

The Red Word by Sarah Henstra — when fraternity life clashes with feminism

[ft.com/content/81269ce8-77ed-11e9-b0ec-7dff87b9a4a2](https://www.ft.com/content/81269ce8-77ed-11e9-b0ec-7dff87b9a4a2)



© Getty

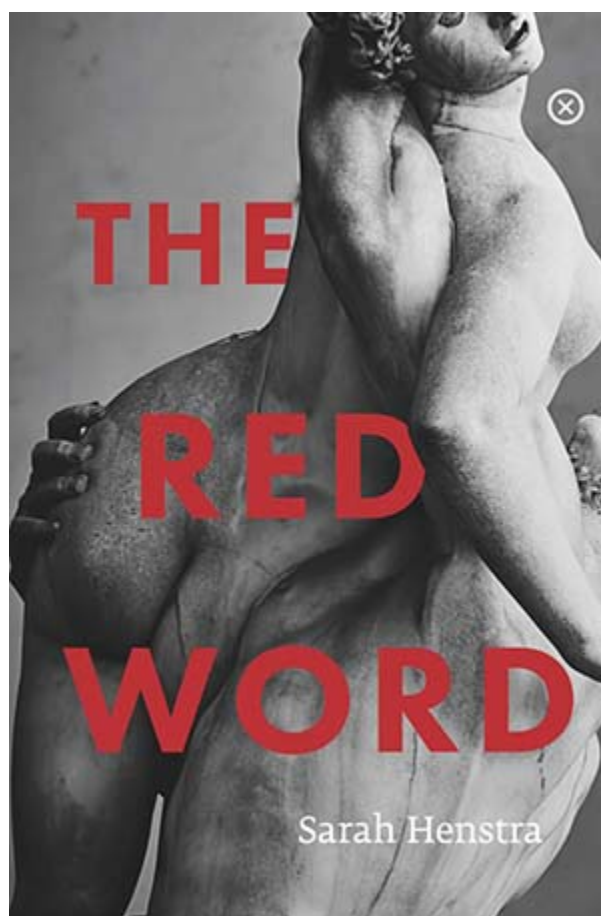
0

Are the right people suffering? This question comes to preoccupy Karen Huls, the 19-year-old protagonist of Sarah Henstra's bravura battle cry, *The Red Word*. Set on an Ivy League college campus in the 1990s, the Canadian's first novel for adults — she's the author of the YA title *Mad Miss Mimic* — is steeped in the Greek myths that pose the same inquiry.

"The trouble with myth is the way it shirks blame," thinks Karen in the first chapter, which is set 15 years after the events about to be recounted. "It makes violent death as unavoidable as weather. All that tragic destiny lets everyone off the hook. Some bored god comes kicking up gravel and, just like that, a noble house explodes into carnage."

Henstra's tale pits two modern-day "noble houses" against each other: fraternity house Gamma Beta Chi (GBC), less illustriously known as "Gang Bang Central", and Raghurst, the residence of a group of queer, radical feminists, led by Dyann, purveyor of herbal abortion remedies and stalwart presence at the campus Women's Centre. Dyann is the "teller of unbearable truths", or, as some characters prefer to put it, a "feminazi".

Karen first meets the Raghurst gang when she wakes up on their lawn the morning after a party at GBC. “I had sex with somebody,” she groggily reports; the women assume she has been raped. Karen is quick to correct them. “Rape,” she thinks, “was a sharp word, a greedy word. It was a double-sided axe brandished in a circle over the head. It drew all kinds of attention to itself.”



Words matter — an accusation of assault, be it true or false, is a label impossible to remove — but they are easily dismissed. A brother will talk respectfully about the fraternity’s “inner sanctum”, but he is quick to mock a female-friendly “sacred space”. Conversations about consent are more nuanced today than ever, but Henstra transports us back to when the language we use to describe sexual assault wasn’t part of everyday discourse.

Karen moves into Raghurst, where she receives a crash course in feminism and enrolls in “Women and Myth”, a class taught by the Raghurst women’s unofficial mentor, Dr Sylvia Esterhazy. But at the same time she also begins dating the frat boy she slept with that first night. Thus, when her housemates attempt to expose the misogynistic violence at the heart of fraternity life, Karen finds herself torn between the two camps, unsure of where her loyalties — and her morals — lie.

The Red Word echoes Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* — another Greek myth-soaked, Ivy League campus-set novel in which a tutor inspires cult-like devotion in their students — but there is nothing derivative about Henstra’s tale. *The Red Word* is a beautifully written, gripping take on the battle between the

sexes. Both houses are built on mythologies shored up by unquestioning allegiances, and the chaos that ensues leaves casualties on all sides.

The Red Word , by Sarah Henstra, *Tramp Press*, RRP£12, 326 pages