



Telex from Cuba: a novel **by Rachel Kushner**

New York: Scribner, 2008.

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A National Book Award finalist

Summary

Rachel Kushner has written an astonishingly wise, ambitious, and riveting novel set in the American community in Cuba during the years leading up to Castro's revolution -- a place that was a paradise for a time and for a few. The first novel to tell the story of the Americans who were driven out in 1958, this is a masterful debut. Young Everly Lederer and K. C. Stites come of age in Oriente Province, where the Americans tend their own fiefdom -- three hundred thousand acres of United Fruit Company sugarcane that surround their gated enclave.

If the rural tropics are a child's dreamworld, Everly and K.C. nevertheless have keen eyes for the indulgences and betrayals of the grown-ups around them -- the mordant drinking and illicit loves, the race hierarchies and violence. In Havana, a thousand kilometers and a world away from the American colony, a cabaret dancer meets a French agitator named Christian de La Mazière, whose seductive demeanor can't mask his shameful past. Together they become enmeshed in the brewing political underground.

When Fidel and Raúl Castro lead a revolt from the mountains above the cane plantation, torching the sugar and kidnapping a boat full of "yanqui" revelers, K.C. and Everly begin to discover the brutality that keeps the colony humming. Though their parents remain blissfully untouched by the forces of history, the children hear the whispers of what is to come. At the time, urgent news was conveyed by telex. Kushner's first novel is a tour de force, haunting and compelling, with the urgency of a telex from a forgotten time and place.

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

Kushner's colorful, character-driven debut succinctly captures the essence of life for a gilded circle of American expats in pre-Castro Cuba, chronicling a mélange of philandering spouses, privileged carousers and their rebellious children. K.C. Stites and Everly Lederer are raised among the American industrial strongholds of the United Fruit Company sugar plantation and the Nicaro nickel mines. As adolescents, they are confronted by the complexities of local warfare and backstabbing politics, while their parents remain ignorant of the impending revolution. Meanwhile, in Havana, burlesque dancer Rachel K and her former SS officer companion become entangled in Castro's revolution. Toward the end of 1957, K.C.'s brother, Del, joins the rebels, and within a month the United Fruit Company's cane fields are ablaze. Throughout the following year, the attacks on U.S.-operated businesses intensify; political and personal loyalties are shuffled and betrayed; and the violence between the rebels and Batista's forces escalate. The action, while slowed at times by Kushner's tendency to revisit plot points from multiple points of view, culminates in a riveting drama. Given the recent Cuba headlines, Kushner's tale, passionately told and intensively researched, couldn't have come at a more opportune time.

From Booklist

For 50 years before Castro's revolution, Americans controlled Cuba's main exports sugar and nickel. United Fruit Company and Nicaro Mining sent its executives and their families to the island and built them their own city complete with native servants. In this lush and falsely idyllic environment, K.C. Stites and Everly Lederer grow up watching their parents disregard the poverty and brutality around them while getting drunk at the Americans-only club. When United Fruit's cane fields are burned, K.C.'s brother, Del, is the planner. Even Mr. Stites' mistress is working with a French agitator in the rebel underground, and he and his colleagues think they can't be vulnerable. It is not until the bombs begin to fall that the light dawns. Pulling from her mother's letters and journals of her time in Cuba in the 1950s, Kushner has written a gripping tale of what it was like to live through a momentous time.

From Kirkus

/ Starred Review */* Los Angeles resident Kushner's first novel follows the lives of American ex-pats and others in pre-revolutionary Cuba. In 1950s Cuba, employees of the vast, powerful United Fruit Company enjoy luxuries galore in their exclusive island communities while poverty and unrest stirs around them. Growing up on United Fruit property, Everly Lederer and K.C. Stites alternately share the stories of their strange, privileged lives. Through the children's eyes, the social morays, recklessness and fears of the adults are revealed. While the children relay their upbringing in the Oriente Province, an exotic dancer, Rachel K, casts a spell on politicians and rebels alike in a nightclub in Havana. The mysterious Rachel K and one of her patrons, a French traitor, become deeply involved in the growing revolution, which leads them down an accelerating path toward a new and different future. Castro's coup serves as a riveting backdrop and famous figures, like Fidel and his brother Raul, populate the narrative.

When the revolution reaches the gates of the American community, Everly and K.C. glimpse the world outside their secluded utopia, even as their socialite parents hold fast to their ignorance. The danger and violence of revolution engross Rachel K and the Frenchman, both of whom lack for a homeland, and they seem to thrive off the conflict.

