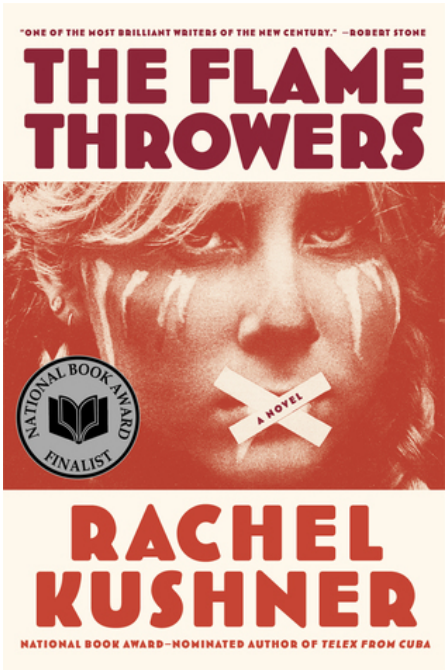

The Flamethrowers

Rachel Kushner

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The Flamethrowers Rachel Kushner
The year is 1975 and Reno—so-called because of the place of her birth—has come to New York intent on turning her fascination with motorcycles and speed into art. Her arrival coincides with an explosion of activity in the art world—artists have colonized a deserted and industrial SoHo, are staging actions in the East Village, and are blurring the line between life and art. Reno meets a group of dreamers and raconteurs who submit her to a sentimental education of sorts. Ardent, vulnerable, and bold, she begins an affair with an artist named Sandro Valera, the semi-estranged scion of an Italian tire and motorcycle empire. When they visit Sandro's family home in Italy, Reno falls in with members of the radical movement that overtook Italy in the seventies. Betrayal sends her reeling into a clandestine undertow.

The Flamethrowers is an intensely engaging exploration of the mystique of the feminine, the fake, the terrorist. At its center is Kushner's brilliantly realized protagonist, a young woman on the verge. Thrilling and fearless, this is a major American novel from a writer of spectacular talent and imagination.

The Flamethrowers Details

Date	:	Published April 2nd 2013 by Scribner (first published 2013)
ISBN	:	9781439142004
Author	:	Rachel Kushner
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From Reader Review The Flamethrowers for online ebook

Trish says

I had a second opportunity to review this title and it was published in Volume 16 of the online journal Avatar Review. The link is here. Below is my first attempt after reading the book.

> ”The flamethrowers with their twin tanks, and their gas mask were Sandro’s favorite of the assault company dolls. The asbestos sweater and balloon pants and gauntlet gloves you could outfit them with so they could not carbonize when they set a woods on fire. A woods or bunker or enemy machine gun nest, depending. A supply line of trucks or a laddered stack of bodies, depending.
>
> The flamethrowers could have been from a different century, both brutal and ancient and at the same time horribly modern. The flame oil in the twin tanks they carried was five parts tar oil and one part crude, and they had a little canister of carbon dioxide and an automatic igniter and a belt pouch with spare igniters. The flamethrower was never, ever defensive. He was pure offense…a harbinger of death…
>
> But then his father told him the flamethrowers were…cumbersome and heavy and slow-moving targets and if they were ever caught they were shown no mercy. That’s not a thing you want to be, his father said…”

This astonishing meditation on art, rebellion, wealth creation, love, truth, and friendship kept me rapt throughout, but I am not going to lie to you. This is a big work, with lots of moving pieces, and it takes more time to process than others might. I’m not sure I got it all. If art is meant to inspire, to challenge, or to change the viewer, this work succeeded on all counts.

> “Difficult to even talk about…I feel changed. Like, say my mind is a sweater. And a loose thread gets tugged at, pulled and pulled until the sweater unravels and there’s only a big fluffy pile of yarn. You can *make* something with it, that pile of yarn, but it will *never* be a sweater again. That’s the state of things.”

It is the late ‘70s. Reno is a young drifter with pretensions to art. She lands in New York and hangs at the edges of a group whose composition changes with the inclinations of Sandro and Ronnie. Sandro, Ronnie, and Gianni, the men Reno spends her time with and learns from, are central but elusive figures in this drama. Sandro’s father, the man who teaches Sandro about how life really works, is also a central but elusive figure.

Reno is, literally and figuratively, a printer’s reference, a human Caucasian face against which film color corrections could be matched to a referent. Subliminally viewed, if at all, her face might sometimes leave an afterimage. Only filmmakers and projectionists knew of her existence. “Their ordinariness was part of their appeal: real but unreachable women who left no sense of who they were. No clue but a Kodak color bar, which was no clue at all.”

When we first see her, Reno is riding a fast motorcycle in the desert and later photographs her tracks. Sandro elevates her work by calling this a type of 'land art.' She wipes out, smashing the motorcycle, but her efforts lead to a larger success in setting a land speed record—more sport than art. She travels to Italy to promote the bike she rode in the Southwest desert.

I have seen references to this as a "feminist" novel. It would not have occurred to me to say that, though there is some movement of a young, untried woman towards a greater understanding of her place in the world who then begins to take charge of her freedom. She also has a glimpse, towards the end of the story, of the men in her life not merely as simple stock images or disposable short outtakes of a larger film. "Cropping can make outcomes so ambiguous…" These are men with all the feelings and dreams, histories and futures of men and she is growing up.

Reno as a character is particularly attractive in that she is able, in the course of this novel, to go off without a lover, rent an apartment on her own, and ride a motorcycle about New York City. This may be the dream of any young person anywhere: it is not feminism, but life. But what held me were the ideas about art, about *looking*, about believing, about making the effort.

Reno's friend Giddle believed herself to be a performance artist of sorts, but somewhere along the way she lost the thread, the point. Sandro made empty boxes. Ronnie photographed beat-up women. Reno made short films of street life. The art created by these folk, and the folk themselves when we first meet them, are stock images, referents for life. But by the end we have had growth and all are in the process of becoming.

Sandro's father has a critical role in this novel. The backdrop of his powerful and moneyed world of making tires for racing vehicles represents the old guard against which the artists and Italian Red Brigade demonstrators were rebelling. Yet he was a rebel in his time. The father taught Sandro important truths about the world: that there is evil and greed; that power matters; that guns don't always fire as advertised; that Flamethrowers can be clumsy targets rather than objects of envy. Flamethrowers' fire often ran back up the hose and consumed the perpetrator.

Kushner held me spellbound with her descriptions of New York's art scene in the '70s. Using Patti Smith's National Book Award-winning Just Kids as a referent, we get a similar feeling of a young, edgy, trial-by-error art scene. I can't help but wonder how closely she captured the riots in Italy in the same period.

Something happens in this masterwork that is all internal. It left me looking about myself, contemplative, silent. The poet Marianne Moore wrote that "the deepest feeling always shows itself in silence." I reread most of it to see if I could untangle it in my mind. I got bits and pieces straightened, but ended up with more questions. But to me this is a sweet confusion. We don't often have the opportunity to enjoy works of this quality.

A lot of this book is concerned with film. I can imagine this book as a film done in the European tradition—lots of long, slow panning shots and minimal dialogue—following the storyline, such as it is. Would be as confusing and absorbing as the book, I imagine. Kudos to Kushner.

