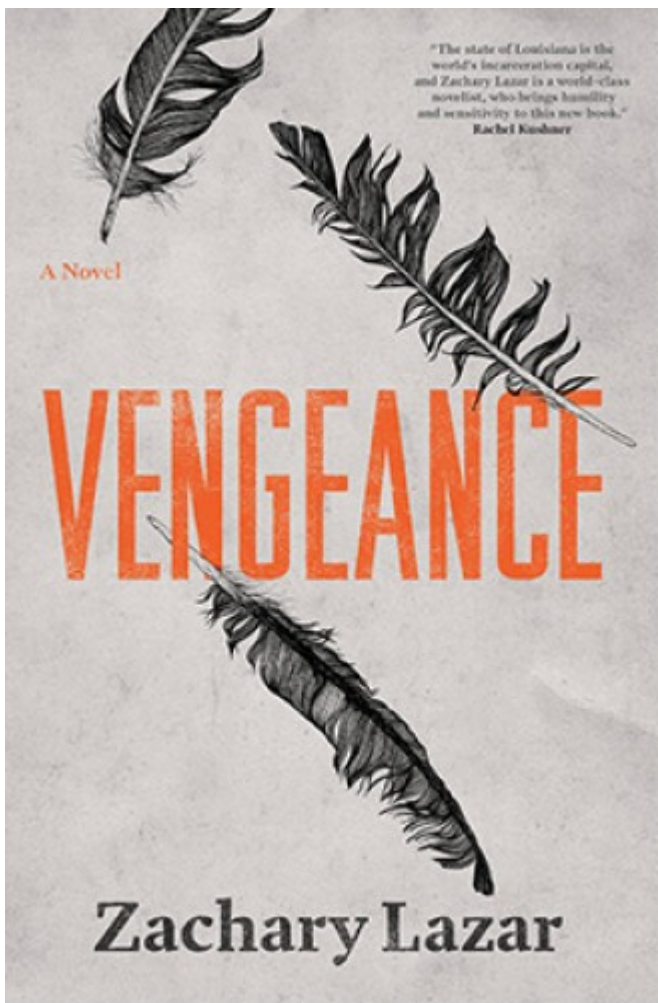


Fiction that makes prisons visible

How three novelists depict the reality of incarceration

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [April 21, 2019](#) issue

In Review

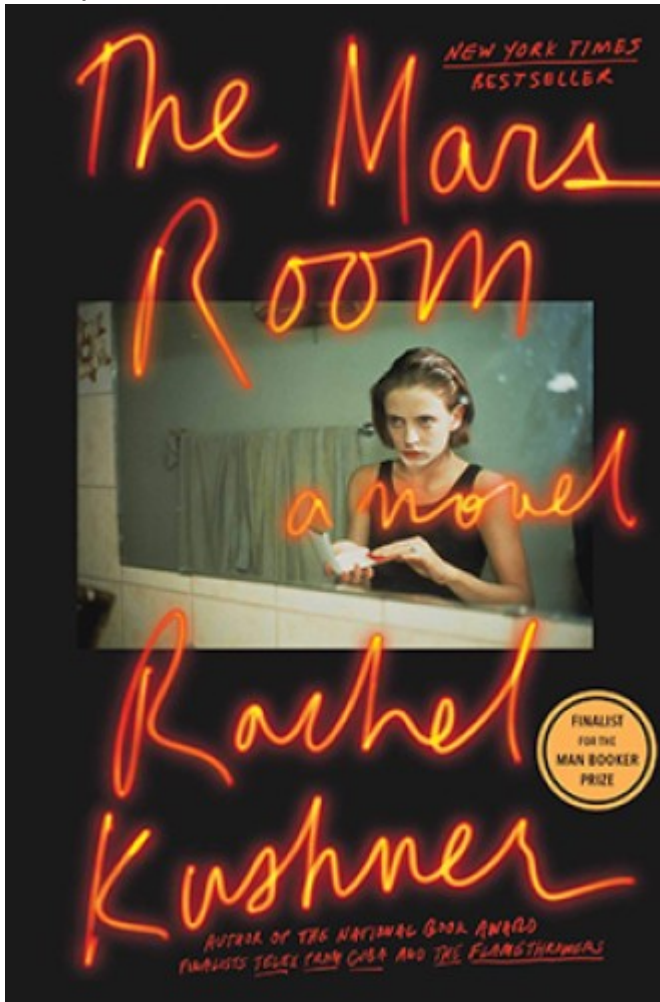


Vengeance

A Novel

By Zachary Lazar

Catapult

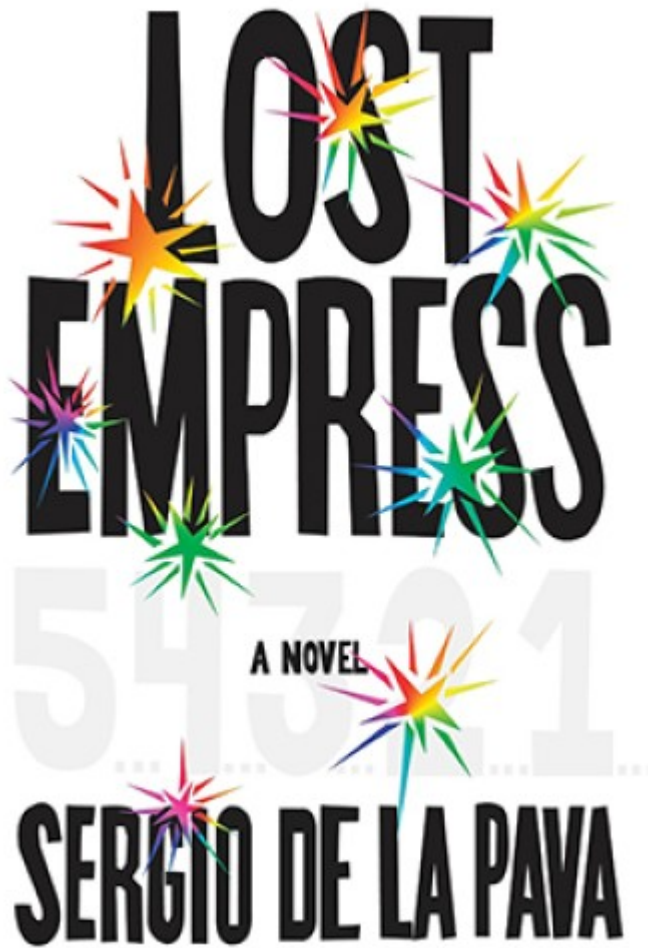


The Mars Room

A Novel

By Rachel Kushner

Scribner



Lost Empress

A Novel

By Sergio De La Pava
Pantheon

Somewhere near the heart of your city sits a squat storage locker of a building. It has some unassuming signage, a high fence, and a science-fictional ability to bend the attention of passersby away from itself. You may drive past this building a dozen times in a month without wondering what it's for. Prisons and jails are central to the way America conducts its business, yet they are often literally hard to see.

They are hard to represent in fiction, too: so boring as to try readers' patience and so awful as to try their credence. The writer is caught in a version of the same paradox that faces advocates for oppressed people. If you're lucky enough to be in a

position to get yourself a hearing, it just means you're inauthentic. Novelists Zachary Lazar, Rachel Kushner, and Sergio De La Pava deserve recognition for taking all of these risks. But only two of them fully succeed.

Vengeance is illuminating in places about the challenges prisoners and their families face, but its most important lessons are accidental. It is an autofiction featuring a character named Zachary Lazar, a novelist and journalist, who visits the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola during its semiannual passion play (a real event, until its recent cancellation). He meets a young inmate named Kendrick King and grows obsessed with King's crime and with the question of his guilt or innocence. He finds King's relatives and friends, pores over news stories about the case, and visits King repeatedly to grill him.

