

Salman Rushdie

BY JESSICA TEISCH

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Booker Prize in 2008, a “Best of the Booker” award was created to name the best novel of all the previous Booker recipients. The winner over other favorites, including Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* and Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, was Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

ON FEBRUARY 14, 1989, Salman Rushdie found himself at the center of a profound and violent controversy—a fatwa proclaimed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran, calling for the death of Rushdie in light of his “blasphemous” depictions of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, in his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). (Many aspects of the novel were deemed offensive, from the fact that prostitutes in the novel were named after Muhammad’s wives to the confusion as to whether the title referred to the entire Qur’an rather than a specific set of verses.) The fatwa, which forced Rushdie into hiding under police protection for nine years, caused a break in diplomatic relations between Iran and the UK and sparked violence and deadly riots around the world.

Although the Iranian spiritual leader renewed the fatwa as recently as 2005, the sentence, which comes with a hefty bounty, has not prevented Rushdie from writing—or from stoking more controversy over his depictions of modern India, Pakistan, fundamentalist Islam, and U.S. foreign policy, not to mention putting forward his own left-leaning views. In his novels, essays, and short stories, Rushdie blends fact, fantasy, mythology, and magical realism to explore the conflicts between faiths, the role of religion in society, and the clashes between East and West. In his newest novel, *The Enchantress of Florence* (see review below), he writes about the mutual suspicion between the East, embodied by the Mughal Empire, and the West, represented by Renaissance Italy.

It was his masterpiece, however, the Booker Prize-winning *Midnight’s Children* (1981), about India’s independence from Britain in 1947, which forever changed the direction of Anglo-Indian writing. The novel not only marked the arrival of a fresh new voice, one that offered an

eclectic mix of prose styles and fused English and Indian colloquialisms; it also turned the genre away from E. M. Forster’s British-centric depictions of colonial India toward an imaginative world that engaged with colonialism and its consequences through distinctly Western postmodern techniques. Rushdie’s new voice captured the energy, exuberance, and chaos of a modernizing India.

If after the fatwa Rushdie became as much as a political symbol as a writer, he is, as his work suggests, also a child of both Eastern and Western culture. Rushdie was born in Bombay (now Mumbai) on June 19, 1947, to a middle class Sunni Muslim family. He and his three sisters were raised as “extremely irreverent children” and “devilish infidels,” he told the *Independent* (UK) (10/13/06), despite his grandparents’ devoutness. Rushdie attended school at Rugby in England, and then studied history (with a special subject in the history of early Islam) at Cambridge. After graduating in 1968, he lived with his family in Pakistan—his family had moved to Karachi in 1964—but he soon returned to England to work for an advertising agency. *Grimus* (1973), Rushdie’s first novel, with its science fiction overtones, was generally dismissed by critics. His second, *Midnight’s Children*, catapulted him to fame and set a new benchmark for Anglo-Indian literature. *Shame* (1983) followed; in 1987, he revealed his Marxist sympathies in *The Jaguar Smile*, an account of Nicaragua’s future under the socialist Sandinista National Liberation Front. Shortly after, *The Satanic Verses* forced him into hiding. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) a children’s book, followed by a collection of essays, short stories, and more novels, including *The Moor’s Last Sight* (1995) and, more recently, *Shalimar the Clown* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2005), a novel in which acts of violence are as personally as they are politically motivated.

Rushdie and Religion

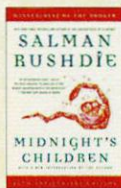
Perhaps what makes Rushdie such an influential writer is that he views events and situations not just with irreverence but also with a genuinely religious (if not exactly devout) sensibility. Though religion (of the fundamentalist kind) is what got him into trouble in the first place, it is also the wellspring of his stories—the stories, in fact, that have defined many of the world's conflicts for centuries. Although he was raised in a family of Muslim heritage, religion was not an important of their lives. "I am totally without religion," he admits, while being "very interested in it. Because if you grow up in India and you spend all your life writing about India you actually can't write about India without writing about religion" (Interview with David Cronenberg, *Shift*, June/July 1995). Even for a nonbeliever, religious precepts and imagery offer an artist a set of powerful mythic tools—a shared language that can be used to explore the human experience, from the profane to the divine.