Later:
An interesting and revealing interview with Kushner in 2/6/14 in advance of the Sunday *NYT* Book section.

jordan says

Rachel Kushner writes beautifully. Time and again reading this novel you'll pause to admire a near-perfect sentence or to marvel at an innovative description or a simile that bursts with freshness. Consider for example this evocative passage: "It was the morning of the fourth of July and kids were lighting smoke bombs, sulfurous coils of red and green, the colors dense and bright like concentrated dye blooming through water." Wow. Hardly a page goes by which doesn't contain another such well polished gem. Unfortunately, extraordinary prose can only serve as a pillar for a novel, it can't be the entire foundation. Different readers rely on different aspects of a novel to carry the whole, but for me writing alone isn't enough. When it comes to "The Flamethrowers" other deficiencies of plot and character proved too weighty and subsumed the whole.

Other reviewers and the description have summarized the novel's premise, but here is my take: a beautiful young woman -- the narrator -- recently out of college with a penchant for motorcycles and dreams of becoming an artist moves to New York from out west. She is nicknamed Reno for the city of her birth and quickly falls into the New York art scene of the late 70s. As a plot, this contains all of the needed ingredients for a fine novel.

Yet "The Flamethrowers" depends on Reno captivating the reader. Time and again, she fails at this task for the simple reason that Reno spends so much time "observing" that she forgets, it seems, ever to make any genuine choices. Instead she drifts. She meets people and goes along with them, befriends this one and sleeps with that one, but she seems far more interested in giving us those surroundings than ever really engaging with the plot. The resulting novel often more drags than flows.

To be clear, her observations are often keen, but they feel as though they have less to do with the story and more to do with the author working towards a broader theme. The lives of the rich? Reno has penetrating insights on the irony that just as the wealthy once only ate the whitest white bread as a sign their bounty, now that everyone can eat it, they favor what they once would have considered peasant dark loaves. Likewise in art, Reno muses on the difference between those outside and those in, and how fluidly one can move over those lines. Yet these observations often feel like they are less authentically those of Reno groping to understand her strange new world, and more Kushner groping to offer deep insights.

Perhaps no where is this issue more acute than in the novel's portrayal of New York's SOHO neighborhood in transition. As with the plot, this novel's SOHO feels oppressively thin, more concept than living breathing cultural nexus. Contrast this, for example, with the same neighborhood offered in the same period in Irini Spanidou's "Before" where one gets a sense of the place's real vibrancy. Instead one gets the sense that the setting is offered more as a point of contrast to the modern world and a point of commentary, a movie lot set. In a way, Reno as a character suffers from a similar problem: she is more a collection of attributes than an a recognizable whole, more carefully constructed cypher than someone who leaps into the reader's mind.

On the power of her prose alone -- not to mention the strength of her wonderful debut "Telex From Cuba" -- I will eagerly await Kushner's next novel. "Telex" left my heart pounding with a story I couldn't put down. Unfortunately, with "The Flamethrowers" that same heart rarely even quickened as I trudged my way to the end.

Troy says

I didn't want to like this, but I do.

It's a bildungsroman, which isn't what I expected. I wanted a social movement novel; something like *The Unseen* . I also thought Kushner would be full of shit, but she's not, and this book is a damn good portrayal of a young woman dominated by men, dominated by masculine (and shitty) social realms.

Actually, the novel is more of a Künstlerroman, which is about an artist's growth to maturity, which as Wikipedia puts it "depict[s] the conflicts of a sensitive youth against the values of a middle and upper class society of his or her time."

But I'm not going to tell you about the plot. There are plenty of reviews on here for that. Instead, I'm going to voice my complaints:

ONE, Kushner slams every cool event she researched, every cool event of 1977, every distinct world into her book. Each of these events or worlds would make a fine book. And I need to give credit here, there are a couple of damn fine books contained in this book.

(view spoiler)

The distinct worlds that make up *The Flamethrowers* never congeal. They roughly interact, but the ties that bind are made of dried spaghetti. Our protagonist, "Reno," is written to occupy the relevant part of a Venn diagram that would encompass all of those disparate worlds. She's never real. Merely a blank slate; a hollow vessel to propel the plot and "what is interesting."

SECOND COMPLAINT: I really dislike that authors have given up fucking with form. This is a minor complaint, of course, since I also hate the recent spate of writing that tries on experimentation as one would try on a goofy hat: just to vamp a bit and show that one can do it. No, fuck that. Form and function should merge. Experiment because you want to communicate something new.

So my complaint is that this is a very traditional book about very untraditional times. A very good movie can be made from this book, and I hate that. I want a book to flaunt its bookness. I want a Hollywood or Euro film "auteur" to think, "Great book, but it would be completely different if I tried to turn it into a movie... and it would end up a disaster with none of the charm of the book.

THIRD COMPLAINT: Again, this isn't much of a complaint, but a novel about a young woman coming of age? I mean, it's a damn good book about one young woman coming of age in several different environments, but it dances-with and whispers-about new ways of living, new ways of thought, new ways of communicating. It dances with a society fully reimagining what is like to live, and another society reimagining what it means to create, and another society interested in tearing everything down.

There's so much stuff there!

There's so much LIFE there!

And while I have nothing against the book I read (because it IS good) I do want more! I want a book not about a young woman coming of age, but a book about a young woman who IS NOT just a voyeur. Fuck voyeurism! I don't want a story about another spectator. In the end, that's all Reno, our protagonist, is: a passive spectator. Life is happening all around her, and she tepidly joins, but not really, really only watches.

And I get it. I get it. She's a way for us to experience the rush that Kushner feels when researching all of this stuff. But it still feels like research. Research to the character; research to Kushner. I want to be fucking involved. I want to feel what it's like to have voyeurism and spectatorship fall away, which is supposedly what happens to Reno, but never really does.

Melanie says

The critic James Wood in his review for the New Yorker pin-points it perfectly:

"Rachel Kushner’s second novel, “The Flamethrowers” (Scribner), is scintillatingly alive, and also alive to artifice. It ripples with stories, anecdotes, set-piece monologues, crafty egotistical tall tales, and hapless adventures: Kushner is never not telling a story. It is nominally a historical novel (it’s set in the mid-seventies), and, I suppose, also a realist one (it works within the traditional grammar of verisimilitude). But it manifests itself as a pure explosion of now: it catches us in its mobile, flashing present, which is the living reality it conjures on the page at the moment we are reading."

Alive. Rippling with stories. Historical. Realistic. A pure explosion of now.

What a vibrant, electric ride this was. A novel as wild as it is elegant, zooming in and out of scenes so perfectly brought to life that they will shimmer in your memory for a long time. A doe-eyed, inhabited, wonderful female character who hungers for experience at every turn of the page and steals your heart in one swift move with her innocence and willingness to take it all in.

Because this is what this gorgeous novel does, it takes it all in. It brings to life (visceral, complicated, ever-shifting life) every single theme and locale it touches upon: the New York art scene in the 70's, the grittiness and primal energy of the Bowery of those years, the coming of age tale that never resolves itself, the radical left-wing groups that terrorized Italy at the same period, the beauty of motorcycles and the intoxication of speed throughout history, from World War I to salt flats races in Nevada.

This is writing at its best. It will swallow you up in one big gulp and spit you back out on the curb, leaving you breathless and wondering what just happened to you.

