In a recent interview with the *New Yorker*, Rachel Kushner ‘01SOA said that most incarcerated men and women she has known “go to prison not on account of their irreducible uniqueness as people but because they are part of a marginalized sector of the population who never had a chance, who were slated for it early on.” Her
third novel, *The Mars Room*, offers a crushing account of one such ordinary life on
the margins.

At twenty-nine, Romy Hall is serving two consecutive life sentences at Stanville
Women’s Correctional Facility in California. Romy — who spent her neglected San
Francisco adolescence drinking, stealing, and getting high — grew up to make her
living as a stripper at a seedy club that gives the book its title. When a Mars Room
regular starts stalking her, Romy kills him in what the courts deem a murder rather
than self-defense. Her arrest leaves her five-year-old son in the precarious custody
of her mother, whom Romy detests. Throughout the telling of this bleak backstory,
Kushner resists painting her protagonist as singular or special. The book neither
flinches nor sensationalizes, guiding us from Romy’s past to the darkest corners of
the prison-industrial complex with a sure and powerful hand.

Like Kushner’s previous novels, *Telex from Cuba* and *The Flamethrowers*, *The Mars
Room* takes on multiple voices and perspectives. This variety lends the book, for all
its focus on captivity, a tremendous freedom and range of movement. We inhabit
the rural landscape surrounding Stanville through Gordon Hauser, Romy’s civilian
GED instructor; the streets of Los Angeles through corrupt cop Doc Richards, now
serving time; and solitary confinement through Sammy Fernandez, a repeat
offender and Romy’s eventual “cellie.” Interspersed with these narratives are
excerpts from found documents, appearing without preface or commentary. Lists of
visitor regulations — “No high fives ... Keep crying to a minimum” — appear, as do
passages from Ted “Unabomber” Kaczynski’s diaries, which Gordon reads while
adjusting to the isolated valley. These interludes add texture to the novel, while
hinting at questions that vex critics of the criminal-justice system: Where is the line
between policing crime and condemning poverty? What sort of life on the outside is
even available to the formerly incarcerated? How do we reconcile the many chances
that protect some with the swift penalties for others?

Despite this wide scope, the novel belongs to Romy. Her frank, unsentimental voice
renders prison in gut-wrenching specifics: “The clock on the wall had a red wedge ...
for the women who could not tell time,” she says. “Everything in prison is addressed
to the woman for whom the red wedge is painted on the clock face, the imbecile.”
Yet Romy’s intelligence and humanity — along with those of her fellow inmates —
are undeniable. Even as she grows nostalgic, as any caged human might, her
memories, laced with irony and self-awareness, never oversimplify the past.

Romy’s voice would have carried me easily through a long, uneventful diary of life
behind bars. But troubling news about her son soon churns the plot, driving her to urgent action and an ending both jaw-dropping and inevitable. Kushner has written a potent tragedy, not by crafting a heroine who could have gone on to do great things, but by gently insisting on the worth of an unremarkable life. At times Romy appears not only ordinary but even invisible: her victim knows her only by her stage name; Gordon finds no trace of her on Google. But *The Mars Room* places her front and center, someone Kushner’s lucky readers can’t help but see clearly and won’t soon forget.

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