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A spy story and reflection on eco-terrosim

Creation Lake

Rachel Kushner
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Rachel Kushner ingeniously interweaves a spy story, a reflection on eco-terrorism, and a symbolically rich comparison of Neanderthals with Homo sapiens in "Creation Lake," her fourth novel. It's an amazing achievement.

The spy who narrates the tale is Sadie Smith, a good-looking, cold-blooded, savvy 34-year-old American woman who, after being fired by the CIA for an unsuccessful framing attempt, is now working for unnamed private contacts who have sent her to the (fictional) Guyenne district in southern France. The contacts remain anonymous—perhaps even to Sadie—but they clearly have financial interest in the agribusiness that is pushing out the historic area's small farms and establishing monocrop conglomerates.

The monocrops require irrigation; the conglomerates are bent on supplying it by creating huge plastic-lined megabasins filled with water siphoned from the lakes, rivers and, above all, the ancient caves and caverns for which the area is famous.

Local farmers, and most visibly, a farming cooperative called le Moulin, have actively protested the commercial attempts. Six months before Sadie was hired, five expensive megabasin excavators fear the commune were set on fire. Paul Platon, a minor security agent of the region's Ministry of Rural Coherence, has been ineffective at defending corporate interests. Sadie's job is to discredit Platon, and simultaneously

to infiltrate le Moulin and prove that its leader, Pascal Balmy, is guilty of leading the sabotage.

The book is divided into eight sections, roughly following Sadie's progress, but its short chapters juxtapose the present and the past, for Sadie's matter-of-

fact descriptions of her machinations merge with her memories of betrayals she performed in her previous assignments. Several chapters also reach into the more distant past, as Sadie reads the (hacked) emails that le Moulin's founder, Bruno Lacombe, sends to the Moulinards.

Bruno, one of the primary Paris radicals of the 1968 risings, later retreated to the country, and subsequently, after a personal tragedy, became what the present communards term "an anti-civ."

One of the great pleasures of reading the novel is the splendid contrast between Bruno's scholarly, earnest, gentle emails about the "transmission" of the local past (both prehistorical and more recent) to the present, and Sadie's caustic acceptance of a stand-alone present, where "the real Europe is highways and nuclear power plants," and one simply shrugs off the knowledge that lives may be destroyed in order to make a living. But gradually, Sadie realizes that Bruno has somehow "insinuated himself" into her thoughts. That's an inconvenience to somebody who is orchestrating an action sure to result in hundreds of arrests, discredit protest against powerful interests, and ruin the lives of people she knows.

Only an author of exceptional skill could bring a book this rich in plot, philosophy, and narrative voice to a close this unexpected, but Rachel Kushner does it well.



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