The question of fundamentalist Islam is one that Rushdie cannot ignore. He likens it to "a political fascist movement which happens to be using a certain kind of religious language"—one that has subverted a more peaceful Islam he knew as a child (*Shift*). "The good guys are losing the battle within Islam," he says. "There's no question. The Islam that now exists is not the Islam that I grew up with" (*Independent* [UK] 10/13/06). Rushdie cites his Kashmiri grandfather, a devout but tolerant Muslim, as a model for what the "other," moderate Islam should be. "If you go into any Muslim country, you will find that dispute between radical Islam and moderate Islam. It is not a question of how the West perceives the East, but of what's happening inside the East," he explains (*Reason*, Aug/Sept 2005). His newest novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, deals, in part, with how the West and East share and overcome common suspicions and misperceptions. But until modern society can do the same, readers can turn to Rushdie for guidance and inspiration.

MAJOR WORKS

Midnight's Children (1981)

- ♦ BOOKER PRIZE
- ♦ "BEST OF THE BOOKER" PRIZE—2008 (BEST NOVEL TO HAVE RECEIVED PRIZE DURING ITS FIRST 40 YEARS)
- ♦ JAMES TAIT BLACK MEMORIAL PRIZE
- ♦ TIME MAGAZINE'S LIST OF 100 BEST NOVELS



Rushdie's acclaimed second novel, a comic allegory of Indian history before and after India's independence, uses a coming-of-age story and a family saga to chart the fate of India from 1910 to independence, the partitioning of India and Pakistan, and Indira Gandhi's declaration of the State of Emergency in 1975. Although recognized as *the* novel that explained India's 20th-century changes to the rest of the world, it incited controversy in India for its criticism of Indira Gandhi's (the then prime minister's) imposed Emergency and her sterilization campaign. A masterful

Rushdie on *Midnight* Reviews

The three [reviews for *Midnight's Children*] I have never forgotten were written by Anita Desai in the *Washington Post*, by Clark Blaise in the *New York Times* and by Robert Towers in the *New York Review of Books*. There was also one memorable bad review. The BBC radio program "Kaleidoscope" had devoted a great deal of time to my novel, and given it the works: Indian music to introduce it, a reading, a sympathetic interview with me, and then it was over to their critic ... who unreservedly hated the book. The program's presenter, Sheridan Morley, kept asking this critic (whose name I've forgotten) to find some little thing to praise. "But didn't you think ... " "Wouldn't you at least agree that ... " and so on. The critic was implacable. No, no, there was nothing he had liked at all. After the magnificent buildup, this negative intransigence was delightfully, bathetically funny.

-Salman Rushdie, "Giving Birth to *Midnight's Children*," *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 2008

blend of politics, religion, magical realism, fact, and fable, *Midnight's Children* introduced a new style for postcolonial Indian-English fiction.

THE STORY: At the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947—the exact moment India achieves independence from British rule—1001 babies, each endowed with magical gifts, are born. Two of them, one from an aristocratic Muslim family, Shiva, and the other the illegitimate son of a poor Hindu woman, Saleem, are switched at birth. Shiva, with a gift for combat, grows up a tough street boy; Saleem (the narrator, whose own story mirrors India's) is personally welcomed into the world by Prime Minister Nehru, enters a wealthy Kashmiri family, and discovers his telepathic powers to connect with the other "midnight's children." When his family realizes his mistaken identity, Saleem starts to understand his political destiny. "Why, alone of all the more-than-five-hundred-million, should I have to bear the burden of history?" he asks. But as he crosses paths with Shiva, the rightful heir to his privileged life, his gifts bring destruction rather than joy.

"Burgeons with life, with exuberance and fantasy. ... Rushdie is a writer of courage, impressive strength, and sheer stylistic brilliance." ANITA DESAI, WASHINGTON POST, 3/15/81

"The plot of this novel is complicated enough, and flexible enough, to smuggle Saleem into every major event in the subcontinent's past 30 years. ... *Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice." CLARK BLAISE, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK

REVIEW, 4/19/81

"As must be clear by now, no one should pick up *Midnight's Children* in the expectation of a rousing good story, Western-style. ... [O]ne of the most important [novels] to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation." ROBERT TOWERS, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 9/24/81

Shame (1983)

- ♦ FRANCE'S PRIX DU MEILLEUR LIVRE ÉTRANGER (BEST FOREIGN BOOK)
- ♦ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST



Rushdie's third novel, wedged between his most acclaimed (*Midnight's Children*) and his most controversial (*Satanic Verses*), is often overlooked, though perhaps notably, it was banned in Pakistan for insulting the state. Despite its relatively low visibility, *Shame* is a powerful political allegory and veiled historical fiction about the first 40 years of post-Partition Pakistan, the reign of the Bhuttos, and the violence and shame that marked those years. Like *Midnight's Children*, a family history becomes a metaphor for the country—and in its discussion of shame, honor, truth, and identity, for other nations as well.