Steve says

What could be more American than a tall blond chick from Nevada riding an expensive Italian motorcycle on the Salt Flats of Utah? I'm actually serious about that question. At least when considering this novel as an important piece of American fiction. Why I'm stressing that, I'm not entirely sure since I'm still trying to digest what Kushner has accomplished. I suspect Kushner is tapping into speed, light, space, ambition (and a bit of Huck Finn with a getaway vehicle), and calling this combo, with a gap in her teeth, Reno. We meet "Reno" (not her real name, but where she's from), on her way to some speed trials in the desert during the mid-seventies. We find out that Reno is an artist, and that all of this trip is somehow tied into her aspiring vocation as a "Land Artist" (I had to look that up).

The book has been called by some an historical novel. Well, it does have a number of historical anchors throughout (a seemingly curious World War I opening, New York Art Scene mid-70s), Italy and the Red Brigade), but to me it's a distinctly literary novel, and a modernist one with a primary focus on character, Reno's in particular. History is there, but it always feels secondary, dreamlike, stuff we're passing through. It's not a linear telling Kusher is offering. The novel often jumps around in time, and not always with Reno's voice to guide the reader. Kushner handles these shifts smoothly and with great skill. Interestingly, I briefly gave up on this book after Reno got to New York. At this point I found the novel had an incredibly high concentration of pretentious assholes saying empty things about sterile art (Reno's eventual artist boyfriend, Sandro Valera, makes empty metal boxes.). I sensed an approaching Point Omega, and that's definitely somewhere I don't ever want to revisit. I'm not going to provide a catalog here, but there's only so much hipster irony a southern boy like me can take. But as others have mentioned, Kushner's sentences are gold. You can't walk away from writing this good. Fortunately Kushner soon shifted things to a party, with the same assholes saying the same things, but it was then that I realized that Kushner was winking at me. She also thought they were assholes! Whew!

The next shift in the novel had Reno going to Italy with Sandero for what turns out to be a nightmare trip involving a different set of assholes. Rich Italian ones. But it's also at this point that Reno learns some things about herself, as well as the dangerous world around her. Revolution was in the air, and the Red Brigade was in the headlines. Reno also, finally, gets to meet some authentic people, revolutionary types. Real For Who the Bell Tolls kinds of people. Kushner is probably getting a bit romantic here, but given the previous toxic parade of characters, these rebels with their bandannas and commie slogans feel earned. One of them, Gianni, has potential lover written all over him, but his distance, and Kushner's restraint, keep you guessing as to how this will all turn out for Reno.

That's as close as I'm going to get as far as a reveal. I see that some have labeled The Flamethrowers a "feminist" novel. I suppose it could be easily seen that way, but with that said the literary echoes I'm hearing are, especially given how Kushner has bookended her novel, from Hemingway. That's not Hemingway the macho man, but Hemingway the craftsman. Kushner is a great writer, one who exists outside such boxes.

Hilary says

No matter how young and hip you think you are, every so often, some cultural product that you don't get at all gets rave reviews and some measure of success, indicating that the world has turned and left you behind, transforming you instantly into an aged grump who mutters things about "the kids these days." Well, now I'm telling *The Flamethrowers* to get off of my lawn.

This book is covered with glowing reviews (albeit from authors like Karen Russell - another cultural product I don't get - and Dana Spiotta, whose *Stone Arabia* was also overhyped and disappointing) about Kushner being a bold new voice and a brilliant writer, which made me want to read it even though it's about a young woman who rides motorcycles and is way into the avant-garde 1970s New York art/political scene, which all set off huge warning bells. (Riding motorcycles as a character trait is fine when you're a character in a four-minute Bruce Springsteen song, but not so much in a novel, where you should probably have something interesting about you other than the type of vehicle you utilize for transport. Also, there are few people less interesting in this world than self-described avant-garde artists.) But it's not just those writers who love this - I haven't read a single bad review (and I've looked, spurred on by the ever-present fear of being the only one who doesn't get something).

As one might expect for a book about artists who are more interested in explaining their work than making art, this book is all style over substance, and dozens of pages are routinely wasted on naught but the vapid verbal exchanges at gatherings of untalented conceptual artists, who all speak to each other in ridiculous mission statements and bumper-sticker philosophies that attempt to justify their narcissistic navel-gazing. For example, at one party, the artists all listen to an extended monologue one of them has recorded on a reel-to-reel about how real estate agents always say "home," never "house," etc., which leads to a second monologue about how this is an insightful investigation of the importance of words in consumerism and blah blah blah. In another particularly dreadful line, the lead character, Reno, finds herself thinking in the voice of her friend, a former Warhol Factory groupie who now believes that her job as a diner waitress is a sort of performance art, who says that "the three most cowardly acts were to exhibit ambition, to become famous, or to kill yourself." (That is at least as dumb as that "Harley Davidson and the Marlboro Man" line, "Better to be dead and cool than alive and uncool." Also, in general, if something reminds you of a Don Johnson movie, it probably is not Great Art.) If the greatest crime in the art world is being boring, then Reno is a dastardly criminal, completely passive, naive, and blase. Since even the other characters comment on how simple she is, her lack of insight isn't enough to sustain a chapter, much less a novel.

There are occasional forays into other stories outside of 1970s New York that are a bit more successful, but they're still not very interesting, and they aren't well-integrated with the rest of the story. The reviews of this book all praise its prose, imagination, and energy, but I just didn't get it. Although I generally like modern art, these artists are much more like Jeff Koons' Three Ball 50/50 Tank than Tom Sachs' clever and funny Nutsy's - no joie de vivre or sense of humor. This book was decidedly disappointing.

Janet says

I've been looking forward to reading this--just started but already I'm caught up. The chunkiness of the prose, the good crunchiness of it--just the choice of words, with shape and weight and texture--has me, the great tactile metaphors, I hear this book, I taste it. Snap, crackle pop.
****
Loved this book--the speed of it, the description of things as well as emotion, the machinery of the world. I adored the way she recalled the Seventies to me--its grunginess, the blackouts, the garbage strikes, the

feeling of being at the end of urban life, at the brink of chaos, the bankruptcy of the cities in the time. I found myself reminded at times of Gaitskill's Veronica, the way certain of Kushner's characters tell stories which may or may not be true, mythologizing themselves. They were my favorite characters--a waitress who, in her mind, is 'playing' a waitress, enacting a performance... a man who spools wild tales about himself which may be true, false or most likely partly true or based on someone else's true story... I like the way her in some ways classic innocent protagonist, Reno--a ski racer and motorcyclist, who becomes the fastest woman in the world, by accident of proximity--but the way in which she accepts the stories of these self-fabulizing characters makes her seem more childlike than would otherwise be the case. Loved her portrayal of New York in the Seventies in particular, and the art world and its pretensions, even on the grubby end, rang truer than true.

Daffney says

The Flamethrowers follows Reno, a would-be-artist (nicknamed after her hometown) who moves to New York and, through a relationship with an older, wealthy Italian artist becomes a peripheral member of the city's vibrant art scene. Though she spends her days among quirky, artistic people, Reno only makes half-hearted attempts at work of her own; rather, she spends the bulk of the novel acting as a sort of mascot for her older, morally corrupted friends. When Reno does attempt to an art project of her own-- capturing images of a motorcycle ride across the Utah salt flats-- it goes horribly wrong and ends with the young pro-artist falling, literally and figuratively, in with an Italian race team sponsored by her boyfriend's family's tire business (are you rolling your eyes yet?). Reno then becomes a Danica Patrick-like racing pin-up for the company and is invited to Italy for some promotional work with the team. After some hemming and hawing, Reno and her boyfriend go to Italy where, you guessed it, things once again go terribly wrong . . . and Reno kind of joins the Brigate Rosse, sort of. Or maybe not.

