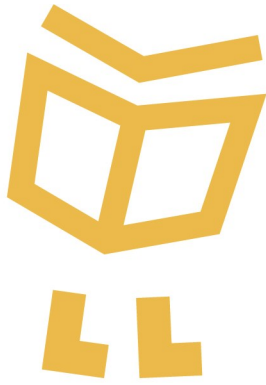


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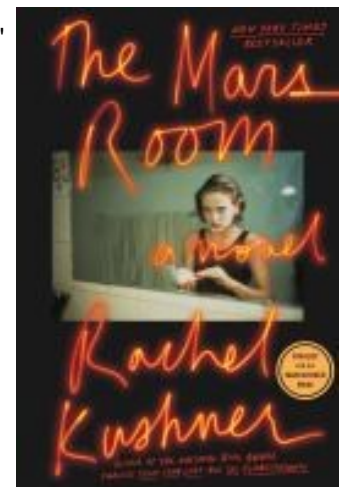


The Mars Room

Rachel Kushner

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the book, before she is incarcerated, Romy Hall, the central protagonist of *The Mars Room*, says, "I said everything was fine but nothing was. The life was being sucked out of me. The problem was not moral. It had nothing to do with morality. These men dimmed my glow. Made me numb to touch, and angry" (page 26). What role do morality and virtue play in the telling of Romy's story? Does morality factor into who is judged guilty and who is judged innocent?
2. The San Francisco depicted in this book is perhaps not a classic one of, as Romy puts it, "rainbow flags or Beat poetry or steep crooked streets," but "fog and Irish bars and liquor stores all the way to the Great Highway" (page 33). Was the San Francisco depicted in the novel a surprise to you? What significance do you read into the scene with the "Scummerz" and the young boy making noodles on the stove? Why is everyone from her past and all her memories so remote and vanished? Is this the nature of childhood and the erasure of cities, or something else more complicated and individual to do with Romy?
3. The overwhelming majority of people, and certainly middle-class people, will never spend a single day of their lives in jails and prisons. Should those who don't have that dark destiny worry for those who do? What impression do you have, after reading *The Mars Room*, about individual agency, and who goes to prison in this country and who doesn't?
4. "Sammy was my big sister and I was Button's, and Conan was something like the dad. We had a family" (page 241). In order to cope with their difficult surroundings the women of Stanville create familial bonds with each other. Do these women nurture one another or is their "family" more of an alliance of protection? What are the benefits of a "family" arrangement? The risks?
5. *The Mars Room's* title comes from the name of the strip club where Romy works before she is incarcerated. What does the phrase "Mars Room" bring to mind? What do these two worlds—a central California women's prison and a San Francisco strip club—share?
6. In the final moments of the book, Romy is in the forest, bathed in light: "I emerged from the tree and turned into the light, not slow. I ran toward them, toward the light" (page 336). There is something both heavenly and hellish in this description. Discuss the dichotomies: Is the scene ultimately despairing or hopeful?
7. In the final paragraph of the book, Romy reflects on giving Jackson life. She calls giving life "everything." Is this a comment on her own life, or some manner of reinterpreting life as extending into other regions beyond the one she's been given and that has been taken away? Is it some way of being part of something in the world that is larger than she is and that goes beyond her? What is the import of the final sentence? Is your sense that the world, at the end, is a human world, a natural world, both, or neither?



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About the Author

Rachel Kushner's new novel, *The Mars Room*, will be published on May 1st, 2018. Kushner is also the author of *The Flamethrowers*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and a New York Times Top Five Novel of 2013. Her debut novel, *Telex from Cuba*, was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award and a New York Times bestseller and Notable Book. A collection of her early work, *The Strange Case of Rachel K*, was published by New Directions in 2015. Her fiction has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *the Paris Review*. She is the recipient of a 2013 Guggenheim Fellowship and the 2016 Harold D. Vursell Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Via the author's website (<http://rachelkushner.com/about.html>)

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