Biography

<http://authors.simonandschuster.com/Rachel-Kushner/45510419>



- Birth 1968
- Where Eugene, Oregon, USA
- Education B.A., University of California, Berkeley; M.F.A., Columbia University
- Awards Finalist, National Book Award
- Currently lives in Los Angeles, California

Rachel Kushner is a writer who lives in Los Angeles. She was born in Eugene, Oregon, and moved to San Francisco in 1979. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and earned her MFA in creative writing from Columbia University in 2000. Kushner lived in New York City for 8 years, where she was an editor at *Grand Street (magazine)* and *BOMB (magazine)*. She has written widely on contemporary art, including

numerous features in *Artforum*. She is currently an editor of *Soft Targets*, praised by *The New York Times* as an "excellent, Brooklyn-based journal of art, fiction and poetry." She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and son.

Her first novel, *Telex from Cuba*, was published in July 2008. It is a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award.

Questions for Rachel Kushner (interview)

Amazon.com: You're writing about the end of one era for Cuba at what may be the end of another. Was that in your mind as you wrote?

Kushner: It wasn't so much, actually, but that might be because I wrote the bulk of the book before Fidel fell ill with diverticulitis, and before the American media's obsession with his (like all of ours) eventual death hit a pitch point. Even now, I find this sense of waiting and the media's focus on it to be an odd tautology: the "breaking" story is often that there's a breaking story, but then the story never comes. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Fidel Castro's policies, his segue out of public view has been pretty brilliant. He trumped the media's deathwatch by stepping down, which took away the promise in his death: nothing substantial has changed to date, except the perception that his move away from the role of *lider* would precipitate change. I do hear he has more time to read now. Someone apparently gave him a copy of *Telex from Cuba*. I'd like to think he's reading it now, in that tracksuit that replaced the military fatigues.

Amazon.com: The kernel of your story was your mother's childhood, similar to some of those you describe in the book, growing up in Cuba as the daughter of an American

mining executive. Did you hear her stories about that time during your own childhood? What did you add to them when you started doing your own research?

Kushner: I indeed heard lots of stories when I was a kid--Cuba has a real mythological importance to my mother and her sisters and how they think of themselves (my mother, for instance, was under the sway of their Jamaican houseboy, Cleveland, who is the inspiration for Willy in my book). My grandparents, dead for many years now, saved an incredible trove of stuff from their life in Cuba: every last receipt from the United Fruit commissary where my grandmother bought groceries, a mimeograph of every letter she sent, etc. I spent about three years going through this stuff, and interviewing my mother and her sisters and others they'd grown up with. But then I had to disconnect completely from all that, and build a fictional structure and then adhere precisely to its logic and requirements, which meant only using what served my story. Just because something is true does not mean it has a place. Often it turned out quite the opposite, that the people and characters and details I imagined were much more fluid and true seeming, and it was the "true life" detail that stuck out and seemed awkward.

That said, by so thoroughly metabolizing the "real" American colony, I was able to depict mine freehand, if you will, in a way that is (hopefully) convincing, that works as fiction but is a realm you can enter and see an erased world. I know that those who grew up in Nicaro have read the book and loved it, so that's nice. And there are many keys and arrows that point to or hint at real people and events, if amalgamations. Some of the American employees, for instance, were kidnapped and later invited to Raul's wedding. There was a Cuban investor who was a kind of interloper and got Batista's air force to strafe Nicaro, in order to drive the Americans out. I spoke on the phone to the former mine manager's wife, who told me that this Cuban investor threatened to kill her husband if he stayed. So that's a real-life detail. I guess there are many, but they are a bare-bones architecture; how fiction becomes fiction is less linear, more mysterious, and might I say difficult!

Amazon.com: This isn't your usual fiction debut, channeled through the perspective of a single navel. You take on a whole society's worth of voices, often in one scene (I'm thinking in particular of the wonderful party scene at the center of the book). Was that your intention from the beginning, or did you start with one perspective and then find yourself needing more?

Kushner: It's true, not one navel, and not my own, either. Probably that's partly why it took me so long to write it. I somehow always knew it would be a structure of multiple voices, rather than a single protagonist. I had become attached, from early on, to the idea--whether I have achieved it or not--of getting at the complex and varied forces of revolution and what led to it, i.e., how did the Americans participate, how did it constitute them, and the reverse, how did they affect it? There would have been no way to do this without rendering the story from multiple perspectives. Alejo Carpentier does it for the Haitian Revolution in *The Kingdom of This World*, for instance, with one narrator named Ti Noël, but he has this guy live about 200 years, so he can witness every significant juncture in the epic.

My problem was not a protracted timeframe, but a subtle network of dynamics: the American executives at United Fruit and the Nicaro Nickel Company were dealing with Batista and in denial of the revolution. But the revolution was obviously real, and so I

needed to send some people up into the mountains to behold what was happening there. A disaffected narrator like La Mazière--like Rachel K, based on a real life figure of that same name--serves this role. Also, he cuts through a bit of the romance associated with revolutionary change. He's totally jaded and there for all the "wrong" reasons, an adventurer who sees violence as mystical, as a "pure" agent of change, if you will. And Rachel K was useful in that she could reveal some of what was happening in Havana and be close to the big political players in the government as well as the underground.