I really wanted to like The Flamethrowers-- I really did-- but the novel is a profound disappointment. Reno spends the entire novel on the verge of something-- on the verge of developing her own artistic style, on the verge of racing fame, on the verge of being a member of a radical leftist group-- without ever doing anything. Instead, Reno passively ping-pongs between men who direct the course her life will next take; she is entirely devoid of agency within a socio-historic moment that was about claiming and utilizing one's agency. This question of agency-- who has it, who claims it, who uses it-- doesn't even amount to subtext; instead, Kushner distracts her readers with one winking New York in the 70s reference after another. "Forget about the act of becoming," the narration seems to say, "here's the Blackout of 1977! Here's a generic Max's Kansas City-type place! Pay no attention to the novel's decided lack of depth!" The novel leads you to believe that something profound will happen to Reno, that within all that she has experienced, all the power she has relinquished to others, she will somehow, in someway come into her own-- she will be able to amalgamate all that she has seen into a profound work of art. But, by the end of the novel, Reno hasn't acted on anything . . .

After investing a week and almost four hundred pages worth of bus-reading efforts into The Flamethrowers, I expected more than Kushner delivered.

Violet wells says

I remember when John Banville won the Booker Prize someone remarked that despite the enormous cultural

changes in our world British writers were still writing about art historians. The New York art scene seems to serve a similar function for American writers. I'll confess here that the New York art scene bores me. And globally speaking probably lost any real influence with the demise of Andy Warhol. New York's cultural relevance after Warhol is its street life, most notably rap and graffiti. Kushner attempts to give her New York artists relevance by marrying them to the social unrest in Italy in the 1970s, which never comes across as anything but a rather random parallel.

There's a really good novel buried in these 400 pages. The problem for me was that Kushner wasn't interested in writing a good novel; she overreached herself and set herself the task of writing a work of art.

The good novel is the story of Reno, a young nameless girl referred to by the town of her birth who arrives in New York full of ambition. She's faced with a world of hideous men. Narcissistic, vain, egotistical pumped up with their own self-importance and sense of entitlement. In 1970s New York pretty young girls, it would appear, were required to be little more than groupies. There are two brilliant pivotal moments in Reno's quest for identity. One when a simple odd jobs guy treats her with kindness, pretty much the only act of kindness she receives from a male in the entire novel. She's not interested. Can't blame her for that. She has her sights set higher. The other is when an aristocratic Italian woman (the best character in the novel) treats her with utter disdain, which is how you feel she deserves to be treated if she's ever going to wake up. The Italian section of the novel was easily my favourite even though it was also the most baffling because it's called upon to make sense of the New York section which for me it didn't. How the New York art scene in the 1970s relates to Fascism and its backlash in Italy baffled me. You sense the author wanted to write about two worlds she knew – New York and Italy – and her means of connecting them was arbitrary rather than inspired.

I love reading James Wood's reviews but rarely agree with his final judgements. He had nothing but praise for this and yet frequently finds fault with DeLillo. Ironically this often came across to me as DeLillo fan fiction. Unfortunately, though she can write well, Kushner never hits the heights of DeLillo.

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switterbug (Betsey) says

There isn't much plot in this novel, but it is a hell of story/Bildungsroman of a young woman known as just Reno, an art studies graduate in 1977 who dared to race her Moto Valera motorcycle at high-speed velocities to create land art. Land art was a "traceless art" created from leaving an almost invisible line in the road from surging speeds at over 110 mph. "Racing was drawing in time." Literally and figuratively.

This era generated a seminal movement in New York where artistic expression in the subversive sect was animate, inflamed, ephemeral, breathing -- a mix of temporal and performance art and the avant-garde/punk scene. This was also an age of conceptual art, which grew out of minimalism and stressed the artist's concept rather than the object itself. Time was the concept of Reno's art, something to be acted upon.

"You have time. Meaning, don't use it, but pass through time in patience, waiting for something to come. Prepare for its arrival. Don't rush to meet it. Be a conduit…I felt this to be true. Some people might consider this passivity but I did not. I considered it living."

The novel, narrated by Reno, is all about her observation and experiences as she comes of age in a revolutionary time. She lives in a shabby, run-down hole in the wall in New York--"blank and empty as my

new life, with its layers upon layers of white paint like a plaster death mask over the two rooms, giving them an ancient urban feeling."

As she gets caught up with the underground movement in the East Village, called Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers, and later with the Red Brigades of Rome, Reno is herself a conduit for the people she meets and gets involved with, such as her older, rebellious boyfriend, Sandro Valera, son of the Fascist-friendly mogul of Valera motorbikes.

Reno came to New York by way of Nevada, eager to demonstrate her art through photography and motorbikes. She's "shopping for experience." Sometime after a particularly moving one-night stand, and attempting to navigate her life and bridge her isolation and loneliness, she meets sculptor Sandro Valera and his friends, a group of radicals and artists who offer her exposure to working-class insurrection in this "mecca of individual points, longings, all merging into one great light-pulsing mesh, and you simply found your pulse, your place."

Reno was looking for a sense of identity, and she wanted enchantment.

"Enchantment means to want something and also to know, somewhere inside yourself, not an obvious place, that you aren't going to get it."

The bridge between life and art, and Reno's invigorating speed of 148 mph on the Bonneville Salt Flats, (where she went with her new friends to make land art), demonstrates the crossover between gestures and reality, and a liberating energy that was "an acute case of the present tense. Nothing mattered but the milliseconds of life at that speed."

On the one hand, Reno seeks self-sovereignty, but on the other hand, she inhabits a male-dominated and often misogynistic landscape where men exploit women for artistic and political gain. When she visits Sandro's family in Italy, she is subjected to derision by Sandro's misanthropic brother and his sneering mother.

In another scene, a male photographer asks women to punch themselves in the face until they are battered, and then pose for him. Reno narrates this with an unemotional but subtle raillery, noting the incongruity of women on a pretense of independence. She acutely observes that "certain acts, even as they are real, are also merely gestures." And, in Rome, the question of feminine mystique versus male dominance is addressed by a Red Brigade revolutionary radio broadcaster, when he states to women that "Men connect you to the world, but not with your own self."

Are women "meant to speed past, just a blur" as Reno speculates? And the more I think about that line, the more paradox it evokes.

Artists, dreamers, terrorists, comrades, iconoclasts, all populate this novel, replete with iconic images and fallen debris in a swirl of electrical momentum. New York and Rome aren't just scenic backdrops; they come alive as provocateurs-- firebrand cities with flame-throwing agitators.

Kushner is a heavyweight writer, a dense, volatile and sensuous portraitist of the iconographic and the obscure. Arch and decisive moments throughout the novel heighten the ominous tension that rumbles below the surface, and the reader wholly inhabits the spaces of Reno's consciousness, and those of the people she meets.

“All you can do is involve yourself totally in your own life, your own moment…And when we feel pessimism crouching on our shoulder like a stinking vulture…we banish it, we smother it with optimism. We want, and our want kills doom. That is how we’ll take the future and occupy it like an empty warehouse. It’s an act of love, pure love. It isn’t prophecy. It’s hope.”

