

The author asks: Is America unredeemable?

Rachel Kushner's novel *The Mars Room*

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Rachel Kushner, *The Mars Room*, New York: Scribner, 2018, 352 pp.

Rachel Kushner's third novel, *The Mars Room*, concerns itself with depicting life inside a maximum-security women's prison in California and related matters. All the brutality and human degradation of America's prison-industrial complex are effectively and memorably on display here. But artistic and other difficulties arise when Kushner portrays the broader situation outside of prison as little more than equally painful and miserable. This limits the truth and impact of the book.

Kushner (born 1968) is the author of two previous novels. *Telex from Cuba* (2008) focuses on the lives of Americans in Cuba working for the United Fruit Company (the US multinational corporation infamous for its colonialist exploitation and political interference in the region) on the eve of the 1959 seizure of power by Fidel Castro and his guerrilla forces. The work has vivid descriptions of the lives of American managers and their families in Oriente Province in contrast to the lives and conditions of Cubans. The novel conveys a feeling of decline and finality not only about American colonial life on the island, but also American life in general.

Her second novel, *The Flamethrowers* (2013), ranges across the history of the last century, from Milan at the end of the First World War to a Brazilian rubber plantation. Most of the novel, though, is set in the late 1970s. The main character, Reno, a woman in her early 20s, races motorcycles in Utah, moves to New York City and meets an artist who introduces her not only to the art world but also to Italian high society, from which she eventually finds her way to the Italian leftist protest movement.

The figures and ideas that dominate each of the different but significant and volatile social movements or settings in *The Flamethrowers* do not make an apparent impression on Reno. There are oblique references to Andy Warhol, for example, but none of the New York artists has anything favorable or unfavorable to say about him, even in passing. The tensions present in the New York of the period only receive a surface treatment. We see a radical gang that steals food and redistributes it to the poor, but the near bankruptcy of the city several years earlier, in 1975, is not considered by either the author or the characters.

As she does with the New York art world, Kushner depicts the tumult of the left-wing autonomist movement in Italy, but without adequate depth. She presents a hotbed of radicalism where there is oddly little political discussion. Characters are concerned with their love affairs, but terms such as "Communist" or "Christian Democrat" and the names of figures such as left academic Antonio Negri, much less Antonio Gramsci, Marx or Lenin, never come up, as they surely did in the intense political culture of Italy at the time.

In other words, social life is also left at a surface level in *The Flamethrowers* and lacks historical concreteness and complexity. A scene of the looting during the 1977 New York City blackout resembles a street demonstration in Rome, for example: wild, spontaneous, elemental.

In an afterword to the novel, Kushner explains that she wanted to "conjure New York as an environment of energies, sounds, sensations.

Not as a backdrop, a place that could resolve into history and sociology and urbanism," and similarly, she sees the Italian "insurrectionary...foment" of the 1970s as "a loose wave of people, all over Italy, who came together for various reasons at various times to engage in illegality and play, and to find a way to act, to build forms of togetherness." *The Flamethrowers* suffers from a haphazard and noncommittal treatment of the historical moment in which its characters live.

At its best, there are echoes of *Underworld* (1997) by American novelist Don DeLillo (a friend of Kushner's and an influence) in *The Flamethrowers*, but more in its form than in the greater accuracy and density of the history in DeLillo's novel.

The Mars Room, Kushner's most recent novel, centers on Romy Hall, who has been sentenced, without a competent or caring lawyer, to two life terms plus six years for murdering a man who was stalking her.

Romy narrates her life inside the fictional Stanville Women's Correctional Facility and her life before prison. We also hear from other characters, inside and outside Stanville: some of Romy's fellow inmates, a killer cop in a men's penitentiary. Romy's stalker has a voice, too, as does Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, an actual figure known for his anti-technology and anti-industrialization views backed up by terrorism. Kushner features the story of Gordon Hauser, a former PhD student from Berkeley who has taken a job as a teacher in the California correctional system.

The scenes set inside the prison ring true with their picture of the authorities' constant humiliation of the inmates. Some chapters simply list the restrictions on colors that visitors may wear. Inmates may not hold hands or hug, and a snitch is always present to tell a corrections officer if they do. When a woman dies on a prison transport bus, a corrections officer examines her and merely calls out "nonresponsive."

"I don't plan on living a long life," Romy says when she is incarcerated, "Or a short life, necessarily. I have no plans at all. The thing is you keep existing whether you have a plan to do so or not, until you don't exist, and then your plans are meaningless."

Scenes from the lives of Kushner's characters outside prison, especially Romy, make up a large part of the novel, and this not only rounds out and humanizes them, but also determines the premise of the novel: that there is a continuity, and even a causal relationship, between life in the US and incarceration. Romy's descriptions of the disregard for justice by almost everyone during her appearances in court stand out.

The author treats most of the characters compassionately (more so the women than the men), but she largely renders their lives cold and joyless in a manner characteristic of a good deal of recent American fiction that treats the lives of the most oppressed social layers. Even the lives of *The Mars Room*'s middle-class characters seem stunted.

