

# New avengers

## REVENGE

Kate Saunders (editor)

Virago £12.99

## IN SEARCH OF LOVE, MONEY AND REVENGE

Hilary Bailey

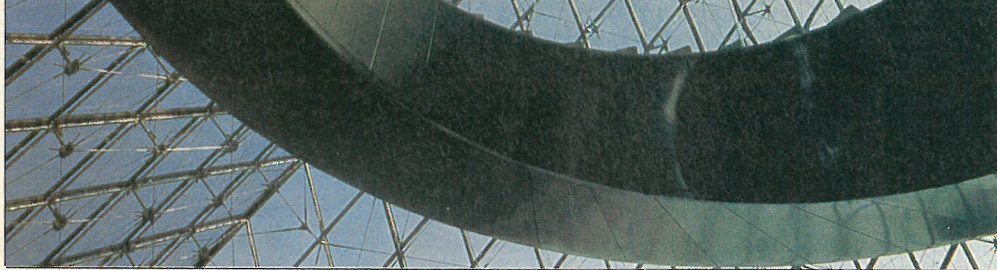
Macmillan £13.99

Kay Parris

Delightful as it is to find Alice Walker and Muriel Spark sharing pages with Elizabeth Gaskell, something is surely amiss when a representative sample of female writing talent from the past 150 years is herded together under the banner of *Revenge*. What Kate Saunders, in her introduction, calls the “intense imagination” and “unlimited patience” of proud avenging woman appears to be no more than dependent obsession and a capacity for storing long-term grudges. Thankfully, not all her contributors in the collection celebrate such negative attributes.

Louisa May Alcott's sensational escapade certainly condemns the retaliatory urge. *Pauline's Passion and Punishment* (a real eye-opener for lovers of *Little Women*) is presented here with admirable lack of apology as a “florid romance”, a “penny dreadful” first written for a popular magazine. It is fun glancing back at high Victorian melodrama; and interesting that Saunders dismisses Alcott's fears for the “poisoned chalice” of revenge.

Of course, most of us have experienced the desire “to pay someone back”. It's understandable, sometimes sorely deserved, and it need not become a destructive force. Many of Saunders's contributors offer innovative tangents off



A “frankly theatrical” staircase inside the controversial glass pyramid in the courtyard of the Louvre, Paris; from Carter Wiseman's lavishly illustrated monograph *The Architecture of I. M. Pei* (Thames & Hudson, £40)

the revenge theme, some complete with wit, perspective and social purpose. Shena MacKay's “Curry at the Laburnums”, for example, presents a humbling lesson in Indian pride for two prejudiced commuters; and “The Spider's Web”, by Lisa St Aubin de Teran, ends with a pair of victims quietly disabling their abusers.

Other contemporary stories in *Revenge* parade woman's tougher side, with a few expletives and varying degrees of success. They attempt an upfront exploration of complexes like sibling guilt or alienation, and sexual/emotional insecurity. They range from the funny and shocking to those which seem only to expose a self-conscious writer with a female inferiority complex. And, let's face it: you must have some kind of a complex to become obsessed with vendettas.

This is one of the reasons that Hilary Bailey's new novel, *In Search of Love, Money and Revenge*, is not as tacky as its packaging suggests. “Love and Money are soon within [the heroine's] grasp,” the blurb promises, but “sweet revenge remains a most elusive prize.” Actually, we have two abandoned wives and one mistreated child for whom relationships and finance only come right in the end, and for whom revenge is a pleasing chance by-product of their new-found independence. But that's typical of blurb writers.

With a healthier attitude towards the concerns of rejected women, it is only a shame that so much of Bailey's stitching shows in this story. Profound and hard-hitting it was never meant to be, but that's no reason to shirk on credibility. Annie and Vanessa happen to meet when both their husbands have deserted them for cardboard cut-out bimbos. The convincingly painful reactions of the wives are unconvincingly shortlived, whereupon two male replacements appear, disappear and re-emerge together at just the right time like synchronised swimmers.

Friendship, love, romance, (local) politics, family dynasty, mystery and suspense: all the ingredients of a popular read are in place. And if Bailey's ideals are a little shakily presented—with some grating stereotypes, the occasional awkward attempt to introduce race issues, and confusion over a crusading humanitarian who abandons his children—it's still nice when a ripping yarn destined for the big-seller lists bothers with ideals at all.

Hilary Bailey champions maturity, not vengeance, in the face of adversity. What does Kate Saunders mean by presenting revenge as “a thing of beauty and a joy forever”? Society's belligerents might understand. But most women, like their equals, have more progressive matters to attend to.