

KING KONG THEORY

VIRGINIE
DESPENTES

Translated by Stephanie Benson

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Cover design by John Yates/Stealworks

Text design by Drew Stevens

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Despentes, Virginie, 1969-

[King Kong théorie. English]

King Kong theory / by Virginie Despentes . translated by Stéphanie

Benson. — 1st Feminist Press ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-55861-657-8

1. Despentes, Virginie, 1969- 2. Authors, French—20th century—Biography.

3. Authors, French—21st century—Biography. 4. Feminism. I. Benson,

Stéphanie, 1959- II. Title.

PQ2664.E7895Z4613 2010

843.914—dc22

[B]

2009044139

For Karen Bach, Raffaella Anderson, and Coralie Trinh Thi

A GUN FOR EVERY GIRL

I AM WRITING AS AN UGLY ONE FOR THE UGLY ONES: THE OLD hags, the dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuck- ables, the neurotics, the psychos, for all those girls who don't get a look in the universal market of the consumable chick. I'm making no excuses for myself. I'm not complaining. I would never swap places, because it seems to me that being Virginie Despentes is a more interesting business than anything else going on out there.

I think it's wonderful that there are also women who love to seduce, who know how to seduce, others who know how to get a husband, women whose perfume is sex and others who smell of home-baked cakes for the children's tea. Wonderful that there are very gentle women, women completely at home in their femininity, young, exquisite women, flirtatious women, radiant women. I am delighted, really, for all those women who are happy with the way things are. I'm saying this without the slightest irony. It's just that I am not one of them. Of course I wouldn't write what I write if I were beautiful, so beautiful that I turned the head of every man I met. It's as a member of the lower working class of womanhood that I speak, that I spoke yesterday and am speaking again today. When I was on unemployment I was not ashamed of being a social outcast. Just furious. It's the same thing for being a woman: I am not remotely ashamed of not being a hot sexy number but I am livid that-as a girl who doesn't attract men-I am constantly made to feel as if I shouldn't even be around. We have always existed. We are just never featured in novels written by men, who only create women they want to have sex with. We have always existed, and never spoken. Even today, when women publish lots of novels, you rarely get female characters that are unattractive or plain, unsuited to loving men or to being loved by them. On the contrary, contemporary heroines adore men, meet them easily, sleep with them after just a couple of chapters, come in four lines, and they all enjoy sex. The character of the loser in the femininity stakes doesn't just appeal to me, she's essential to me, in the same way as the social, economic, or political loser is. I prefer the guys who don't make the cut for the simple reason that I myself often don't make it. And because generally speaking, humor and invention are to be found on our side. When you don't have what it takes to think highly of yourself, you tend to be more creative. As a girl, I am more King Kong than Kate Moss.

I'm the kind of girl you don't get married to, the kind you don't have babies with. I am writing as a woman who is always too much of everything-too aggressive, too noisy, too fat, too rough, too hairy, always too masculine, I am told. And yet it's my virile, masculine qualities that make me more than just any old social misfit. I owe to my very masculinity everything I like about my life, everything that has saved me. I am writing therefore as a woman incapable of attracting male attention, satisfying male desire, or being satisfied with a place in the shade. It's from here that I write, as an unattractive but ambitious woman, drawn to money I make myself, drawn to power, the power to do and to say no, drawn to the city rather than the home, excited by experience and not content with just hearing about it from others. I'm not into giving a hard-on to men that don't make me dream. It has never seemed obvious to me that good-lookers are having all that great a time. I have always felt ugly. I put up with it and now I'm starting to appreciate it for having saved me from a crap life in the company of nice, dull, small-town guys who would have taken me nowhere fast. I like myself as I am, more desiring than desirable.