Jennifer says

okay, so...wow. this is a bold, smart, meaty book. laura miller (linked below) referenced *"...the novel’s categorical instability"* and i totally agree with this assessment. several times, while i was reading *the flamethrowers*, i found myself thinking (and once, even saying out loud): "WHAT *IS* THIS?" (not that it matters, i don't think.) the book is many things, and in taking on so many subjects, it is definitely ambitious. it's literary. it's post-modern. it's realist. it's historical fiction. it's feminist literature.

someone smarter and with a better attention span than i possess (to be able to go through the novel for examples and quotes, and then write and re-write a paper) will probably write about the importance of this novel as part of the feminist literature canon - and i would totally read that. it seems to me, as i have been scouring reviews this morning, trying to gather my own thoughts coherently, a lot of people are not talking about that aspect of the story, and i don't understand why. seems to me, it's a pretty important thread within the story. and it also seems to me that when the feminst aspect is being mentioned in reviews...it's only being mentioned by women. laura miller thinks the men are scared. i don't know if i would go that far...but perhaps there is a bit of unsettled feelings going on in reviewer-land? (though, to be fair, many male reviewers are fawning and loving the book. a couple of links are shared, below. and it also may go back to people being challenged to define what, exactly, this novel is.)

i suspect i would have felt a deeper or more personal connection were i to be in my 20s or even early 30s right now. but, from my perch in my 40s, i was deeply impressed by kushner's writing and the story she created. it's evident language is a love of kushner's. there's even a quote to that effect from one of her characters. but kushner doesn't overdo it - i didn't have any eye-rolling-over-metaphor moments.

sometimes people will talk about being mood readers or reading a book at exactly the right time. i suspect that for people who don't like this book, it will come down to a matter of timing, or being in the wrong frame of mind. while the book is far from perfect, it's an accomplished novel. i think i am going to be suspicious of people who dislike this one (oops! haha!). my only 'yeah, but...' has to do with the ending, which i felt sort of petered out and was not as strong as the rest of the story. i recognize the deliberate choice of ambiguity being made by kushner...but for all the references to fire, i could not help thinking about neil young's "hey hey, my my": *"it's better to burn out, than to fade away"*. i was really expecting the burn at the end...as fiery and fierce as it all began. and that just didn't happen.

but, the novel created some visceral moments for me, which seems to be the trend when i read post-modern literature. i get a bit twitchy inside. i can feel my pulse thumping around in my neck. i think two things are going on: a bit of awe over talent, and a bit of anxiety over where it's all leading. the combination makes for books that not only keep me alert and on-edge as a reader, challenged, but they become stories that are unputdownable.

extra links:

* great piece over on the paris review - 'curated by rachel kushner'
* james woods' 4-page gush-fest, over on *the new yorker*
* a review in the *guardian*, by hermione hoby, that i quite liked.

TBR notes:

* could this be the great american novel??? laura miller thinks it may be just that.

colour me intrigued!

(link for those who have embedded issues: http://www.salon.com/2013/06/05/rache...)

Jan Rice says

Review originally posted July 2014

First, a few exemplary quotes:

> A taxi pulled up, and Sandro, his cousin, and Didier got out. I glanced at Burdmoore, whose face registered the cousin's beauty. He watched her with interest, but also caution. It was the expression of a man who had handled beautiful women and could still admire them but never wanted to handle them again.

> Practically all of Italy had celebrated Mussolini, and then the war had ended and suddenly everyone was an anti-Fascist.... As if the entire problem could be isolated to a few rich families.... Families like the Valeras, whose villa was occupied by Germans. After the war, walking to school in Brera, Sandro and Roberto were pelted with rocks. Their father moved them back up to Bellagio, where the boys were pelted with cow chips, and once misled into a swarm of angry bees that stung and restung them more times than Sandro had thought possible. Was he stung because he lacked natural virtues, ones the children who pushed them into the bee swarm possessed? Had those children stood up to Mussolini? No. Did it matter who possessed natural virtues? No. A blend of good and bad characterized all humans, and to pretend to sort that out was an insult to human complexity. But at the same time, Sandro understood that people only tended to allow their own contradictions, and not those of others. It was okay to be murky to yourself, to know you weren't an angel, but other people had to be more cleanly divided into good and bad.

> My mother worked nights, and Bobby was what we had as a parent. Done driving his dump truck, he sat inexplicably nude watching TV and made us operate the dial for him, so he wouldn't have to get up. He'd fix himself a big steak and give us instant noodles. Sometimes he'd take us to a casino, leave us in the parking lot with bottle rockets. Or play chicken with the other cars on I-80, with me and Scott and Andy in the backseat covering our eyes. I come from reckless, unsentimental peopole.

Rachel Kushner writes beautifully and with great insight. Observations like those I've quoted above are scattered throughout, but the book would not come together for me despite its visionary flashes. For more than half of it I was taking notes and trying to figure it out as though it were a print version of *The Usual Suspects*. I couldn't read it late at night because it was making me fall asleep instead of waking me up; sometimes in the daytime, too. There were live parts but they died out on me. They never burst into a general conflagration.

Reno, the girl at the center, also seemed not to be fully awake for most of the novel. She awakens (almost) to foreboding and (fully) when there is heartbreak. She awakens just once to joy and full presence. The book has sex, but sex isn't part of what wakes Reno up--not like heartache does. I thought that even her relationship(s) lacked chemistry. She strikes me as *trying* to wake up for most of the novel. She is like an observer at her own life (but what an observer!).

So for me she as a character was not a complete success. This view is in contrast to the the high praise of many readers, including respected friends for whom the book achieved the highest rating, so hence my struggles to impose understanding on this novel. After half the way through or so I did find some reviewers who also noticed the book was discursive or didn't coalesce, which finally let me give myself permission to just relax and read.

All that said, the real gift of this novel is the birds-eye view of the mid-seventies in the US (mostly New York) and in Italy. That view does not extend to all aspects of those times but zeros in on the arts scene and attitudes that equated truth and creativity with overthrowing conventional institutions and norms, including by means of "revolutionary" street violence. I put that in quotes because as seen here the utter arbitrariness and meaninglessness stand out, and the violence seems to be for its own sake. None of these characters is a paragon! This portrayal might serve to disenchant people who tend to look back fondly at years gone by, or it could frustrate them. I'm thinking of a dialogue with someone who resented the picture of the young, disturbed, and violent daughter in *American Pastoral* because he felt Philip Roth was maligning the Left. The picture painted in this novel does not make for a romanticized view, but, I think, an accurate one, as far as it goes.

It's odd to read a historical novel about a period I lived through--or rather to realize it's now considered a historical novel! Reno is 22 years old in 1975; I was that age in 1967/68. She was in New York; I was in Atlanta. While I can remember one episode with a group of people older than I was (as are most of Reno's contacts), almost everybody else with whom I got involved was around my age. That made a difference. It was a great period of coming together, of kinship-like feelings, of acceptance and belonging. Against that backdrop of my own experience, Reno's experience of aloneness or of a sort of parallel play with others stands in contrast. For me as for her, though, it was a time of upheaval. The times they were achanging. Even though in her case she got involved with older men who were cads, given those times it's likely that no matter what she would have cycled through episodes of heartbreak on the way to maturity.

It's true that by the mid-seventies, time had moved on and the bloom was off the rose, so to speak, of the youthful hopefulness and joie de vivre of the late sixties. In '74 after a mugging and after my car was stolen and totalled, we moved out of our apartment between Peachtree Street and Piedmont Park. The hippies were long gone and the drug dealers and criminal element had moved in.

