

INTERVIEW

## **A Year on Earth with Mr Hell — the sex book that's stirred the art world**

**Young Kim, Malcolm McLaren's partner, tells Helen Rumbelow about her erotic memoir, inspired by punk lover Richard Hell**

There is something extra-enjoyable about reading what we'll dress up with the phrase "high-class erotica", and when my boyfriend glances across the pillows, noticing me a little more distracted than usual, asks, "What are you reading?" I can glance innocently at its beautiful red-bound cover and say: "Oh, just something to do with Malcolm McLaren and the history of punk." This sends him back to sleep.

I mean, it's not like we need permission to indulge in "high-class erotica" in these troubled times; perhaps we need more on prescription. This slim volume called *A Year on Earth with Mr Hell* is on one level a fabulous escapist fantasy involving two cool people in amazing clothes having a fine time taking them off in glamorous hotel rooms. One journalist judged the book a "marmalade-dropper" in shocked tones, after diligently reading every word.

It also happens to be true. The author is Young Kim, the Korean-American woman who was the inseparable partner of McLaren for the last 12 years of his life. This book is not directly about McLaren, the British creative with cultural ADHD who was godfather to punk, the Sex Pistols and a raft of pop and fashion trends.

Rather it is what happens when a widowed woman in her forties decides to have some fun, and by fun I mean a man called Richard Hell, who is not well known in Britain, but was a legendary punk rocker in New York, possibly the style template McLaren used for the Sex Pistols. Latterly, Hell has become a writer who documents his sex life. Yet when Kim decided to turn their short recent affair into literary filth, Hell was apparently not happy.

You can imagine McLaren, who died 11 years ago aged 64, loving this, as a project at least. The outrageousness of the book, for a start, would no doubt have tickled a man whose famous punk-fashion shop was called SEX. There is a reason McLaren fell in love with the unshockability and mischief of Kim: she was only 26 when she walked up to McLaren in a Paris hotel bar. Now at 49 she is even more in control. Despite dissenting opinions from people such as former Sex Pistols frontman John Lydon she writes in the

book that Malcolm “was a submissive creature really” and that she is “more predator than prey”.

Some in the literary world have drooled over *A Year on Earth*. Greil Marcus, the music critic, called it “the most graphically effective sex writing I’ve read in a long time”; the British journalist Matthew D’Ancona compared her to Anaïs Nin and declared it “a truly modern work of art”. But the book also manages, in its genre-busting way, to be a romantic Valentine to her time with McLaren. There is lust for Hell, but love stories about McLaren. “This book is very Malcolm to me,” she says.

So begins our Zoom conversation, which ranges over the new Danny Boyle TV series about the Sex Pistols to her disparaging summation of Vivienne Westwood, McLaren’s ex-partner. She is calling from her friend’s house in Los Angeles. Kim is indeed “young” looking and slight, but determined. Hell was only the third man she had any relationship with, yet she is confidently unabashed about being a middle-aged woman seeking and writing about her own pleasure.

“I am relatively inexperienced, still on a level quite sheltered, still pretty naive about certain things,” she says. “But people say I do write particularly well about sex, which is apparently difficult to do.”

Is she nervous about publication? “No, not at all,” she says. She came to America from South Korea at the age of one, and led an oppressively obedient life until she got to Yale law school and started to look at the creative world and think: “Why do other people get to do what they want?”

“I consciously made a decision when I left law school that I would live a life that I wanted to live and to do things creatively that I wanted to do.”

It was, she says, “a horrible experience that really upset my parents”, but fleeing that life of obligation made her the radical fashion student that rocked up to McLaren and fell in love. “I would have died if I could not be with him,” she writes in the book.

She learnt from McLaren the puckish fun of disrupting. In the book, planning an act of romantic audaciousness with Hell, she cites McLaren: “Malcolm always said, ‘To be bad is to be good and to be good is boring.’ I was going to throw a bomb. And like all bombs it could blow up in my face.”

Kim read *Fifty Shades of Grey*, out of interest, before she started this book, found the writing “pretty terrible” and an archetypal “Beauty and the Beast” plotline that has been designed to appeal to women throughout the ages. By contrast Kim’s book is understated and precise. Her story is modern: a woman who got what she wanted, without punishment. In a cheeky inversion of the male-dominated punk scene as well as the history of male creativity, she calls Hell her “muse”.

“Sometimes I feel with this project I’ve become Malcolm. I started to write a memoir about him, which was anguish, but this project has been pure joy,” Kim says.

What, then, about the 71-year-old Hell? He asked Kim to describe their encounters in sexualised letters, but he was less keen when they sparked the book.

“I’d say you would really have to ask Richard to know. I think for him it was private. Even though he’s public with his own sexual activity, from his perspective, I don’t think he enjoyed the fact that the other person in the room decided to give her version of events. I think he liked owning it.”

I suppose, I say, if it was a man writing about an affair with a woman in this kind of detail, it would seem exploitative. “I wouldn’t have written a book like this and I couldn’t have done this to someone who doesn’t normally write about his sex life, honestly and graphically. He’s known for this. If someone had written a book like this about, say, Henry Miller, would you think he should feel violated?”

Apart from a few barbs about his weight, fidelity and use of Viagra, Hell is written like a Byronic hero. Bret Easton Ellis, the novelist, recently interviewed Kim on his podcast and said if someone wrote a book like that about him, he’d be very happy.

The pair are no longer in touch, but Kim insists she feels gratitude to Hell for giving her sheer pleasure in sex and writing.

The affair re-awoke Kim to life after years of grieving. “It wasn’t a profound thing, like with Malcolm, but romance is extremely healing.” McLaren died of a rare asbestos-related cancer called mesothelioma, possibly from his deliberate shattering of the old ceiling of SEX, the Kings Road shop, to make the place look like a bomb had hit it.

“It’s really sad. I never imagined he would die so quickly. I thought he’d have another 20 years,” she says.

Kim works as a consultant in many aspects of the arts. As sole executor and heir of McLaren’s estate, she is also a champion and archivist of his work. I put to her some of the remarks made by Westwood in her 2014 memoir. “Because he’s dead,” Westwood stated, “I don’t mind saying this: he behaved incredibly cruelly. Professionally, personally, in every way.”

Kim dismisses this; it jars with her memory. “I didn’t know personally how he was with Vivienne. That relationship was not built on a mutual desire. He was entrapped and he did his best...”

All this makes her “apprehensive” about the new Danny Boyle mini-series *Pistol*, based on the memoir of the Sex Pistols’ guitarist Steve Jones. Jones is far more grateful to McLaren than Lydon. Still, Kim is nervous which McLaren will appear on screen. “I wish I knew more about it... but what can I do?”

This book is available through an art gallery rather than a mainstream publisher, as Kim wanted to treat it as an art project. I think it has mass appeal. Many women won't idolise Hell or McLaren. But Kim? The Kim of the book is a sex pirate. A friend remarked to her that the book has nothing of the domestic in it, no cooking, or cleaning at all. "You know I'm not domestic," Kim replied. "Why would I have anything domestic in my book?"

This, to many women, and especially right now, is intensely arousing.

*A Year on Earth with Mr Hell* is available from [ubugallery.com/store](http://ubugallery.com/store), at \$30