



The Strange Case of Rachel K

Rachel Kushner

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Three early stories about myth, power, and sex by the acclaimed author of *The Flamethrowers*.

An explorer's unknown whereabouts keep a queen in anticipation; a faith healer's illegal radio broadcasts give hope to an oppressed people; a president's offer of ice cream surprises a prostitute expecting to turn a trick—the three short fictions gathered in *The Strange Case of Rachel K* build into a vision that is black-humored, brutal, and beautiful. Written prior to the publication of Kushner's acclaimed debut novel *Telex From Cuba*, these stories, like Roberto Bolaño's *Antwerp*, burst forth with the genesis of her fictional universe. From the mythical "Great Exception," to the ominous "Debouchment"—originally published in her too-short-lived journal *Soft Targets*—to the sexy and noirish title story, Kushner saddles up for a journey into the wilds of modern fiction.

The Strange Case of Rachel K Details

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From Reader Review The Strange Case of Rachel K for online ebook

Bruce says

Kushner is a major talent but these short stories don't add up to a book. Read the title story, easily the best of them, in the New Yorker

Diane S ? says

Strange, quirky but well written. Three stories of which my favorite was the first but the third, which is the title story was interesting as well. Scenes that were like snapshots, the story takes place during Battista's regime when Rachel, a dancer of sorts, tries to seduce a French Nazi. Good but it is the first story that sticks in my mind.

Roger Brunyate says

Quality, Not Value

Also, in this in-between era, after the Spanish, who cooked their parrots so slowly they remained alive as they were removed from the oven, and before the Russians, who took the scrubbers off the chimneys and let the red dust rain down: a dictator's estate, with artificial waterfall and presidential barbershop, a divorcée's mausoleum, with amber Lalique windows, and the addition of cheval-de-frise on the low walls of Spanish colonial buildings, to prevent vagrants from sitting.

With writing like this, how could I not be thrilled? Rachel Kushner's three little vignettes of Cuba in the decadent years just before the revolution are utterly superb. This is my first experience of the author, but it makes me eager to read her novels, *Telex from Cuba* (2008) or *The Flame Throwers* (2013), which I actually own. This is five-star writing if I ever saw it. Kushner has been compared to Roberto Bolaño, which I certainly see in the title story here—a reworking of a Cuban noir movie which happens to have the same name as the author's own. Her technique of approaching her subject with abrupt dashes from every possible direction, like a terrier barking in brilliant prose, reminds me also of my favorite book about Cuba in this period, *Adios, Happy Homeland*, by Ana Menendez.

But what is it about marketing? To sell three short stories, totalling 60 small pages, for just under \$20? That is 33 cents per page! And then, having printed them in a really rather beautiful volume that nestles in the hand, to cover the whole thing in a simply hideous jumble of a cover with virtually illegible lettering—do they have a suicide wish? Reading Kushner's brief introduction to the stories (as brilliant as any of the writing in the stories themselves), it is clear that these pieces are a decade old, dug out from a drawer. I happened to find out that the leading male character in the title story, a real French former Nazi called Christian de la Mazière, also appears in *Telex from Cuba*. So if the title story, which is longer than the other

two put together, should turn out to be merely a study for the novel, readers of that book will find almost nothing here that is new.

My advice: get this from your library and read it overnight as I did; the writing is simply superb. But buyer beware, be very much aware!

LindaJ^ says

This small volume, published in 2015, contains three short stories written by Kushner before her first novel *Telex from Cuba* was published in 2008. The stories and the preface are very good. Kushner's writing is, as always, superb. I love her writing even when I don't quite know what she's saying, at least on the first read! If you've read *Telex from Cuba*, you'll recognize the characters in the third story -- *The Strange Case of Rachel K.* The three stories are linked chronologically, although the first - *The Great Exception* - is many years earlier. Collectively you could even say they tell a story of about syphilis! While all were good, I think I liked the shortest - *Debouchment* - the best. I had to look *debouchment* up to find out its meaning and then ponder using it for what happens in the story. I wonder if I've got it right!

Greg says

Time for another "amuse bouche"/AB2, and here Rachel Kushner gives us "Rachel K." Unfortunately, just today while staring at my morning mirror I swore not to madly mock meta. (Signed copies of this review are available for only \$99.99, limited time only.)

Christopher McQuain says

****1/2

Jason Robinson says

I just recently discovered Rachel Kushner. She writes quite eloquently. I am looking forward to reading more of her work. I recently read her latest novel *The Mars Room* and enjoyed that also.

Bronwyn says

A wonderful collection of short stories set in the *Telex From Cuba* universe. It might help to read *Telex From Cuba* before reading this collection, since most of the settings and characters are the same, but I can see it also serving as a good kind of prologue to *Telex From Cuba*. I'm usually more of a fan of novels, but all the stories were excellent, both entertaining/engaging and so well written.

Downward says

a slight but dense collection of interwoven stories about street level cuban politics at various points of the twentieth century. the titular story is the strongest, focusing on identity and gender performativity of a burlesque dancer as she attempts to seduce a french nazi during the beginning of batista's reign. the global politics serve as a landscape here while the intimate details of the portrait are drawn out by our main characters. there's some real good dialogue here that blossoms into beautiful depictions of desire and fear. the intro compares it to slow learner by pynchon, but that's only really accurate insofar as you can see kushner getting her sealegs here. would earn a higher grade with a more significantly emotive ending, and perhaps a hundred more pages of the character stuff that kushner knocks out of the park so easily.

