



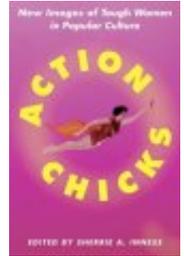
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## REVIEW

# Book Review: *Reel Knockouts* by Martha McCauley and Neel King

Written by [Lisa Alvarado](#)  
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*Reel Knockouts* celebrates and examines what the authors call "mean women." It is the first book-length treatment of violent women in the movies. Martha McCauley is a Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Technical and Neel King is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Belmont College in Nashville. Both have written and lectured extensively on the themes of gender, violence and popular culture.

*Reel Knockouts* does not pander to a traditional feminist critique, which is essentially anti-violence, which eschews any portrayal of women as perpetrators of violence as merely parroting the oppression of the patriarchy. McCaughey and King take the position that the traditional feminist movement offers an equally restrictive construct for women. A universe for women that is hemmed in by giving birth, forming community and nurturance alone is just as limiting as exclusive warrior culture restricting the lives of men.

The authors argue that it is not the business of analysts, artists and theorists to decide which images suit sexist reaction and which feminist revolution, which express dominance and which resistance. Rebellion never exists without oppression, and McCaughey and King reject the standard argument that any images of women in the movies bear the marks of their sexist, heterocentrist, white supremacist origins.

This volume studies violent women in the movies not merely as patriarchal pawns or broken promises but also as possible tools in the liberation of women from racial, class, gender and other political constraints that oppress women and deny them equal chances and equal rights.

The chapters deconstruct a variety of the most well-known of these new women. Starting with Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis in *Thelma and Louise*, Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, and Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in the *Alien* series, the impact of these strong, vengeful, sometimes "amoral" women are placed in a post-feminist context. They are not bound by conventional ideas of womanhood, love, romance or family. They are quintessential outsiders, sometimes outlaws, having more in common with the wave of male antiheroes made popular in the spaghetti Westerns of the late sixties and indie films of the seventies. But they live on their own terms, sometimes liberating themselves and others, always resisting external control.

The whole issue of how to portray violence enacted by women is a thorny and complex one. What I appreciated in this book was the author's willingness to allow all schools to contend. What emerges in this collection allows feminists and the public-at-large to question assumptions about gender, violence, pleasure, dominance, fantasy.

I agree with the assertion in *Reel Knockouts* that images of powerful women, capable of violence, capable of revenge are important ones to consider. I am not afraid that these portrayals show women as too deranged, too sexy, or that women will imitate the violence. I am excited at the prospect of looking at and accessing the powerful, and sometimes confronting dark impulses, if it leads to a fuller expression of the real self. I am also not afraid to examine in myself the ambiguous, ambivalent feelings about violence, and as artist, mold, deconstruct and exploit them.

[Lisa Alvarado](#) is a poet, novelist, and performance artist. She is the author of *The Housekeeper's Diary*, *Reclamo*, and *Sister Chicas*. In 2007, *Sister Chicas* was the 2nd place winner of the Mariposa/International Latino Book Award for Best 1st Novel in English. She also shares her views and literary criticism on La Bloga.

## Comments