THE STORY: Three unmarried sisters in Q. (Quetta, on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan) determine to bring up Omar Khayyam Shakil without *sharam* (shame). Consigned to the sisters' fantastical mansion until he is 12, Omar watches the world through a telescope until he leaves his isolated home. He then becomes a secondary character to a plot involving two politicians whose families' fates merge: the famous warrior General Raza Hyder (General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq), who becomes the dictator; and Iskander Harappa (read: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), the playboy-turned-prime minister deposed by Hyder.

"The political allegory may prove a stumbling block to those readers who prefer, more or less, to take their fiction pure, without recourse to recent history. ... There are some wonderfully comic episodes. Mr. Rushdie particularly delights in palpable absurdities such as those resulting from Raza Hyder's attempt to impose Islamic fundamentalism upon his country after seizing power." ROBERT TOWERS, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 11/13/83

"A Westerner by adoption and choice, looking back on a country where he would assuredly be silenced if he tried to write a book like *Shame*, Rushdie has produced an imaginative tour of obliquities and iniquities." PAUL GRAY, TIME, 11/14/83

The Satanic Verses (1988)

- ♦ WHITBREAD AWARD



The Satanic Verses, perceived as portraying the prophet Muhammad irreverently through the dreams of one of the novel's more psychotic characters, led to a 1989 fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran requiring Rushdie's execution. The book and the fatwa resulted in violence around the world; the banning of the book in India, Bangladesh, Sudan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and other

parts of Africa and Asia (bookstores were even bombed in London and in Berkeley, California); and the temporary severing of diplomatic relations between the UK and Iran. Rushdie was forced into hiding. In 1990, he published an essay in *In Good Faith* that reaffirmed his respect for Islam.

THE STORY: Two Indian actors, Gibreel Farishta, a celebrated movie star, and Saladin Chamcha, a television actor, fall to earth in Britain when terrorists explode their Air India jet 29,000 feet above the English Channel. They miraculously survive and are born again. Gibreel develops a radiant halo and dreams that he is the archangel Gabriel visiting Muhammad—but treachery consumes him from within. By contrast, Saladin, disaffected from his Indian past but harboring good intentions, sprouts horns, hooves, and a tail—and the fight between good and evil begins. The middle part of the novel involves a dream about the story of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam (one of the sources of the controversy). Such a story is typical of Rushdie's fiction—nothing is as clear cut as first appears as Rushdie explores Gibreel's and Saladin's physical and imaginary journeys from Bombay to London, and then back to Bombay.

"Some of the noisiest objections have been raised by people who have never read the book and have no intention of ever reading it. This opposition does little to educate a woefully ignorant and prejudiced Western public about the Islamic faith. ... Salman Rushdie is a storyteller of prodigious powers, able to conjure up whole geographies, causalities, climates, creatures, customs, out of thin air." A. G. MOJTABAI, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 1/29/89

"All sorts of themes are dramatized, in between the states of waking and dreaming: the nature of Indian and English society, racial tension, sexual attraction and antagonism, exile, renewal, godship, the relationship between God and Satan, man and woman, East and West. ... He has a genuine sense of saga, a feeling for magic and mystery, which lends momentum to every page." KEN ADACHI, TORONTO STAR, 10/15/88

"Like previous Rushdie novels, one is left with the sneaking suspicion there's a lot more going on than meets the average reader's eye. Besides Mohammed's transformation into an old testament devil (in the book Mohammed is called Mahound—an archaic name for the devil), there are strange repetitions of certain names and certain places. Such intentional idiosyncrasies will likely delight and puzzle professors of literature." PAT LEIDL, VANCOUVER SUN, 11/12/88

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990)

- ♦ WRITER'S GUILD AWARD (BEST CHILDREN'S BOOK)



Rushdie wrote *Haroun*, his first novel after *The Satanic Verses*, for children, but it is appropriate for adults as well. Inspired by *Arabian Nights*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and other children's classics, it is a fanciful fairy tale about a young hero who travels to new lands to lift

a curse. Written during Rushdie's fatwa, it is also a parable about the right to tell stories.

