

ARRT Book Club Study Notes

The Mars Room by Rachel Kushner

Wednesday, November 13, 2019, 2:00 Pm

At Stickney-Forest View Public Library District

7 participants

Discussion led by: Mary Constance

Note taker: Sonia Reppe

Mary started with a bio about Rachel Kushner.

Some people listened to the audiobook, which is read by author Kushner. Comments: "Sounds like a pro,"

"Unusual for an author to be good at reading."

Discussion of how Kushner treats her prisoner characters:

- "sympathetic about their life but doesn't excuse them or absolve them."

- She mentions some bad thing from their pasts to help the reader understand their situation.

- Shows how the system is at fault.

- At some point Romy says she's at fault, but to manipulate someone. She doesn't actually feel guilty.

What about the murder? Why did she kill him? Would you have called the police?

- Police wouldn't have taken her seriously.

- The police hadn't helped her in the past.

- Like she had a doomed fate.

- The other prisoners had a doomed fate.

Why does Kushner show the stalkers point of view?

- made him unsympathetic/creepy

- a civilian pt of view (as opposed to prisoners)

- didn't add to the story
- Made Romy more sympathetic
- to get the death scene from his eyes (as opposed to Romys)
- His voice was needed because he caused Romy's demise

Would you give this to psychological suspense readers? Even though it's more literary and complicated?

- Fans of Gillian Flynn.
- Give it to someone interested in social justice. Non-fiction readers who would read this?

Tie-ins: Dead Man Walking (new opera at Lyric). The point [of Dead Man Walking] is not the crime. In Dead Man Walking he's guilty. The *circumstances are more complicated than the crime*. Same as The Mars Room. Shows everyone that it affects.

Doc/other prisoners

- The characters don't fit in a box
- found Doc fascinating
- liked the multiple viewpoints
- all had different paths
- fair depiction of transgender issue
- So many male POVs, yet takes place in a woman's prison.

Why was her sentence so harsh? Two life sentences (one for child endangerment, although her son was inside the house).

- The trial was worse/harder to read than the prison scenes.
- Trial was enlightening from a social justice angle.

Thoughts on the plot: inter-connected stories that keep moving, it works because it's written skillfully. Not preachy. Did it not have a plot?

Ending: Did she die at the end?

-Heavenly and hellish descriptions.

-Romy thinking about her son at the end. "I gave him life...It is everything."

Unibomber quotes. Why? Ted Kaczynski devoted to land and blamed people. American transcendentalism. American symbols. Depiction of San Francisco-gritty. Gave a realistic backdrop.

Romy wasn't even in the news when googled by Gordon.

-She was insignificant to society. Didn't even tell her real name.

Significance of her name? What about the title?

-The Mars Room is where her fate was determined.

-Mars/Alien connotation. The world is an alien place for the characters.

Tone: Somber tone but not hopeless. Some optimism. Romy not feeling guilt. Loves her son.