

A Review of 'The Mars Room'

Zack Ravas

February 2020

Published in 2018, Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* was a New York Times Best-seller as well as a finalist for the Booker Prize, and my paperback edition boasts a blurb from no less than Stephen King ("*The Mars Room* is the real deal," declares the King)—so while I'm merely adding to the chorus of praise the book has already received, I find myself unable to write about anything else this month simply because reading *The Mars Room* was far and away the most compelling experience I had in February.

I tore my way through the book in a matter of days, propelled by the novel's taut, almost noir-ish sensibility and Kushner's force of vision. The plot is focused largely on the experiences of Romy Hall, a former stripper at San Francisco's The Mars Room who, as the novel opens, is currently serving two consecutive life sentences for the murder of her mentally unstable stalker. Romy's story is grim—and the portrait Kushner paints of our City by the Bay (no doubt inspired by her family's move to the region in the Eighties) is hardly the usual romance:

I sometimes think San Francisco is cursed. I mostly think it's a sad suckville of a place. People say it's beautiful, but the beauty is only visible to newcomers, and invisible to those who had to grow up there. Like the glimpse of blue bay through the breezeways along the street that wraps around the back of Buena Vista Park.

Brutal. Kushner is the rare contemporary novelist who inspires a sense of awe: not only does she delicately tackle some loaded subject matter, including the racial and sexual dynamics of the women's prison system, but she's able to leap between different perspectives without losing the reader, even going so far as to incorporate material inspired by the journals of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski. Ultimately, the novel depicts how one's concept of "victory" or "survival" must be redefined in the wake of incarceration. A major work, *The Mars Room* has me eager to discover what Kushner does next. In the meantime, local readers can catch her in conversation this June as part of City Arts & Lectures.

The Ted K Archive

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