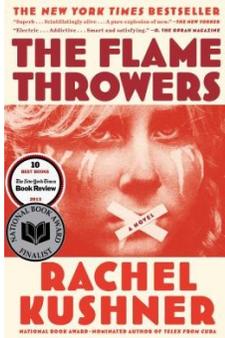


Books by the Stack



The Flamethrowers by Rachel Kushner

Reno comes to New York intent on turning her fascination with motorcycles and speed into art. Her arrival coincides with an explosion of activity – artists colonize a deserted and industrial SoHo, stage actions in the East Village, and blur the line between life and art.

Why you'll like it: 1970s New York, gritty, coming of age.

About the Author: Rachel Kushner's New York Times bestselling novel *The Flamethrowers* was a finalist for the 2013 National Book Award, the 2014 Folio Prize, the James Tait Black Prize, and was chosen as one of the five best novels of the year by the New York Times. Her debut novel, *Telex from Cuba*, was reviewed on the cover of the NY Times Book Review and was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, winner of the California Book Award, and a New York Times bestseller and Notable Book. Kushner's fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and the *Paris Review*. She is the recipient of a 2013 Guggenheim Fellowship, and 2016 winner of the Howard D. Vursell Award for her prose style, from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (*Amazon*).

Questions for discussion

1. Reno wants to create Land Art in the manner of iconic artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. Why does she leave the West, where both of those famous figures chose to make their work, for New York City? Is the contemporary art world accessible to most people? Or is it somewhat elitist?
2. On her trip back West for the speed trials at the Bonneville salt flats, Reno watches a couple literally playing with fire at a gas station. A man flicks matches at spilled gasoline on his girlfriend's legs. In another scene, a truck driver tells Reno she won't look nearly as good in a body bag. What do these interactions imply about the world Reno inhabits?
3. Reno reflects that Stretch, the maintenance man at the motel near the salt flats, had said her name "like he believed he knew her." And yet readers never learn her actual name. Why do you think the author chose to leave her nameless? Would we know her better if we knew the name that Stretch uttered?
4. Were you surprised Reno wiped out on the salt flats? Why or why not?
5. What first got Sandro's father into motorcycles? To what extent was his lustful desire for Marie a factor?
6. As a young person, Sandro's father encounters a gang of subversives in Rome. What are these rabble-rousers rejecting about the "old" Italy? What is exciting to them about machines, and the future? About going to fight in World War One? Are their expectations about the war met, or not?

7. Giddle, who claims to work at a coffee shop as a kind of conceptual performance, tells Reno the most cowardly acts are to exhibit ambition, to become famous, and to kill yourself. Is this yet one more performance, or is there some honesty in what she says? Do you have the sense that Giddle is more naïve than Reno, or less? More or less wise to the ways of the art world? To the ways of men?
8. Reno is a “China girl” on film stock leader, which her boss Marvin says is “as much a part of the film as its narrative,” despite her being unseen and in the margin. Is there any thematic echo of this in Reno’s presence in the novel? She is the narrator, but often others (mostly men) with stronger personalities drown her out. Perhaps find an image of a China girl online and talk about these mysterious film lab secretaries who posed in the now gone era of celluloid film.
9. How would you describe the relationship between Stanley Kastle and his wife Gloria? Do you think their behavior and antagonism is a kind of game, or something darker?
10. Is it simply bad luck to be hit with a meteorite while sitting in the kitchen? If so, why does Reno imagine the scenario of a bored housewife regarding it as something special, a kind of destiny?
11. Reno says that the smell of gasoline on the crowd of people in Rome—and the disconnect between that world and the one she grew up in—made her “sad for Scott and Andy in a way [she] could not explain” (284). If you had to explain it for her, what would you say?
12. The theme of time seems to crop up in various ways. Reno says that “curler time was about living the now with a belief that a future, an occasion for set hair, existed.” What do you think she means? Is Reno herself in “curler time”? Meanwhile, Sandro’s father says that unlike men, women “are trapped in time.” What makes him say this? Do you agree with him?
13. Do you think Ronnie is being unfair when he “demonstrates” for Reno “the uselessness of the truth”? Or do you think she had it coming? Is Ronnie a sympathetic character despite being incapable of sincerity?
14. Why do you think we suddenly hear from Sandro directly, near the close of the novel? Does he sufficiently account for his choices, when he shares with the reader his “side” of things?
15. After waiting all day for Gianni to ski down into France, Reno gives up in order to move on “to the next question.” (383) How has Reno changed by the end of the novel, and why do you think the author chose to end on this melancholy and ambiguous note? Would it have been more satisfying if Reno had triumphed by the end, found her way to love and success? Or would you have felt manipulated?

(Questions by publisher)



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