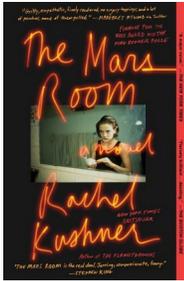


# Books by the Stack



## **The Mars Room by Rachel Kushner**

A woman begins serving two life sentences at Stanville Women's Correctional Facility deep in 2003 California's Central Valley, reflecting on the San Francisco of her youth and her relationship with her young son while navigating the harsh realities of a bare-essentials life of casual violence at the hands of the guards and her fellow inmates.

**Why you'll like it:** *Complex, well-developed characters. Strong sense of place.*

**About the Author:** Rachel Kushner's debut novel, *Telex from Cuba*, was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Her second novel, *The Flamethrowers*, was a finalist for the 2013 National Book Award. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2013. Her fiction and essays have appeared in numerous publications including *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *The Believer*, and *Grand Street*. She made the Bestseller List in 2018 with her title, *The Mars Room*.

### **Questions for Discussion**

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 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 the 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 familiar 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. After recounting an emotional story from childhood, Conan says, "There are some good people out there...some really good people" (page 252). Discuss the acts of generosity in this novel. Which ones stand out? These women seem to start at disadvantages. They take wrong turns. The prison system lacks mercy or a shot at redemption. Would many of these characters' lives have been different with more, or greater, acts of generosity?

- 6.** Straining the edges of a reader's compassion perhaps is the character Doc, the "dirty cop" who had been involved with Betty LaFrance and is eventually strangled by his cellmate. Why do you think Kushner included him and his story in the book? Does he achieve a kind of unexpected likability, and if so, how?
- 7.** Romy says, "To stay sane you formed a version of yourself you could believe in" (page 269), and earlier, "Jackson believed in the world" (page 156). Kushner makes a connection between the wide-eyed optimism of youth and the crushing realities of what the world can be for those born without power or wealth, and for those who have made irreversible mistakes. Discuss the role that Jackson serves in the novel. What does he symbolize to Romy?
- 8.** "Part of the intimacy with nature that you acquire is the sharpening of the senses. Not that your hearing and eyesight become more acute, but you notice things more" (page 299). This is presumably the voice of Ted Kaczynski, but its placement suggests a link to Romy's escape into nature. Why does she end up alone in the woods? What does this say about the human need for connections with the outside? In what other ways does Romy seem to be shut off from the outside world/ What role could a connection with nature play in rehabilitation
- 9.** What role does gender play throughout the novel? What differences did you see between the experiences of incarcerated men and incarcerated women? How did gender factor into Romy's trial and sentencing?
- 10.** Serenity Smith is a transgender woman whose presence generates an outsized reaction from the women of Stanville. Discuss the controversy among the prisoner concerning this character. How do the surroundings contribute to their reaction to her? And what does Serenity's predicament say about the structure of prison? What is society to do with people who cannot assimilate into the caged spaces allotted for them?
- 11.** Hauser can be seen in different lights. Was he a predator, or was he a man who meant well but could not resist temptation? Discuss the effects of his actions on Romy?
- 12.** *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?
- 13.** 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 helpful?
- 14.** 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?

*(Questions provided by the publisher)*

