

Ruth Picardie on avenging angels

Violent Femmes

Violent women are in vogue. Kathy Bates won an Oscar for her performance in *Misery* as an overweight, philistine and multiple child killer (in that order), Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis play two Southern belles with balls who go on a killing spree to symbolise their liberation in Ridley Scott's new film *Thelma And Louise*. The newspapers are full of real-life examples: Vienna's sisterhood of killer nurses, masterminded by the monstrous Waltraud Wagner; alleged serial killer Aileen Wuornos, currently awaiting

trial in a Florida prison. And in an eleventh-hour conversion to revolutionary feminism, Michael Winner is set to adapt Helen Zahavi's rape revenge fantasy, *Dirty Weekend*.

Eileen MacDonald's **Shoot The Women First** (*Fourth Estate*, hbk £16.99), a series of interviews with women terrorists, is therefore a timely contribution to the debate. An *ex-Observer* investigative journalist, she has gained access to the most security-conscious terrorist cells, both past and present. The book includes extensive



and probably exclusive interviews with 'brainwashed beauty' Kim Hyon Hui, the North Korean agent who blew up Korean Air Flight 858 to discourage the 1988 Olympic Games; Leila Khaled, the Palestinian hijacker who blew up an (empty) TWA plane in 1969; and Baader Meinhof founder-member Astrid Proll, as well as active members of the IRA and Basque separatist movement Eta.

Unfortunately, MacDonald's first-person interviews are constantly interrupted by her A-level theorising about women and violence. 'Men are traditionally seen as having a certain familiarity with violence', she writes. 'Whether as defenders or aggressors, they are expected to know how to fight. Women, by contrast, are associated with nurturing and caring, and still often revered by society as Madonna figures. They are the protectors and givers of life.' There's also some O-level psychology (women who lose a parent at an early age try to find a new family within a terrorist cell) and home-grown moralising. 'She was such an intelligent woman, yet she had wrecked her own life and the lives of countless others', is MacDonald's verdict on reformed Red Brigade activist Susanna Ronconi. 'If she had chosen differently she could have done so much good...' None of which is particularly useful in an ana-

lysis of the motivation and status of women working within terrorist organisations, and their relationship to male terrorists. Andreas Baader called all women 'cunts', but women like Astrid Proll still dominated the Red Army Faction.

MacDonald's prose is equally annoying - more Mills & Boon than reportage. 'Her mood suddenly swung from one of bravado to despondency,' is one typical description. 'She buried her head in her arms. For a few seconds there was silence, then she looked up, almost beseechingly. "Oh god, this is getting hard," she groaned.'

When they are allowed to break through, the women's voices are revealing, despite the android rhetoric. 'Our dreams of self-determination did not materialise and there was still oppression,' says one Eta activist. Maybe the poetry got lost in the translation.

Liveliest is Leila Khaled who blew up Flight 840 wearing an expensive white trouser suit, matching handbag and hat, telling the passengers to 'relax and drink champagne'. Completely eclipsing her (male) co-hijacker, she went on a publicity tour of the Middle East to celebrate her success. It is she who comes closest to proving Astrid Proll's dictum: 'Then, the most fantastic thing in the world was not to be a rock star but a revolutionary'.*