Lazar explains his motivation as follows: his life has been shaped by violent crime (his father was murdered); so, from the other side, has King's; therefore, King can help him understand himself. Though Lazar occasionally goes through the motions of challenging his own motivations, he seems not to question this deeply questionable premise.

More importantly, he treats King's loved ones as though they have no purpose on earth except to satisfy his curiosity. As Lazar-the-character drives all over the South to pester this nice, beleaguered, working-class black family, even at one point poking his head uninvited into a room in which a young child is alone (stranger danger!), you start to resent him. He never seriously pretends that he will help establish King's innocence or otherwise use the information the family gives him in a way that will benefit them. In this way, the book, which says little about prison or crime that we can't learn from Michelle Alexander or Janet Malcolm, does tell us something about the experiences of prisoners and their families—in the way it accepts Lazar's tyrannical curiosity and his complacent expectation that others (King's family; Lazar's readers) will go along with it.

Everyone who has ever had family in prison knows from experience that people feel entitled to your story. Journalists hound you. Normally well-mannered people will, on learning that your father or cousin is locked up, pepper you with rude, invasive questions, trying perhaps to assess how tainted you are by the act your family member may have committed or to manipulate you into reassuring them that the system, despite appearances, works. Lazar-the-character is utterly believable in adopting this behavior. But there's little in the book that Lazar-the-author has

constructed to suggest that we are intended to do anything with his inhumane curiosity but share it. In this way, a book that repeatedly tries to criticize the prison-industrial complex ultimately devalues those caught in its clutches.

The Mars Room also has real-life elements. The main character and her friends, as teens, refer to themselves as White Punks on Dope, a reference both to the classic Tubes song and to the name of Rachel Kushner's long-ago friend group. So, in all likelihood, does *Lost Empress*, a sprawling, messy, occasionally great novel by Sergio De La Pava, who is a public defender as well as a writer. But neither writer tries to straddle the line between fiction and nonfiction as Lazar does, and *The Mars Room* and *Lost Empress* seem far truer to social reality.

The Mars Room is superb—focused and grim. The women in it, like women in real life, go to prison in many cases because of men. This includes Romy, a former stripper at the establishment that gives the novel its name. Much of the novel is devoted to her quest to reconnect with her son before he is lost to the foster-family system, with colorful and believable characters introduced on the side. Only the high melodrama of the ending feels false.

As for *Lost Empress*, it is unabashedly maximalist—with a science-fiction subplot, lengthy disquisitions on the genius of Joni Mitchell, and a sermon on Jesus' use of parables. The main plot deals, depending on your sense of priorities, either with the emergence of a rival football league to the NFL or the theft of a Dali painting from Rikers Island. (The latter actually happened, though it was done by prison staff and administration, not, as here, by prisoners).

A typical De La Pava scene involves two people, one loquacious and brilliant and the other mostly there to act as a foil. Thus Nina Gill, the heroine, spends much of the novel haranguing her young assistant, Dia Nouveau (subtlety is not part of De La Pava's genius). Nuno DeAngeles—a prisoner who once loved Dia and is (unbeknownst to him) stealing the Dali for Dia's boss—harangues his lawyer, his fellow prisoners, his sidekick, his chaplain, and the reader. You can occasionally feel trapped yourself by De La Pava's manner. He makes you do a lot of work for insights that are not always that insightful, jokes that are not always that funny. But, for all its misfires, this book is endlessly diverting, and it offers one of the more harrowing depictions of solitary confinement I've seen.

In their respect for the interiority, the final unknowability, of prisoners, as of other sorts of characters, both *The Mars Room* and *Lost Empress* achieve an aesthetic

power and moral grandeur that Lazar's book, with its lawyerish concern for what "really happened," never approaches.