Lastly, a child who can see it all up close, like Everly, can reveal certain less mediated truths, without the more narrow judgments and strictures of adult thinking. Everly can hold contradiction in her mind and not be forced to resolve it, which is what maturity so often does to the process of thinking. On the other hand, in K.C. I wanted a child narrator who was looking back in hindsight, who has some degree of awareness, but not complete awareness, of how and whether his memories hold up over time: is the world he loves as benevolent as it had seemed to him as a child? Was it benevolent even then? Regardless, it's his *childhood* as well as a place, and he has a right to have his own feelings about his own childhood, even if the implications of it are so much larger than one boy's life.

Amazon.com: You leave yourself almost entirely out of the story, but there is one provocatively named character who apparently shares very little of your own biography: Rachel K. How did she come into the story, and how did she come to share your name?

Kushner: Actually, Rachel K is a real-life historic figure of pre-Castro Cuba, though specifically of the dictator Machado's era, and not Batista's. While I was researching the book, I came across a reference to her while reading Michael Chanan's comprehensive book about post-revolutionary films, *The Cuban Image*. Rachel K (no period after K—in every Cuban history reference, she is, as if sprung from a Kafkan universe, referred to this way) was a "French variety dancer" who became an icon after she was found mysteriously murdered in a hotel room. No one ever figured out what happened, and the mystery of her death came to signify the mortal decadence of Havana in the 1930s. The Cubans made a film about her in 1973 called *The Strange Case of Rachel K*. Because of her role in history, and in historical imagery, and due to the striking coincidence that her name is like mine, I felt it would be an act of exclusion *not* to put her in the book. I took the "cue" and ran with it, basically. And as you say, yeah, she is unlike me, which makes her perhaps a perverse or fun surrogate: she's discreet and dispassionate, qualities I wish I possessed, but in fact do not. Though perhaps she is my repressed double, "more me than me." On the surface I am much more like Everly: a goofy fabulist.

Amazon.com: You've visited Cuba a lot in recent years. What memories are there of the pre-Castro times and of the American presence?

Kushner: The residue is everywhere. There's the layer of it that many people know--the American cars, the rusted and burned-out neon signs for Woolworth's and Zenith Televisions et cetera in bigger cities like Havana and Santiago. In the Nipe Bay region, the northeastern part of what used to be called Oriente Province (now divided up) where my book takes place, suddenly, the residue is both less visible, and yet much, much stronger: the real story is there, lurking, and going there and excavating that residue was crucial to writing the book.

In Nicaro, for instance, it's a small mining town and there is no skeleton of midcentury American retail, and without an architectural heritage like you have in the cities, there was little to stop the Soviet-financed construction of huge Brutalist apartment buildings. So you don't think, shiny 1950s America when you get there. But everyone you speak to who is old enough knows they live in a former American colony, and when we went, all the Jamaicans and Haitians who had worked as butlers in the houses of my grandparents and their friends are still there, and they told me stories about the town in its colonial, er, heyday. The managers row, which features in my book, is still there, and the biggest house, which the mine administrator lived in, is now a school. Fidel had a real axe to grind with Nicaro--not unfounded, by any means--and I'm sure the children are aware that the facility's benefactor is a banished "yanqui" landlord.

Preston, the United Fruit Company town, has been renamed, but it was an American town in every way. United Fruit built the entire infrastructure, the roads, the electricity, ran their own mail service, the trains, shipping, everything. The town they built is still there, and the houses, once uniformly "company property" even in paint scheme (all over Central and South America United Fruit painted their towns a particular shade of mustard yellow) have never been repainted. And so what paint is still there is a palimpsest of the Old Order: faded patches of mustard yellow linger on the weathered exterior of every house. The old company hotel where my mother used to sit on the porch and sip her cane juice, waiting for my grandmother to shop, is still there, but it has no windows and the tile floors are cracked. United Fruit departed very quickly when Fidel nationalized the mills, and they left a huge cache of company records, which I discovered behind a chainlink fence in the back of the public library in Banes. The Cubans know it's part of their history, which is why it's in the library, but like every other detail of American life, its state of decay, moldering under a leaky roof, is part of the allure: a history erased, but not completely...

Amazon.com: My strongest sense of that moment (until I read your book) was from one of my favorite movies, the glorious documentary, *I Am Cuba*. Did that play a role in helping you imagine the times?

