**The Mars Room**

**By Rachel Kushner**

**About the Book:**

It’s 2003 and Romy Hall is at the start of two consecutive life sentences at Stanville Women’s Correctional Facility, deep in California’s Central Valley. Outside is the world from which she has been severed: the San Francisco of her youth and her young son, Jackson. Inside is a new reality: thousands of women hustling for the bare essentials needed to survive; the bluffing and pageantry and casual acts of violence by guards and prisoners alike; and the deadpan absurdities of institutional living, which Kushner evokes with great humor and precision.

**About the Author**:

Rachel Kushner's new novel, The Mars Room, debuted at # 4 on the New York Times bestseller list. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and winner of the Prix Médicis in France. Her previous 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 5 best novels of the year by the New York Times. A book of early short fictions, The Strange Case of Rachel K, was published by New Directions in 2014. 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 Harold D. Vursell Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Los Angeles.

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**Discussion Questions**

1. At the beginning of the book, before she is incarcerated, Romy Hall 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 of Romy’s story? Does morality factor into who is judged guilty and who is judged innocent?

2. 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 this country and who doesn’t?

3. "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 familial 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?

4. 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?

5. 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?

6. 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?

7. Serenity Smith is a transgender woman whose presence generates an outsized reaction from the women of Stanville. Discuss the controversy among the prisoners concerning this character. How do their 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?

8. 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?