

ABACUS

Fiction/Susanna Rustin

Female masochism

Three of these novels by distinguished European writers share an image: that of a knife cutting human flesh.

Dacia Maraini's protagonist is Michela Canova, a radio journalist working in Rome on a series about unsolved crimes against women when her neighbour, Angela Bari, is murdered. The narrative traces Canova's investigation through a series of taped interviews.

Maraini is an outspoken campaigner for women's rights in Italy. Previous novels have dealt with historical cases of oppression. But the narrator of *Voices* is far from a didactic protester of wrongs.

Rather she offers a sophisticated analysis of seduction and the role of language. The "voices" of the title are the incompatible and changing accounts of the victim's life which Canova collects on her tape recorder and from which the truth must somehow be distilled.

As identities become enmeshed, Canova finds herself increasingly caught up. Through her female characters - the childlike Bari, the sister who is also a battered wife, and the prostitute Sabrina - Maraini shows how women can become complicit in the violence against them. Her detective story seems also to be a cautionary tale about the dangers of female masochism.

Where Maraini emphasises the importance of listening carefully - and critically - if we are to understand what people are really saying, Slavenca Drakulić, strangely for a novelist, takes as her starting point the limits of language.

Her characters, Tereza and

José, are foreign students in New York. The novel, narrated by Tereza, tells the story of their love affair: "I stopped writing my thesis when I met José... At first I thought it was because my language was shrinking, retreating into itself".

Where language fails, the body takes over, as the couple give themselves over to a totally consuming desire. "Like two desperate, surrounded terrorists", they retreat from the outside world, entirely immersed in each other. "The longer we were together, the more I

VOICES

by Dacia Maraini

Serpent's Tail £9.99, 248 pages

THE TASTE OF A MAN

by Slavenca Drakulić

Abacus £9.99, 212 pages

THE MISTRESS OF SILENCE

by Jacqueline Harpman

Harvill Press £8.99, 184 pages

SILK

by Alessandro Baricco

Harvill Press £6.99, 91 pages

felt that our skin and flesh were melting". A temporary separation moves Tereza to act, as her passion tips over into vampiric hunger, and her lover becomes her prey.

José's academic work concerns the 1972 air crash in the Andes, and the debate within the Catholic Church about the survivors' cannibalism. But this and other anthropological material sits uneasily with Tereza's description of the "destructive oblivion" of her relationship, and Drakulić's idea

that these grotesque scenes represent the limits of desire is hard to stomach.

The Mistress of Silence is the first of Jacqueline Harpman's novels to be translated from French into English. The scene is a closely guarded, Kafka-esque cage - until escape leads its 40 women prisoners out into a nameless, featureless desert. Unlike her companions the narrator has no memory of before, yet it is this curious, detached persona who manages to structure their absurd existence by learning to measure time. Counting the seconds and minutes until it was automatic, "I became a human clock."

Once on the move the female fugitives encounter many horrors. In time, the narrator finds herself called upon to perform a series of passionless, clinical mercy killings. Death looms large throughout. But the whole is too bizarre to be very sad. What Harpman seems to be gesturing at is the possibility of facing rationally a world absolutely without meaning.

Alessandro Baricco's *Silk* is a skilfully-told tale about a mid-19th century French silk trader who falls in love with a concubine. The rhythm of his journeys to the Orient, and Baricco's brilliant use of repetition, make the story a formal success. But for all its art there is something ridiculous in the love letter, or lust letter, addressed to "my master and beloved", which is the relationship's consummation - and which is translated for our travelling businessman by the madame of a brothel in Nimes. Perhaps "organ" works better in Italian. Having said which, the whole redeems itself with a striking twist - and all this in 91 pages.