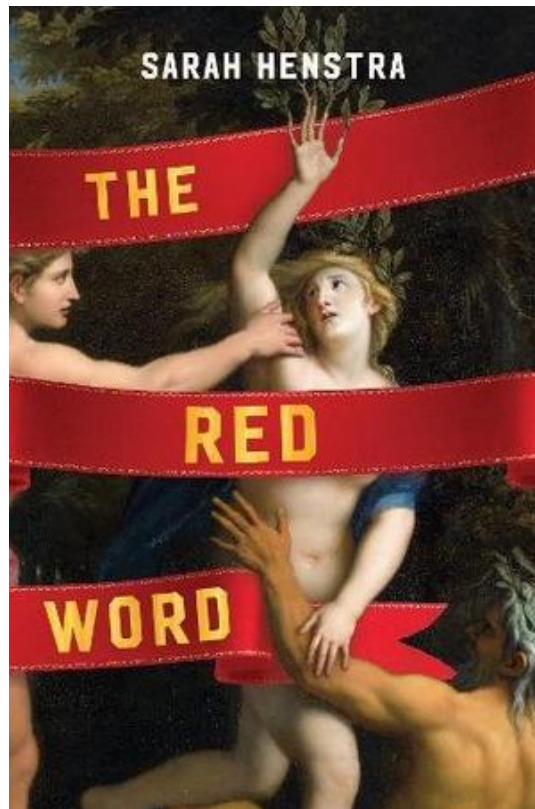


# THE RED WORD | Kirkus Reviews

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## THE RED WORD

by Sarah Henstra · RELEASE DATE: March 13, 2018

Timely and brilliant.

An aesthetically arresting interrogation of rape culture on campus.

Like many an epic tale, this is the story of a war between two great houses. On one side there is the fraternity Gamma Beta Chi, also known as “Gang Bang Central.” On the other, Raghurst, the home of a collective of radical feminists. Sophomore Karen Huls lands between these two extremes when she wakes up in the backyard Gamma Beta Chi shares with Raghurst and remembers, “I had sex with somebody.” The “red word” of the title is rape, “a double-sided axe brandished in a circle over the head.” This novel is, among other things, an interrogation of what that word means and whom it hurts. Karen moves into Raghurst, dazzled by the heady discourse of her new housemates and the charismatic professor who serves as their mentor. But she is also an insider at GBC—she’s dating one brother and intensely, irrationally attracted to another. As a plan to expose the frat as an epicenter of violent misogyny spirals out of control, Karen is caught in the middle. And she is the first to ask the question that becomes the central theme of this book: “Are the right people suffering?” (e.g., being punished). This is also a question that hangs over Classical tragedy. The women of Raghurst are keenly interested in the ways in which myth shapes reality, and Henstra’s text is shot through with antique allusions. The narrative begins with an invocation of the muse. There are references to Artemis and Maenads and Medusa, female figures who pose a threat to men by transgressing the rules that govern women. Helen of Troy becomes a sort of mirror for Karen as she explores the limits

and possibilities of female agency in a patriarchal world. And, at moments of high drama, Henstra's language echoes Homer. Dyann Brooks-Morriss, Raghurst's leader, is "battlethirsty" and "redglistening." Bruce Comfort, the frat brother who fuels Karen's fantasies, is given epithets like "heavengoing" and "goldbright."

Timely and brilliant.

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