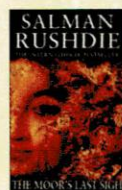
THE STORY: Eleven-year-old Haroun sets in motion a rather unpredictable set of events when he asks his father, famed storyteller Rashid Khalifa, "What's the point of telling stories that aren't even true"? Rashid's wife soon leaves Rashid, and he cancels his subscription to the magical moon of Kahani ("story" in Urdu), which supplies him with his imaginative powers. Soon, Rashid can only utter "ark, ark, ark." To help his father, Haroun must travel to Kahani to try to reclaim his father's storytelling abilities. Kahani, however, has its own problems—including warfare and the poisoning of the sea of stories.

"Haroun and the Sea of Stories is full of comic energy and lively verbal invention. ... There are other echoes from earlier children's classics. Mr. Rushdie's puns and anagrams, and his exuberant wordplay, suggest *Alice in Wonderland* and Norton Juster's *Phantom Tollbooth*." ALISON LURIE, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW,

11/11/90

The Moor's Last Sigh (1995)

- ♦ WHITBREAD PRIZE
- ♦ ARISTEION PRIZE
- ♦ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST



Because of its caricature of the Shiv Sena, a fundamentalist regional political party, this book—Rushdie's first true adult novel after *The Satanic Verses*—was not released by its Indian publisher in Bombay. Then, it was temporarily banned by the Indian government. Billed as the sequel to *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* similarly uses a fantastical family saga (the history of a spice-trading family) to understand modern India, with the Moor's travails an allegory for 20th-century India and good and evil, love and hatred. Here, however, Indian history is told from the viewpoint of the minority-ridden South. "In science fiction people talk about first contacts between the human race and other races," said Rushdie, "and Cochin was the site of the first contact between India and the West, a kind of science fiction moment if you like, a meeting of two species. So the meeting and mingling of these two cultures was, you could say, my subject" (*Salon* interview, 2006).

THE STORY: Moraes Zogoiby, the Moor of the title (also a Jew, a Christian, and an Indian), flees a violent, barbaric Bombay. He ends up imprisoned in Spain by an enemy and tells his personal and family history from a graveyard, where he is hiding from the Spanish police. The Moor, who grows and ages too fast (like India), traces his genealogy from his mother, an artist descended from the Portuguese da Gamas who settled Cochin, and his father, a successful but corrupt South Indian Jew perhaps descended from the last Muslim sultan during the expulsion of Jews from Spain. The Moor, the last of this family, relates his family's rifts and fortunes, passions and hatreds, and ultimate rise and fall as he escapes the country once so full of possibility.

"The grand deception in this book is to conceal a bitter cautionary tale within bright, carnivalesque wrappings. ... There's much to offend here, and all along the spectrum of belief. ... No retort to tyranny could be more eloquent." NORMAN

RUSH, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 1/14/96

"The book works trenchantly as a dark and sardonic message, and this alone would give it value. ... Despite its agitated plotting (the war between capitalists, fundamentalists and plain criminal gangs ends in a twilight-of-the-gods-style bombing orgy) and Rushdie's febrile way with words, the book remains an enclosed, even a solipsistic work." RICHARD EDER,

LOS ANGELES TIMES, 1/7/96

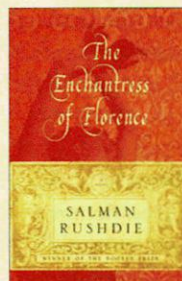
"If Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* outraged the dour literalists within Islam, then *The Moor's Last Sigh* will anger the fascist-populist element within Hindu sectarianism. ... But instead of the interwoven development of character, theme, and action characteristic of the middle section of what might be called the classic novel, we find in the middle section of Rushdie's novel only fitful and episodic progress." J. M. COETZEE, NEW YORK

REVIEW OF BOOKS, 3/21/96



The Enchantress of Florence (2008)

By Salman Rushdie



In the 16th century, "before the real and unreal were segregated forever," a tall, golden-haired European traveler calling himself the Mughal of Love arrives at Fatehpur Sikri, India, the capital and court of Mughal ruler Akbar the Great. He carries with him a dangerous secret—and many stories. The stranger, claiming to be an emissary of Queen Elizabeth I, regales Akbar with tales of a hidden, magical Mughal princess and her journey to Medici-ruled Florence. Suspicious but charmed, Akbar, too, has his stories—about his many wives (one imaginary), his successors, and his belief in universal harmony and religious tolerance. As the stories of two cities at the height of their powers—Fatehpur Sikri, of the Muslim East, and Florence, of the Christian West—converge, Akbar wrestles with new philosophical ideals and the nature of power.

