

# In a Steamy Novel, Obsession or Control?

By DENISE MOURGES

**“W**HEN a very famous icon of the screen looks at you in person and fixates all his energy on desiring you,” said Karen Moline, a recipient of such a spell, “it’s very difficult to tear yourself away from that magnet.”

Ms. Moline is the writer of “Lunch,” her provocative debut as a novelist. Released in the fall in the United States by William Morrow, “Lunch” is not for readers who are sexually faint of heart.

Suffice it to say that the whip that the fictional superstar, Nick Muncie, keeps under his bed in “Lunch” is not for prodding horses. And the fluff-brained woman his facially scarred bodyguard, M, procures for him become “turned on” by being made submissive and ravished.

“Lunch” is about obsession and control,” the writer said. “I am not condoning violence to women. Deep down Olivia is controlling. She makes the decisions, which annoys Nick.” Olivia is Olivia Morgan, an accomplished and self-possessed painter Nick meets while lunching at a trendy London restaurant. Engaged to a touring concert pianist, Olivia does not turn to jelly at the sight of Nick. In fact, after they are introduced she resumes her conversation at the next table and further rebuffs him.

That makes Olivia compelling prey for the spoiled and bored actor. Conspiring with M, the narrator, Nick sets a seductive trap, and Olivia succumbs. But she fights herself all the way.

“I think it’s wonderful that Olivia is emotionally grounded enough to feel shame,” Ms. Moline said of the moral conflict. “To recognize she’s getting pleasure from something that she knows is wrong.

“I wanted to create a female character with a strong sense of self and who was uninhibited about her sexual desires. Olivia is doing what I and many other women can’t, living out her sexual fantasies. Our society doesn’t accept women or consenting adults who have unusual sexual desires doing what they want in the privacy of their homes.”

Before turning to writing novels, Ms. Moline was a freelance entertainment journalist for American, English and Australian publications. She was also an editor, a “novel



Deborah Feingold

Karen Moline, the author of “Lunch,” a novel.

doctor” and a packager of books on popular culture and rock musicians.

“Nick is a composite of people I’ve met,” Ms. Moline said, “actors, models, directors, producers and pop stars. People who are in the public eye and have what I call an anger management problem. When you’re plugged into the gossip, what Nick and M do is nothing unique.”

The underlying idea for “Lunch” came to Ms. Moline in the early 1980’s, she recounted. She was packaging a book on a famous person. He wanted a certain cover. “When I said no, explaining that his idea was technically impossible, he gave me a look of sheer, unadulterated hatred,” Ms. Moline said. “It gave me palpitations. Questioning myself about what terrible thing I’d done, I realized that no one around these famous people ever told them no. I decided I wanted to write about a powerful person who thought he had the right to be sheltered from the truths of life.”

Ten years passed before Ms. Moline found the proper framework for such a character. In early 1992 she was having lunch with an editor at Orso, a restaurant in London.

“A girlfriend came in with a bunch of actors,” she recalled. “One fixated on me. I clearly remember feeling

this guy’s eyes boring into the back of my head. Stalked at Orso! I thought, ‘This is a perfect way to open a book.’” Returning to New York, where she lives in the East Village, Ms. Moline spent the summer of 1992 on Fire Island working on her novel.

“I became addicted to Fire Island,” she said in an interview, “when a friend sold me his Ocean Beach summer share in 1980 for \$150.” Over the years she has spent many summers on the island.

Most of “Lunch” however, was written in the winter of 1992-93, in Wainscott. She reworked the book the next summer, in a house in Amagansett. Last winter, to recuperate from the project, she rented a retreat in East Hampton.

“The Hamptons are re-energizing,” Ms. Moline said. “And by the time I’d finished working on ‘Lunch’ the willfulness of the characters had drained me. People walking on the beach when I was going through the final edit had to wonder, ‘Why is that woman crying again?’”

The character whom she most related to was the mysterious M. “He’s an outsider looking in on the party, like a freelance journalist writing about entertainment,” she said. “Also, for most of my childhood I was subjected to ridicule. I was an ugly, gawky kid who wore braces and was always the tallest of everybody.”

Ms. Moline was born in Chicago and grew up in Buffalo. She attended high school in San Jose, Calif. Her father was a biochemist with Union Carbide — “pre-Bhopal,” she said — and the family moved with his promotions.

After graduating from the University of Chicago, she attended the Sorbonne for a year. “If you’re young and poor stay away from Paris,” she said strongly. “They hate you.”

Coincidentally, France is one of the few European countries where the publishing rights to “Lunch” have not been purchased. The book has just been released in the Netherlands. Rights have been sold in 17 countries, including Bulgaria, Japan and Korea. The book appeared first in the United Kingdom; “Lunch” is primarily set in London, where Ms. Moline lived and did freelance work in the mid-80’s.

Whatever part of the globe her fictional superstar might inhabit, Nick Muncie has the soul of a monster.

Ms. Moline said “image power” caused an unsuspecting public to adulterate real-life stars who are awful people. “Many of them are so unworthy,” she said.

She said she understood, though, why some actors arrived at the top bruised. “It sounds like a cliché,” she said, “but acting means so much hard work, so much rejection. It’s a very difficult process to be a star. You have to want it more than anything. Because of the terrible places they’ve come from — many had sad childhoods — a lot of them have hidden anger. When they’re out of the public eye this anger can get expressed in strange ways.”

Ms. Moline surmises that women who go after stars-as-stars are seeking validation through reflected glory. Olivia isn’t, but she places herself in as precarious a situation as the bimbettes who have gone before her. The perils of sharing unusual sexual desires like Nick’s can easily escalate.

“Of course, there’s a danger,” Ms. Moline said, “as there is in every kind of sexual behavior you have with anyone with a sexual past today.

“Besides AIDS any woman who allows herself to be picked up by a stranger is throwing herself in a potentially explosive situation. Ninety-nine point five percent of the time things turn out all right. I’m not condemning, condoning or preaching. The lure of the forbidden is human nature, what makes most people to do things like have extramarital affairs. The last thing you think about when your hormones are flying is the reality of danger.

“The worst mistake women make is we smell trouble and don’t listen to our instincts. Olivia doesn’t lie to herself. She knows Nick is trouble from the beginning. But she also makes a common mistake. She tells herself, ‘I can deal with it.’ Then she gets caught.

“No relationship, though, is rational. That’s what makes falling in love such a wonderful and hideous process.” If one is wronged, well, there is always revenge, the topic of Ms. Moline’s novel in progress, “Belladonna,” which means beautiful woman in Italian and is also the name of a poison.

And what about the charismatic actor who inspired “Lunch” by “stalking” the author at Orso? Did his spell work? “No,” she whispered. “It creeped me out. My radar went up. But I was curious.” ■