John Jr. says

Cuba, on our minds with the death of Fidel Castro, has been on Rachel Kushner's mind for some time, as this slender book of evocative but elusive stories illustrates. "The Great Exception," prompted by Kushner's reading of a book of history, is her sketch of a "version of discovery and progress." It concerns a Portuguese admiral and a queen and the finding of the Americas, and later a Colorado woman who, inspired by kinetoscope visions, travels to Cuba. The admiral ends up boiled in a pot, and the woman falls in love with a man who makes cheap, faked-up films, who spends all her money. "Debouchment" presents a set of fragmentary descriptions centered on a scene in a nightclub in an unnamed tropical country during an "in-between era," after the Spanish and before the Russians. A banned faith healer broadcasts illegally on the radio at night, as do "bearded ruffians" in the mountains; the nightclub scene, already in pieces, ends in a blast. In the title story, the longest of the three, a Frenchman who during the war had fought for the Nazis but managed to cover up that history once it ended, is now established in Havana. At a nightclub he frequents, he dallies with a young dancer who also has a false past. It's 1952; the characters exist in a moving present that goes with them from day to day but isn't headed anywhere.

The stories are flecked with eccentricities and ironies and recurring motifs and almost-jokes. The admiral conceives of the world as shaped like a pear, or a violin. Because he had claimed that the natives did so, the Spanish take to cooking and eating parrots; at one point the text evokes the pun "parrot-cide" without explicitly stating it. Mirrors and violence, syphilis and smoke and strong fragrances contribute to the atmosphere, but we catch glimpses of loveliness, such as the harbor "whose shore was paved with pulverized white diamonds." Some samples of the text: "This was Christmastime, and there were humans hanging in the trees beyond the security fence" (from "Debouchment"). "In Havana there was no war, no snow, no shame. There was, instead, softness, flesh and decadence masking some kind of horror, like makeup over a bruise" (from "The Strange Case of Rachel K").

Terri says

If you've read Kushner's first novel, *Telex from Cuba*, a lot of the material in these stories will look familiar. Her writing is so good. If I hadn't already read her novels, I might rate this more highly simply on the merits of her prose.

Tyler says

This is a treat, a doggie biscuit, for those of us who encounter Kushner's other novels first and want more. Others have spoken of this as a book much like Bolaño's *Antwerp*, in that both that book and this one allow the reader to see the kernels of other books by these authors and how their longer works came to fruition from sketches, observations, images that stuck, and character studies. I love the eccentricity of these three "slight stories," as another reviewer has called them, and their playfulness. I wouldn't recommend this book for your first Kushner experience, though—for that, I couldn't recommend *The Flamethrowers* enough.

Shawn Mooney says

I read the first story, which was perhaps cleverly yet vaguely allegorical or something; I really had no idea what was going on. When I started the second story and found it to be equally confusing, I bailed. Not my cup of tea or maybe I am not clever enough but no thank you, I'm good. Wonderful sentences, though. I just wish I knew what it all was supposed to be about.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

A Work of Seductive Details

This small book is a collection of three early short stories by Rachel Kushner.

They seem to be modest exercises in style, or tentative efforts to design settings for her fictions. Together, as she hints in the preface, they form "*a work of seductive details*", which evidences her desire to "*run alongside, but with [her] own version of discovery and progress*," in which she captures "*the feeling of knowing*".

In the first story, "*The Great Exception*", the narrator tells a tale of her grandparents' arrival and meeting in Cuba. The style reminded me of Borges and a tropical Calvino.

The second, "*Debouchment*", describes her mother's life in Havana "*in this in-between era, after the Spanish and before the Russians...and their Brutalist apartments*". The descriptions are so evocative, you can almost feel the moisture of rain and sweat, hear the songs playing on the radio, and smell the blend of local fragrances (breadfruit trees, "*fetid jungle breath*" and brothel perfumes and makeup).

In the eponymous third story, the narrator gets a job as an exotic dancer in the Cabaret Tokio's Pam-Pam Room. "*She eludes the term 'whore' with the smoke and mirrors of 'demimondaine'.*" She has a superficial relationship with a French Nazi ("*a French SS officer - memoirist, minor aristocrat, dreamer of extremes*"), because they find each other attractive, alluring and elusive in equal parts:

"Seduction, he knew, was a slew of projections, disguises, denials...[Her painted-on black fishnet stockings] were an enticement in the guise of a barrier, like a beaded curtain hung over

a doorway says 'come in', not 'stay out', its beads telegraphing that what's inside is enchanted and special."

This story is the longest, and is probably the source of comparisons to Roberto Bolano, to whom I would add Anaïs Nin, Rikki Ducornet and maybe Henry Miller. Like them, Kushner writes with an intimate understanding of the seductiveness of location, circumstances and language:

"And so here I am, in a burlesque club below the Tropic of Cancer, in this damp city where dreams are marbled with nothingness."

Barbara says

I am a fan of Rachel Kushner although I am discovering she is not loved by all. I didn't realize these stories were set primarily in Cuba but looking closely at the book jacket, the Cuban flag is recognizable. I read this in a n hour. It is a portrayal of the decadent side of colonialism. One image that struck me was the French Nazi SS officer reflecting that the American Cadillacs roaming the streets of pre-revolution Cuba to the Nazi's driving Mercedes through Paris. Chilling. While the time periods is not defined, it can be estimated by the entrance of Batista. The critical details is that this is post Spanish American War and pre-Cuban Revolution of 1959. Rachel K is not the author, but coincidentally, as Kushner points out, has the same name. She was a prostitute found murdered in a Havana hotel room. A short book, full of intriguing details of the crimes of colonialism, and a portrayal of Havana I'd not seen before.