Afterthoughts
"They were on the runway, in line for takeoff. He pressed his forehead to the glass, the plastic, whatever it was...."

The author had done that several times when the main character was the actor, and now with the secondary character. I wish she wouldn't. Look it up!

I didn't like the paper this book was printed on. It became a minor irritant. The pages felt cheap and flimsy. I don't remember ever noticing that about a book before except maybe an old dessicated paperback, and I don't know the extent to which my response was an objective one to the actual quality of the paper. I have the hardback. It came from the Daedalus catalog in advance of the release of the paperback. I looked at several comparable books and found this one a little lighter proportionally, so perhaps there is something to my impression.

In his book The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined, Steven Pinker fingers the 1960s as the start of a *reversal* in what he calls the civilizing process. The youth revolution wasn't quite the French Revolution yet was enough to result in an upsurge of crime and violence that lasted through the 1980s and in reaction propelled American society to the right. The violence described in this book for the 1970s fits Pinker's pattern.

But if it hadn't been for the sixties I don't know what would have happened to me! They weren't still burning women at the stake. Maybe institutionalization? For me the sixties were risky but ultimately freeing and affirming. What they were for me doesn't fit either Pinker's picture or Rachel Kushner's. In lauding the civilizing process Pinker comes very close to endorsing traditional values across the board with only passing mention of problems and wrongs that perhaps predictably precipitated change. Could the civilizing process contain within itself the seeds of its own destruction if applied in too draconian a manner?

I'm saying that the 1950s couldn't go on forever!

August 29, 2014: Wow--*natural* land art! http://bigstory.ap.org/article/myster...

Perry says

Her Name is Reno and She Dances on the Hand

Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar. Sigmund Freud

Our protagonist Reno hails from Reno, Nevada. She's in her early 20s, loves motorcycles, goes to NYC in 1975 with a nebulous plan to create art incorporating her need for speed--not the drug. She hangs out with a number of artsy narcisisstic tarts and farts, each of whom loves to blow hot air.

After many vapid verbal volleys among these SoHo denizens, our girl becomes involved and moves in with an Italian dude who is nearly 40 and heir to a tire/motorcycle empire in Italia. They go to a nearly empty cinema where Tony Manera surreptitiously starts her dancing on his hand while they watch the film. I tend to agree with an article I saw some time back lauding Ms. Kushner for writing sex well. Reading this scene is apt to make most readers hot and bothered.

They travel to Italy. She briefly becomes entangled with a workers' rights radical group in Rome. After arriving back in NYC, she hears a tragic auto-history of her first NYC flame.

The novel was most interesting for its illustration of the pretentiousness of the movers, players and hangers among the world of "art," which also brings up the novel's drawback: too much (for me) high-brow talk-talk with a fusion of the esoteric and erotic, which both titillates *and* etiolates.

Hugh says

Kushner has taken an intriguingly disparate set of subjects - the New York art world, the world of land speed records and the political unrest of 70s Italy, and woven them into the rites of passage story of a girl from Nevada nicknamed Reno and her initiation into the Bohemian milieu of New York, where she meets Sandro, an artist who has largely rejected his part in the family business that has made him rich. Reno is something of a blank cipher whose actions lead her into situations quite passively, but the set pieces are vivid and brilliantly painted. I was left wondering how many of the component stories were factual and how much was imagined, but it adds up to an impressive and readable whole.

Michael says

I love the cinematic flow of this book , with a young female lead character, Reno, who passes through life leaving few marks. She is a recent art school graduate from Nevada who moves to New York in the late 70's where she becomes immersed in the ferment of an art scene full of poseurs and prodigies (think Andy Warhol's Factory and the high tide of bohemian types taking lofts in Soho). As we start the book, her mind is on the traces in the Bonneville Salt Flat she hopes to film after she pushes her motorcycle at the land speed record. But the reader soon learns from unpredicted events at the flats that she values the higher experience of racing itself over her produced art.

Reno becomes our hero for the verve she shows in trying to "live her art". We ride this tale from her first person account, and we are soon privy to her fascination with speed and its traces from ski racing at an early age and running fast motorcycles from age 14. "I come from reckless, unsentimental people", she confesses to the reader. I love getting a feel of her aesthetic in life as she watches the cars blast off in the Utah event:

Every few minutes an engine screamed as a vehicle flew off the line, spewing a rooster tail of salt from under each rear tire. A few seconds into its run the vehicle began to float, its lower half warbled. Then the whole thing went liquid and blurry and was lost to the horizon.
One after another I watched the scream, the careen, the rooster tail, the float, and then the shimmer and wink off the edge of the horizon, gone.
Careen, rooster tail, float, gone.
Careen, float, gone.

I loved Kushner's pacing in her presentation of the backstory of Reno's move to New York and how she got romantically involved with the other main character in the novel, Sandro Valera. He is a successful artist in the minimalism bent ("His work is all objects that are what they are, and something else, at the same time"). He is 14 years older than her, with some integrity in her view for effectively divorcing himself from his wealthy industrialist family back in Milan, makers of motorcycles and tires. She talks of loving Sandro, but that is up to the reader to weigh. Romance and looking for love does not really drive this tale. Sandro helps her career with beneficial connections with artist peers and gallery owners, and he supports her taking the opportunity to race one of the Valera company motorcycles in Utah.

Against the swirl of strange performance artists and fake revolutionaries, this odd couple begin to seem the most sane, the most authentic. One young artist friend makes an art out of elaborate lies about his past. One guy shoots a pistol with blanks as part of his lovemaking with his girlfriend. A man in a former militant group like the Weathermen now plays at robbery and donates proceeds to the poor. A waitress who once had a part in a Warhol movie is hiding out in her role, an idea she got from encountering a sociologist studying the hardships of life on a minimum wage (like Ehrenreich in her "Nickel and Dimed"). But Reno doesn't really judge these adaptations to life, and Kushner seems not after satire, but a form of realism, with these characters. She gets confused sometimes by the trips they lay on her head, but she goes with the flow:

I felt that he and his friends were unraveling any sense of order I was trying to build in my new life, and yet, strangely, I also felt that he and his friends were possibly my only chance to ravel my new life into something.

The plot moves us to Italy, where we experience the social unrest that leads to labor strikes, protest actions from many quarters, and sporadic political kidnappings of public figures by the Red Brigade. Reno begins to make momentous choices that brings her both more agency over her fate and more chaos. In interludes, we cycle back in history with the story of Sandro and the impact of his father, who hung out with an anarchist motorcycle gang in Milan in his youth which later volunteered as a motorcycle unit fighting in World War 1. In the words of the gang leader:

They were smashing and crushing every outmoded and traditional idea,… every past thing. …
Lonzi said the only thing worth loving was what was to come, and since what was to come was unforeseeable—only a cretin or liar would try to predict the future—the future had to be lived now, in the now, as intensity.
You can't intuit the future, … even the next moment. He talked about a sect in the Middle Ages who believed that God reinvented the world every moment. …We want, and our want kills doom. This is how we'll take the future and occupy it like an empty warehouse, Lonzi said. It's an act of love, pure love. It isn't prophesy. It's home.
…Lonzi felt that joining the war would be the perfect test and triumph of their metalized gang, who would be their ultimate selves in the war, vanquish the putrid Austro-Hungarian Empire and wake all of Europe from its slumber … .