So I am writing from here, as one of the left-overs, one of those weirdos, the ones who shave their heads, those who don't know how to dress, those who worry that they stink, those who have rotten teeth, those who don't know how to go about things, are never given presents by men, those who will fuck anyone who'll have them, the fat tarts, the skinny sluts, those whose cunts are always dry, those who have big bellies, those who would rather be men, those who behave as if they were men, those who think they're porn queens, who don't give a damn about guys but who are interested in their girlfriends, the ones with big asses and thick, dark body hair they don't wax, brutish, noisy women, who destroy everything that gets in their way, those who don't like perfume shops, whose red lipstick is too red, who haven't got the figure to dress like hookers and yet desperately want to, women who want to wear men's clothes and a beard in the street, those who want to show it all, those whose shyness is due to their hang-ups, those who don't know how to say no, those who are locked up in order to be controlled, women who are scary, pitiful ones, women who don't turn men on, those with flabby skin and a face full of wrinkles, those who dream of plastic surgery, of liposuction, of having their nose broken so it can be reset but can't afford it, women who look like the back of a bus, those who can only rely on themselves for protection, who don't know how to comfort others, who couldn't care less about their kids, those who like to get drunk in bars and collapse on the

floor, women who don't behave. And in the same vein, while I'm at it, I'm writing for men who don't want to protect, men who would like to be protective but don't know where to start, men who don't know how to fight, those who cry easily, those who aren't ambitious, competitive, well-hung or aggressive, men who are fearful, timid, vulnerable, men who prefer looking after their home to going out to work, men who are fragile, bald, too poor to be attractive, men who'd like to be fucked, men who don't want to be counted on, men who are scared to be alone at night. Because this ideal of the attractive but not whorish white woman, in a good marriage but not self-effacing, with a nice job but not so successful she outshines her man, slim but not neurotic over food, forever young without being disfigured by the surgeon's knife, a radiant mother not overwhelmed by diapers and homework, who manages her home beautifully without becoming a slave to housework, who knows a thing or two but less than a man, this happy white woman who is constantly shoved under our noses, this woman we are all supposed to work hard to resemble-never mind that she seems to be running herself ragged for not much reward-I for one have never met her, not anywhere. My hunch is that she doesn't exist.

Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929

however ferocious the attempted control-everyday life has shown us that men are by nature neither superior to nor even that different from women. What has seeped into our very bones is the idea that our independence is harmful. This message is passed on relentlessly by the media: just think how many articles have been written over the last twenty years, about women who terrify men or who remain single, as punishment for their ambition, or eccentricity. As if being widowed, abandoned, alone in time of war or suffering from violence were recent inventions. We have always had to manage by ourselves. Pretending that men and women got on better before the 1970s is a historical lie. We just saw less of each other.

In much the same way, motherhood has become the essential female experience, valued above all others. Giving life is where it's at. "Pro-maternity" propaganda has rarely been so extreme. They must be joking, the modern equivalent of the double constraint: "Have babies, it's wonderful, you'll feel more fulfilled and feminine than ever," but do it in a society in freefall in which paid work is a condition of social survival but is guaranteed to no one, and especially not to women. Give birth in cities where accommodation is precarious, schools have surrendered the fight, and children are subject to the most vicious mental assault through advertising, TV, the internet, and so on. Without children you will never be fulfilled as a woman, but bringing up kids in decent conditions is almost impossible. It is essential that women feel like failures-that they be made to feel as if they've made the wrong choice. We are held responsible for a failure that is in fact collective and cross-gender. The weapons used against our gender are specific, but the method can be applied to men too. A good consumer is an insecure consumer.

A striking, and depressingly revealing fact: the feminist revolution of the 1970s did not create any substantial reorganization of childcare. Nor of the domestic space. Voluntary work, therefore female. Politically as well as economically we have not moved into the public domain, we have not taken it over. We have not created the babysitting or childcare facilities we need, nor have we created the industrialized systems for housework that would have emancipated us. We didn't invest in these economically profitable sectors, either to become rich or to serve our own communities. Why didn't anyone invent the equivalent of Ikea for childcare or Mac for housework? The public domain has remained masculine. We lack confidence in our right to take over politics-it's the least of our worries,