

snort.

"You laugh because it sounds like the cheap plotting of a low budget porn video," she guesses correctly. "I know that. It sounds like the ridiculous daydream of a horny schoolboy, but sometimes reality crosses into the ludicrous, the obvious, the blandly titillating." For a few moments she says nothing more and you realise you want to hear the rest of her story. To hide your embarrassment, you take an ill-advised swig from your polystyrene coffee cup, scalding your tongue.

Eventually, she resumes. "I had been instructed to let her fondle me, and I didn't have to wait too long to follow instructions. As I said, I was beautiful in those days, glossy-haired, bright-natured, optimistic. I wanted to be a Leader, as did all the ambitious young men and women of the group. I longed for it. Leaders were

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privity to all the secrets, not only regarding the missions of the Expendables, but the financial state of the community and news of the world outside. I was itchy to know.

"Finally, I got my chance. I was in her room in the main house. The urgent fondling had ceased and my companion was asleep, a deep, greedy afternoon slumber. It was quiet outside. Still. The group was in the fields, bringing in the crops. I could smell the jasmine outside the window. A bird flew over the small patch of sky in my vision. I got out of bed.

"In the kitchen I covered a cold pancake with honey, the honeycomb crumbling into wetness under the knife's blade. I took hungry bites as I climbed the stairs two at a time, my bare feet silent on the floorboards. I found the study easily, although I had never been upstairs before. Incredibly the door pushed open. It was not locked. I licked my sticky fingers and stepped over the threshold."

She has finished with her sandwich now and collects the discarded crusts in the elaborate wrapper. Later, as you walk swiftly to your car, you will see her feeding these to car park sparrows.

"The study was not as orderly as you might expect. All surfaces were strewn with grimy glasses and mugs half full of what I now know to be cold, congealed coffee. Coffee was officially forbidden in the community, regardless of status. Loose paper rustled softly in the breeze from an open window. There were books everywhere, on every topic imaginable. Office management,

mediaeval weaponry, car maintenance. In a filing cabinet, open, available, I found a dossier outlining the missions undertaken by two generations of Expendables. It seemed our community was only one small provincial branch of an extensive international network. Handwritten notes clipped to faded newspaper clippings told of subway bombings, murdered abortionists, pornographers found strangled in their homes. Newer clippings described exploding cars, audacious bank robberies, the lonely suicide of an iconic actress, the framing of a black football star for the murder of his white wife. Handwritten memos mentioned addresses, passwords, security codes. I read and sweated and read some more. I watched my honeyed fingerprints stain the paper dark."

Silent, you dab the last of your ear sausage in a smudge of brown sauce. Your

companion sips delicately at her juice before continuing.

"I never heard the footsteps behind me. I heard nothing until the file I was reading was taken gently from my hands and closed. Then a calm voice told me I had made a mistake. I was bound, gagged, and tortured for several hours. The woman who had found me so irresistible hours earlier cut my face with a razor blade as my parents watched on, impassive. I had to move into new, temporary quarters, separated from my family. I don't care to remember or relate the things they did to me there. Eventually I was named in the New Year's List as an Expendable and sent on my own mission."

"What did you have to do?" you ask, humouring her.

Her smile is gentle. "I can't tell you what I did, or where I've been since. You wouldn't believe it, and they'd probably have you killed. They follow us, you know, to make sure we don't talk to anyone."

"Right," you agree, pulling a stupid face. She catches the sarcasm in your voice but doesn't comment on it. She places the spent juice box on your table and touches a hand to the scar on her face. Then she is gone.

Pushing your tray to one side, you finish your coffee, musing over the encounter. You think it's all over, but it isn't. The man at the next table catches your eye again, surely not a coincidence this time. He winks.

## New Releases

**Veronica**  
Mary Gaitskill  
*Serpent's Tail*

**V**eronica is the second novel from Mary Gaitskill, author of the short story, which inspired the film *Secretary* (2002). *Veronica* combines the decadence and debauchery of the 1980s, where two seemingly incompatible women meet in New York. Alison is a former modeling sensation searching for stability and Veronica is an eccentric middle-aged proofreader.

*Veronica* combines razor sharp observations on major themes: sex and cruelty, beauty and ugliness, youth and age. Gaitskill constructs a fascinating narrative, which successfully flits between the 1980s and present day. *Veronica's* atmosphere is fraught with loneliness and the relationship between time and memory. Alison's realist and unrepentant musings epitomize the objectification, alienation and psychological traumas she experiences in the modeling world, which dissolve the mythical iconic status associated with the industry. A highly perceptive and recommended read.

Shona Fairweather

**Scapegallows**  
Carol Birch  
*Little Brown*

**M**argaret Catchpole escaped the gallows not once but twice, all in the pursuit of love. This skilfully weaved fictionalised tale of Margaret's life, sweeps you from the dingy backstreets of 1700s Ipswich to the wide-open landscape of Australia. Birch draws Catchpole, and her life in fascinating detail using old sources and her original letters, which paint the intricacies of her personality beautifully. This is a fantastic Victorian morality tale about a good simple girl led astray by a bad man and her resulting struggle. Will Margaret be redeemed and live to ripe old age or will passion take her hand yet again and led her astray once more, to the groan of the gallows?

Carol Birch's evocatively detailed writing brings the characters to life, carrying the reader on a courageous and emotional journey. It's a definite must read this autumn.

Deborah Ellis