I thought the stew served up with this novel was fun and exhilarating. I don't side with those who say Kushner is overextending herself in her combination of concerns with the iconography of motorcycles and guns, issues of class and gender oppression, and the play of form, function, and integrity in art. One could get silly and step from a common icon of motorcycles as sexy to a broader mash-up of ideas in one image:

It is helpful that at the end of the book she shares some of the photos that inspired her in the writing and some thoughts on her sausage-making craft:
Art was now about acts not sellable; it was about gestures and bodies. It was freedom, a realm where a guy could shoot off his rifle. Ride his motorcycle over a dry lakebed. Put a bunch of stuff on the floor—dirt, for instance, or lumber. Drive a forklift into a museum, or a functional racecar. But that's art history. For the purposes of a novel, what did it mean? I was faced with the pleasure and headache of somehow stitching together the pistols and nude women as defining features of a fictional realm, and one in which the female narrator, who has the last word, and technically all words, is nevertheless continually overrun, effaced, and silenced by the very masculine world of the novel she inhabits—a contradiction I had to navigate, just as I had to find a way to merge what were by nature static and iconic images into a stream of life, real narrative

life.

This book was provided by the publisher through the Goodreads Giveaway program.

Rachel Kushner

Wendy says

Reading this was like sitting in the back of a cab. You're pretty sure you're headed SOMEWHERE but the way is circuitous, confusing and sometimes nonsensical. It drives just like a cab, quick accelerations that slam you into the seat and jarring stops that throw you into your seatbelt, none of it for a good reason. Maybe, you think, this kind of slam start/slam stop driving has a purpose? Maybe saves gas? Maybe cruel fun at the expense of the rider? Maybe simple distraction...oops...car ahead, stop now! Your thoughts are similar as you read this book. You think "There is probably an underlying structure here, a reason for this 'style'", and briefly you feel you're getting it when you slam into another hipster moment and it turns you off to caring about the underlying themes, to even finishing the book. Maybe that IS the theme. Playing with the real and the fake. But overall it was choppy, unsatisfying and self congratulatory in a way I found annoying. It was an interesting read but I wouldn't read it again. Feels like it needed another one or two good edits before publishing to smooth out the ride.

Meike says

I really, really enjoyed Kushner's "The Mars Room", but I found "The Flamethrowers" pretty underwhelming: Too many ideas that were insufficiently connected made for a convoluted novel that left me pretty cold. Additionally, it shows that the parts about Europe were written by an American, as Kushner throws around historical and cultural developments that might be well researched, but their depiction lacks vividness and a feeling of sincerity (not that an American generally couldn't pull that off, it's just that Kushner's attempt falls flat).

It's the 1970s, and our narrator, called Reno, is in her early twenties. She is obsessed with motorcycles and comes to New York to start an art career. There, she falls in love with the minimal artist / heir to an Italian rubber and motorcycle empire Sandro Valera who is considerably older then her - and this makes for the most interesting part of the whole book: Kushner does a fantastic job describing the dynamics between the naive, infatuated Reno, and the rich, influential Sandro, who enjoys the uneven power balance in their relationship.

Unfortunately, there are too many other topics piled on top of that: The Italian labour movement, the Red Brigades, the lifestyle of the rich in Italy, the New York art scene, motorcycle racing, and - this finally threw me off - futurism (which has been over for about 50 years at the narrated time).

A far-fetched story that moves wildly in order to connect disparate ideas - and this could have been so good, because the core story about Reno and Sandro was very well done.

Miranda says

Strangely disjointed and somewhat disappointing. There are a few (a very few) parts of this that work so well--just really genius bursts of writing; effortless capturing of setting, emotion, or human experience. Unfortunately, they're deeply embedded in long stretches of clunky prose where nothing, literally nothing, happens. The chronology and the two stories don't work either. I can't see a reason for developing Sandro's father's story, except to taint my already perspective on Sandro. I don't understand why the book opens with the Salt Flats. I don't understand why the narrative meanders off into so many strange little corners and then abruptly about faces. The first person narrator (Reno?) is hollow and largely underdeveloped. She's a flat character who experiences her only real, true moments (the ones where you say, "Oh, I LIKE this person.") in Rome--and unfortunately, they're short lived. In the end, she's a directionless character whose only forward motion is propelled by her ties to douche bag men. The book ends abruptly and feels unresolved, but with lack of clear conflict, rising action, or climax, I guess there was nothing to resolve. I feel like I read 10 different books in these 350+ pages--the two stars are for the chapter when she's in Rome with Gianni.

El says

I was 25 at the time, looking for something, *any*thing, when my brother told me he was moving out of town. I couldn't think of anything more important than playing the kid sister card and tagging along wherever he decided to go. Our other brother had broken free a while ago, our parents had moved to another state, and here was the idea that my last attachment was leaving me behind in a place I probably hated more than any of them put together. I had a job, I had a relationship of about seven years, I had roots. But I no longer wanted any of those things. I can't speak for his reasons for wanting to leave, but I like to think we were in the same boat: We had outgrown the town we were brought to as teenagers and we needed to reaffirm that there was life somewhere else. Because there was no life where we were. At least not a life that worked for us.

So we moved.

Ten years ago around-this-time-like-by-a-week-or-so my oldest brother and I moved from a college town in mid-Missouri to Pittsburgh.

It's not as daring as Reno's travels to New York in the Seventies when things were different than they are now, and my new circles in Pittsburgh didn't quite involve the same sort of characters that Reno encountered in NY, or in Italy, or in Utah. I didn't make any part of the trip on the back of a motorcycle and have no intention of getting on one at this stage of my life either. But it was different. It was a radical change. It was scary. It was exciting.

Reading this book now, a decade later, in the middle of August around the time we made that move makes me think a lot about the 25-year-old me and how things would have been had I stayed in mid-Missouri. I'm terrified of the prospect. But timing is everything, and I read this book at exactly the right time. Maybe if I had read it at a younger age it would have lit a fuse under my ass that much sooner, but I'm happy to read it now, as an older reader, a slightly wiser person. I can appreciate Reno's position better? I can relate to her, even though Kushner keeps her readers *this* far away from Reno and all of the characters, which gives the

whole read a sort of... muted tone. One could argue that Reno's a female, I'm a female, there ya go. But it's more than that, this isn't about gender, this is just about growing and expanding and breathing and becoming.

Reno isn't perfect, and this isn't a perfect novel. What Reno *is* is a flawed person, just like the rest of us, with flawed emotions and flawed rationalities, with flawed teeth and flawed interactions. I'm not going to point out my own flaws by indicating which parts of the story were especially (sometimes painfully) familiar to me, but they're there. I have a feeling they're there for a lot of people, and I feel that's the reason that this book is striking such a chord with its readers.

And to my brother: It's been a good decade. Thanks for letting me tag along and cramping your style. I like who we have become.

Justin Evans says

Much of this book just isn't very good, indeed, it's quite bad. Much of this book is also great, not in the sense of 'very good,' but in the sense of Great American Novel. A more tech-savvy reviewer could insert a Venn diagram here, but I'm limited to words: there's too much overlap between the 'great' bits and the 'not good' bits. Really great Great Books manage to be both good (i.e., competent) and great (i.e., fascinating) at the same time, viz., Muriel Spark at her best. Failed great books are often great (ambitious, intellectually stimulating, timely but also timeless) just when they're also bad, viz., early Dostoevsky.