Kushner: Funny you should ask, because one of the images on my website, www.telexfromcuba.com, is a still I made from *I Am Cuba*, of women in a poolside beauty contest, to depict what La Mazière means when he speaks of a place "where dreams are marbled with nothingness"--i.e., a place simultaneously at a height and in decline, upon which he's projecting his own knowledge of decline, having lived through the German occupation of Paris and their subsequent departure eastward, as they were crushed by the Allies and the party was over. I thought a lot about whether or not to use this image, because the film was not made in the fifties, but in 1964, and moreover with a real political agenda. That said, it is indeed an amazing film, and the tracking shot into the swimming pool at the beginning is right up there with the tracking shot at the beginning of *Touch of Evil* as a stunning technical feat (and was even replicated by Paul Thomas Anderson in the opening of *Boogie Nights*). But *I Am Cuba* is more than just beautiful and strange. It is, as I said, extremely dogmatic, it's a piece of propaganda, really, and yet it is one of only a handful of films that you show you what prerevolutionary Havana might have looked like. There are no films made in the fifties that actually portray life in Havana at that time, at least that I am aware of. It's the closest thing, despite its dogma. And even its dogma can take on a kind of surreal charm: the "evil"

Americans are all played by Russians, who have these heavy and angular Slavic jaws. Also, they speak with Russian accents.

Discussion Questions:

1. KC Stites tells his story as an adult. Why do you think Rachel Kushner chose to write his story in first person (as opposed to the others told in third person) based on a grown man's memories? How might the story be different if a young KC was telling it?
2. Everly notes that "If her parents ever did get rich, their old selves would hate their new selves" (p. 42). Discuss the importance of social class in 1950s Cuba, both amongst the expatriates (the Stites, Lederers, Allains, etc.), their servants (Annie, Willy, etc.), and the locals, such as Mr. Gonzalez. Are there rigid laws, or can people maneuver between classes? Why are issues straightened out native to native (pg. 187)?
3. La Mazière believed Rachel K "gauzed her person in persona, but sensed the person slipping through, person and persona in an elaborate tangle" (pg. 55). Discuss the significance of identity in *Telex from Cuba*. Who is not what they seem? The Lederer daughters have a doll, Scribbles, whose face they can erase and then re-draw. Are other people capable of reinventing themselves?
4. Why do these families move to Cuba? Do they arrive seeking to escape their pasts, hoping for new business opportunities, or looking forward to a new adventure? When they leave, have they accomplished their goals? What do they take away?
5. Throughout the novel, many characters note the red haze of nickel oxide that floats from the company's mines and covers the whole area. What, if anything, does this red dust symbolize?
6. "A human trapped inside a monkey trapped inside a cage. But when she tried to put him down, he screeched like a vicious animal" (pg. 97). What role do animals play in this novel? Consider the shark Del insists on killing, Mrs. LaDue's caged monkey Poncho, and the pig Mr. Stites beats to death to teach KC a lesson.
7. In this novel, what is the significance of one's nationality? Rachel K claims to be French, people believe La Mazière is German, Mr. Carrington is actually Cuban, and Deke Havelin renounces his American citizenship to become Cuban. Is a person's nationality a matter of choice, where they're born, the family they're born into, or how they appear to others?
8. What drives La Mazière? Why is he in Cuba, and why does a Frenchman join an army of Cuban rebels? Does he have true political motivations, or is he simply an instigator? And will he always yearn for a "luminous bubble, for an impossible time of privilege and turmoil" (pg. 200)?

9. Do you believe the story Rachel K tells La Mazière about her past, or does she merely like to play games? Does she have true feelings for him? What is the significance of her painted on fishnets?

10. When Mr. Carrington returns home from being kidnapped, his wife never sees him on the lawn because the indoor lights are on: "she'd have to put herself in darkness in order to see" (pg. 253). When thinking about Rachel K preferring to sleep without blankets so she can freeze and then make herself warm, La Mazière ponders what the director said about Woodsie, that she "gives radiant joy, but then she takes it away" (pg. 229). What do these observations imply about the women? Can you think of other examples of dichotomy?

11. Why does KC give Everly the Pullman car's door handle? What does it represent to each of them? Does KC truly have feelings for her, or does he want to please his mother?

12. KC thinks Everly has a funny look, but "maybe everyone has that look, but they know to cover it" (pg. 267). Which characters are best at wearing masks?

13. As they're being evacuated, Everly looks over the island from the boat and realizes "It's so nice—without us" (pg. 277). How did the families of the United Fruit Company impact Cuba, for both the good and bad? Will anyone be sad to see them leave?

14. In the closing words of *Telex from Cuba*, KC states "You don't call the dead. The dead call you" (pg. 317). What does he mean by this? Who is calling KC and the other families who once lived in Cuba?

Further Reading:

To Change the World: My Years in Cuba by Margaret Randall

House of Sand and Fog by Andre Dubus

Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba by Margarita Engle

After Havana by Charles Fleming

Fidel's Last Days by Roland Merullo