Life on Mars

Rachel Kushner's new novel, *The Mars Room*, is a study in empathy.

Rob Spillman

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"There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford." So said John Bradford, a 16th century British chaplain, as a line of poor convicts filed past him toward their executions. Over the centuries, the phrase has become personalized to whomever is speaking, i.e. "There, but for the grace of God, go I," and has come to embody empathetic thinking. For Bradford, living in the volatile Age of Reformation, that empathy was no doubt based in a genuine fear of being executed. Not long after becoming the chaplain to the reformer King Edward VI and helping institute Protestantism in England, his patron, Edward VI, died while still a teenager. Edward's successor, Mary Tudor, promptly had Bradford burned at the stake.

In fiction, there is a great chasm between sympathy and empathy. The majority of writers, both good and bad, are able to sympathize—to say, "Woe unto her." But great writers are able to empathize, to fully embody the characters, to say, "Woe unto me, because I *am* she." *Madame Bovary, c'est moi*, Flaubert famously said.

In Rachel Kushner's new novel, *The Mars Room*, the narrator Romy Hall feels fully inhabited. Romy is inmate W314159 in the Stansville Women's Correctional Facility, California's largest women's prison (based on the very real Central California Women's Facility). Like Kushner, she grew up in the Sunset, then a tough, forgotten, working-class San Francisco neighborhood. You get the feeling Kushner believes that Romy's story, but for a few twists of fate, could have been her own—instead of a critically acclaimed writer whose first two novels where nominated for the National Book Award, she might have been a stripper and single mother serving two consecutive life sentences for bludgeoning a stalker to death.

To talk about mass incarceration in America is also to talk about race in America. As a white woman writing about women in a maximum-security prison, the vast majority of whom are women of color, Kushner makes the tactical decision to have her protagonist be white. For those who haven't read Michelle Alexander's seminal 2011 book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*—or for those who are not tuned in to the systemic nightmare that is mass incarceration—the protagonist's plight could also lead one to the conclusion that to talk about mass incarceration in America is to talk about poverty in America. Romy, and most of the women behind bars in *The Mars Room*—be they black, brown, or white—have grown up on the edge of the economic abyss, and have been failed by every institution that could and should have intervened, from child protective services to foster care to public schools to the criminal justice system.

In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander states that she wrote the book for those who "do not yet appreciate the magnitude of the crisis faced by communities of color as a result of mass incarceration." For a fictionalized rendering of that crisis, one can look to Jesmyn Ward's 2017 National Book Award-winning novel, Sing, Unburied, Sing. It is the account of one family's legacy of Jim Crow-era incarceration at Mississippi's notorious Parchman State Prison, from the time when it was a working farm to its current status as an instrument of mass incarceration warehousing thousands of people. Kushner, though, is not looking at the historical forces that put Romy and the rest of

the women in maximum security. Her focus is on the current systemic societal failures that have repeatedly slammed the doors on these women.

The novel starts with Romy's transfer to Stansville—we soon learn how she only met her well-intentioned public defender the day of her trial. Savvy, with a knack for self-preservation, Romy navigates the various prison factions while looking for allies to support her appeal, from jailhouse lawyers to a do-gooder literature teacher. Kushner boldly juxtaposes the teacher's lonely existence in the hills above the prison with the Unabomber's diaries. She also weaves in the story of a corrupt cop in protective custody in a nearby male prison, and the story of a transgender inmate petitioning to be moved into Stansville against the violent and vocal opposition of a fascistic group of incarcerated women.

These dramatic elements serve as a kind of a cover to the day-to-day struggle to maintain dignity. There are small acts of resistance to the degrading rules—like messing with the dress codes and hording mandatory medications to make a collective "punch"—as well as bolder acts of defiance, such as banding together to fight off guards trying to manacle an inmate who is giving birth. These quotidian struggles are what give *The Mars Room* so much life. The women are endlessly creative and full of gallows humor. The novel culminates in an escape plot, which is enacted during a riot triggered by the transgender inmate's transfer. The violent conclusion feels fictively necessary, but after all of the difficult work of character- and world-building, it also feels like an escape hatch for the reader. Unlike the vast majority of the incarcerated, left to linger, we are given an out—even if it is in death.

Kushner is a student of history. She knows that it takes just one autocrat, like Donald Trump, to reverse the course of justice in our country. She knows that Trump embraces mass incarceration, for-profit prisons, and vigilante justice. And she knows that in an unjust society, the majority of citizens—like Joseph Bradford—are one regime change or bad break away from being sucked into the criminal justice vortex. In *The Mars Room*, Kushner transmits her empathy for Romy so effectively that we, too, are Romy. We should and do care for her, along with all of the other incarcerated women.

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