Since FT is meant to be great, I'm judging it next to later Dostoevsky, which is ridiculous, but also the only way to take the book as seriously as it wants to be taken.

So consider the atrocious banality that Kushner stoops to time after time (perhaps to perform the banality of the philosophy of time embedded in the novel): "time had stretched like taffy, the night a place we would tumble into and through together, a kind of gymnasium, a space of generous borders." "This was a different Italy from what I had experienced during my two semesters in Florence" (a phrase, or one like it, repeated ad nauseum, lest we forget the oft-stated fact that the narrator spent two semesters in Florence). "There is the woods, his cashmere scarf wrapped around my neck for extra warmth, I felt like everything was going to be okay" (just one of many passages that seem to have migrated from the 50 Shades of Grey side of the border). "I never would have guessed that nay of the bad news would have an impact on me" (migrated from undergraduate writing seminar; this kind of foreshadowing returns again and again, as in Helen DeWitt's 'Lightning Rods,' except in LR *it's satirical*, unlike this rubbish: "I wouldn't have guessed that his silence would be so effective. It grafted me in. To a way of proceeding. Of not knowing where we were going except someplace in Rome, not knowing where I would stay or what I would do").

That last sentence brings me to the lauded prose, dazzling, sexy, glorious, urgent, etc etc... It's just possible that I'm showing a real bias against American-style prose, which makes a mockery of my constant protestations that there's little difference between U.S. lit and other forms of it. But take the first paragraph of chapter four, of whose ten sentences all but one start "I [verb]", and the one that doesn't is one of those fake 'look at how literary this book is, following speech patterns and stuff' sentences ("...a way to make an impression on him. *Then I'll call.* I knew no one else..."). Now, there's a point to all this I'ing; it shows the narrator's loneliness. But much of the book is written in the same way, only with a different pronoun at the start of the sentences, or, at best, a concrete noun of some description. As the novel develops the writing improves, primarily because there's more dialogue and so fewer of these awful, sub-Hemingway sentences, as well as less reportage from the immensely boring and yet also implausible Reno. Which leads me to...

Verisimilitude, there is none (unlike unnecessary inverted word order)--Reno, just an aw-shucks girl from Nevada, does the following things in 2 years: moves to New York, sleeps with a famous artist despite not knowing his name; makes friends with a woman pretending to be a waitress who is really an artist living as a waitress for the sake of art (Sartre alert); gets picked up by a different famous artist who is friends with the first one and ends up living with him; sets the land-speed record for women; falls in with a group of Italian Autonomists; accidentally seduces their heroic leader; fails to help him escape across the border to France (not her fault); has the stunning intellectual insight that she needs to find an "open absence" and "move on to the next question." Which would be impressive if she had the looks of [insert your favorite movie star here], the intelligence of Hannah Arendt, the charisma of Ayn Rand, and the talents of both Virginia Woolf and Ai Miyazato. Unfortunately it is merely incredible. She really is just an aw-shucks girl from Nevada, with no discernible talents (though she can work a camera and motorbike), personality or attractions. Even that would be fine if

i) the sections of the book that focus on her were written in the third person, but they're in the first person, and there's very little indication that the implied author finds his/her narrator to be implausible or ridiculous in any way.
ii) she weren't set up as some kind of Greek Goddess who can, as I said, go at 300 miles an hour, slip easily between radically different groups of people, and effortlessly conquer the penises of men. All men.

Interlude: Alison Bechdel suggests that one way to judge books is to see whether female characters have conversations that are about something other than boys. This is the 'Bechdel Test', and it's both funny and smart. There needs to be another test, which I hereby name the 'Evans Test.' Here, you judge a book according to whether the main character can have a relationship with a man or woman (depending on which genitals they like the shape of) that is not sexual or romantic. Reno fails, despite the fact that she never actually hits on anyone. And speaking of the Bechdel test, the female characters are all either Reno, bitches or skanks, and if Kushner's first name was Robert, he'd be rightly consigned to hell by angry women readers. I'm not sure that Kushner herself will escape it.

Then there's the cliched intellectual sentiments--that the poor Italian proles are welcoming and genuinely live out their political beliefs (by giving Reno food, for instance; the value of ideas and politics in this book often boils down to whether they turn their holders into the kind of person who gives *HOT* young women whatever they want) whereas the New York artists are too cold and detached. Yes, the poor are wonderful, whereas the rich are unbearable. That is precisely the effect of poverty on people: it opens their hearts, makes them generous, inclines them to accept outsiders.

The book's 'X' motif is tiresome, beginning with the description of a photo in which a gun barrel is "one long half of the letter X", in other words, there is no X there at all, it's just a diagonal. Other examples: Reno and Sandro's first date is him fingering her and then him saving a drowning man, and these two events "crossed to form an X, and the X pinned us together"; Reno skis an X into a frozen pond and photographs it; a man encourages characters to watch a porn movie that's "Trippel X". Just in case you didn't notice, it's, like, sex and violence and art and stuff? And, like, growing up and coming to a crossroads about this stuff? And making your mark, like, knowing your place in the world and stuff?

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Now, reboot, because there are some truly fantastic, wonderful things about this book. Kushner takes on the difficult task of writing a serious book about camp people. The clash between the 'authenticity' of futurism/bikes/speed/revolution and the fakeness of artfulness/art/irony is well drawn and not simplified--there are good characters who are sincere (Gianni), and good characters who are ironic (Ronnie). A couple of

examples of this opposition playing itself out: Sandro chooses love, suggesting that he isn't really living it, whereas Reno doesn't experience "love as a choice," and requires "sincerity" from her friends/lovers. Sandro plays with guns and treats them like art, whereas the Autonomists use them as tools to defend themselves from fascists. You get the point. This is a serious, timely issue, that Kushner treats with great sensitivity and great intelligence.

There are terrific minor characters, too, particularly Chesil Jones, notable American novelist, who is pretty much embodied Mansplaining, and utterly hilarious. The aforementioned Ronnie, who tells endless nonsense tales about himself in order to tell us the truth rather than to hide it, is wonderful and very moving.

And so I came to the end of the book. Stream of consciousness. Verbless sentences, and pompous. Words posing as thought. Individuality? None. Rhythm? Negatively absent. How much longer? Time-lines of one man stand only so much. Revelation! Sad post-coital emptiness.

I will read everything that Kushner publishes from here out, in the desperate hope that she develops into the real thing; I would have felt the same way after reading, say, Joyce's Portrait of the Artist in 1916, another ridiculously self-important Bildungsroman, the ending of which ("When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets") I've come to read ironically just to save myself the pain of rolling my eyes too hard, although when younger I found it a call to arms. So I choose to read all that silliness about open absences and blah blah blah as Kushner showing us that Reno hasn't changed at all, and is still just a twit, whereas she, Kushner, has great things ahead of her.

Addendum: I just read a review in which Kushner described one of the aims of the book--to have her narrator perceived by the men and even women in the story as nothing other than a pretty little piece of tail, but have the reader see her depths more clearly. That's a pretty great idea, and does make me think better of what she was trying to do. On the other hand, I wonder if the task is just impossible: Reno's 'flat' outer life just isn't distinguishable, I think, from what Kushner intends to be her full inner life. Great idea, possibly impossible to execute well.
