
By predatory allies and masters, reduced:
I rise again
I am eternally self-renewing
I saw Hitler loom above Rosa
Luxemburg's grave
And then fled East
To hail his other self
I am the true Phoenix.

I hailed Stalin
Saviour and Father of the Peoples
The Tsar who yet somehow was not a
Tsar,
The Peoples' own Red King
A comrade
Dialecticked
Though Stalin had built himself a
mausoleum
To strut on, in triumph, dancing
On the poor dry bones and waxy blind
Forever silent ruin of
The dead iconoclast, Vladimir Lenin
I am the Phoenix

I saw Mao
And Mao's Red peasant army moving
through
Shanghai's old streets
Where Chaing had butchered
Riding in triumph
To the palaces of my murderer's
And I hailed Mao as God
My all-renewing saviour
I am the Phoenix
I never die

I fall in love with monsters
I cross-bred with horror
My children were all monsters, or died
young
Many are born dead
But I make life, I go on
I am the Phoenix

I am ignorant, credulous
Senseless, wayward, often fooled: often
fooled
But I live!
I torment seduce cajole rouse energise
mesmerise
I am treacherous, delusive, self-deluding
Rest-destroying, death-defying
Id-sprung, I make life.
I am the Phoenix.

I am the heart of heartless worlds
The sigh of the oppressed in vales of woe
Guileless, I have searched the Twentieth
Century
For my fatherland
I have searched amongst verminous cults
For the cult, the saviour
That is not verminous
That saves
I have proved Carlyle right
It was a choice of the elite
And yet I live, reborn
I am prolific
I rise and go down, sometimes in blood

And yet I rise again and again and again
I am the Phoenix
I will not die

I am Caliban
Caliban overthrown, enslaved
Who would be mine own king again
I choose a shipwrecked drunken
sailor on a beach
To be my saviour and my king, if he
Will kill oppressive Prospero
I am the serf who prays to the Devil
To the enemy of my enemy's god
I cannot die, I go on.
I am the Phoenix

I was in that grey old bearded man,
Who knew relentless death stalking him
close,
Had claimed his children
And all his tribe:
He made me from green and sunlit grass
Beneath a window
And from blue sky
High above a Mexican wall
Proclaiming I should live
Though he was certain soon to die
I give life, I am life
Id-rooted, I
I am the Phoenix
I will not die!

Workers will fight to live
To be their own king:
To give, relinquish, suffer, fight
Knowing yourself a slave
You must know more than yourself
Or you will know less: I am more
Though often, often I am less!
I am the Phoenix

I have seen Spartacus crucified
Ten thousand times
And then ten thousand times
And still I live, reborn,
I rise up out of the foaming blood,
proclaiming
With Rosa, out from the Kaiser Wilhelm's
jail
And on the eve of fiasco and death:
I was, I am, I will be
I will be because I must be
I am the Phoenix
I give life

I am hope, Proletarian hope

I learn to see, I can see what lies behind
But I am born, and reborn, always, blind!

Sean Matgamna