Random House. 355 pages. \$26. ISBN: 0375504338

Cleveland Plain Dealer ★★★★★

"Rushdie coaxes the readers out of the literal into the world of the imagination. But it's not a tale about escapism. Akbar's most profound act of imagination isn't how he believes in the traveler's tale of the Enchantress, but how he decides to become a kinder ruler than his grandfather or father." JOHN

FREEMAN

Seattle Times

★★★★

"It stacks institutional orthodoxy against maverick thought, and the power of love against the pragmatics of realpolitik. ... Rushdie, in turn, beguiles the reader with a sleight-of-hand narrative that's a dizzying dance of veils, postponing its ultimate revelations until the last dozen pages." MICHAEL

UPCHURCH

Washington Post

★★★★

"Set during the 16th century, *The Enchantress of Florence* is altogether ramshackle as a novel—oddly structured, blithely mixing history and legend and distinctly minor compared to such masterworks as *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *Midnight's Children*—and it is really not a novel at all. It is a romance, and only a dry-hearted critic would dwell on the flaws in so delightful an homage to Renaissance magic and wonder."

MICHAEL DIRDA

San Francisco Chronicle

★★★

"Whether this considerable effort is rewarded will depend on a reader's taste for adventure, zestfully fictionalized—at a tangy slant—from history. ... What's missing may be unfair to seek in this brand of saga: any glimmer in the teller of tenderness toward his tale, of emotional risk." JOAN FRANK

New York Times Book Review

★

"*The Enchantress of Florence* ... revels in writerly self-congratulation. ... [It] is so pious—especially in its impiety—so pleased with itself and so besotted with the sound of its own voice that even the tritest fancies get a free pass." DAVID

GATES

New York Times

★

"*The Enchantress of Florence* ... feels static and enervated, as

though it had been mechanically assembled from a recipe that included lots of research (about Medici Florence and the Mughal empire), a rote sprinkling of fantasy, and some perfunctory and strained allusions to some greater politico-religious issues (like the Sunni-Shiite split and Islam's troubled role on the world stage). ... [It's] quite devoid of magic." MICHIKO KAKUTANI

USA Today

★

"In the place of plot, character and simple coherence, Rushdie has substituted a lava flow of lavish language and arcane research. Instead of writing a novel, he's published an annoying exercise in self-indulgence and literary showing off." DEIRDRE DONAHUE

CRITICAL SUMMARY

The *Washington Post* sums up general sentiment: If one can overlook its flaws, *The Enchantress of Florence* is "so delightful an homage to Renaissance magic and wonder." Rushdie combines his trademark mix of fantasy and reality in his exploration of East and West, power, love, loyalty, religion, humanism, and imagination. While many critics described the writing as sensual, evocative, and dreamy, and the portraits—Niccolò Machiavelli, Savonarola, and the Medicis—as intriguing, other reviewers were not so generous. A few faulted Rushdie's mechanical storytelling, flat figures, over-the-top research, and self-indulgent digressions. But readers who focus on the wonder of the story rather than the particulars won't be disappointed. As the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* notes: "Ideas and what we imagine have as much power over our lives as the tangible stuff, Rushdie seems to be telling us. They are both the basis of the modern world, this fable gently reminds, and its terrible bane." ■

Rushdie Goes Hollywood

Rushdie, who admits to understanding women better than men, has been married four times, most recently to model and actress Padma Lakshmi (they split in 2007). Marriage to an actress was perhaps apt. Since Rushdie grew up in Bollywood, movies played an important role in his childhood. "Let me just say that I'm completely obsessed with movies. I've always said that movies had more impact on me than novels in a formational way" (*Shift*). With a lust for acting (he claims to have abandoned that career just in time), Rushdie played himself in the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* and as Helen Hunt's obstetrician in *Then She Found Me*; he has also appeared on stage with Bono of U2, among other bands. Despite wanting to be an actor after university, he admits that he, fortunately, "got out in time" (*Shift*).