Romy, for example, has a heroin-addicted mother and describes her youth in a morally and physically ugly San Francisco.

Romy takes drugs throughout her youth (although she does not appear to

use them as an adult) and ends up working in a particularly sleazy strip club, the Mars Room. The performers offer lap dances and are sometimes available for more. Family and friends are not a part of Romy's life. It is the 1990s, though there is not much to indicate the time: no description of fashion or music, no events on the news.

The character explains, in a typical passage: "I said everything was fine but nothing was. The life was being sucked out of me. The problem was not moral. It was nothing to do with morality. These men dimmed my glow. Made me numb to touch, and angry. I gave, and got something in exchange, but it was never enough. I extracted from the wallets—which is how I thought of the men, as walking wallets—as much as I possibly could. The knowledge that it was not a fair exchange coated me in a certain film. Something brewed in me over the years I worked at the Mars Room, sitting on laps, deep into this flawed exchange. The thing in me brewed and foamed. And when I directed it—a decision that was never made; instead, instincts took over—that was it."

The women, the staff, the customers all live in an advanced state of misery. Romy has a child by a bouncer. The child becomes her one joy, but almost no phase of her life resolves itself into anything better. She is subsequently stalked by a customer. She escapes his presence and the Mars Room by making her way to Los Angeles, where she finds a sort of normalcy, but life overall is grim, and deep emotional attachments are few and far between. The author does not dispel the sense that Romy is somehow fated to be in prison.

Kushner also relates the thoughts and memories of Doc, a killer cop connected with one of the inmates on death row in Stanville. From his maximum-security protective custody lock-up, he considers and describes the people he has killed.

There is nothing about life in his police department and we don't get a sense of a police milieu, but we are struck by an extended memory of Doc's as a boy when he saw President Richard Nixon playing the piano on the stage at the Grand Ole Opry in 1974, a few months before he resigned his office. It is an obscene sight and an episode from a cheap, false society that enters the psyche of the novel—but, to what end? Is this another example of a horrible America that produced police murderers?

After Romy, perhaps the most significant character in the novel is Gordon Hauser, the former graduate student at UC Berkeley. Before he took a job teaching in prison to make ends meet, he was writing a dissertation on Henry David Thoreau. When he is transferred to Stanville, he lives in an isolated cabin, like the subject of his dissertation.

But there is little genuine relation here to Thoreau. A friend tells him that he is living much more like the Unabomber, Kaczynski, and thereafter Kushner inserts selections from Kaczynski's journals as chapters (the journal entries are genuine: Kushner obtained them from her friend, artist James Benning, and they are published here for the first time). Kaczynski's paranoid and violent response to almost any irritation seems to stand as a symbol for the America outside of prison. Kushner, no doubt, is implicitly contrasting this to Thoreau's concern for the higher faculties of man.

In a more compassionate scene, Hauser begins to research the inmates he teaches. He comes across horrible and stupid crimes, but he puts them into the context of poverty and abuse. But is that all there is to them? Are the poorest people in America foredoomed to prison or are there alternatives that might be revealed in a rounded and complex existence that is something more than dogged oppression and abuse?

Kushner describes life in a maximum-security prison based on an enormous amount of research. She is a member of Justice Now, an advocacy group, and counts prisoners and ex-prisoners among her friends. Her sympathies are with the downtrodden. In one interview, she commented that "no one I have met in prison had anything like a fair chance, from the very start of their lives."

The weakness of the novel lies in the quality and content of the America

outside of prison and how it conditions the miserable life in the penitentiary.

"Individual destinies recede and one sees a set of relations, an arrangement, a set of allocations," Kushner has said about prisoners in a profile in the *New Yorker*. But which "relations" and "allocations"? This requires a deeper, more complex and coherent approach to social life in the United States, with attention paid to the conflict between social classes and its explosive implications. Otherwise, prison and every other sort of barbarity afflicting the working class end up seeming inevitable and unstoppable.

This is a dismal view of society, and although the author rejects the effects on the poorest Americans, no one anywhere in *The Mars Room*, incarcerated or not, has a plausible way out or feels much hope.

Artistic decisions are made under the specific historical conditions in which an artist has matured, been educated and assessed her experiences and the world around her. Kushner, born in 1968, developed as a writer in a period of political retrogression: the Reagan years in the US, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the suppression by the trade unions of strikes, the ever-mounting enrichment of a thin layer up top and the impoverishment of the bottom 90 percent, the ever-booming art market.

The dominant irrationalism and postmodernism and the worship of subjectivism on the universities and in the art world are the principal analytical "methods" that have been readily available for writers to make sense (or not) of all of this.

Life in America for Kushner is violent, coarse, primal and, in the broadest sense, *unconscious* and perhaps arbitrary or accidental. It is telling when Romy rejects books (gifts from Hauser) such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Willa Cather's *My Antonia* in favor of works by Charles Bukowski and Denis Johnson's *Jesus's Son*.

A whole generation of artists, some of them with the best of intentions, lags far behind in its sensitivity to the deeper currents of social development—including the inevitable emergence of mass opposition to the existing order—that are beginning to assert themselves openly once more.



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