

**BABEL**

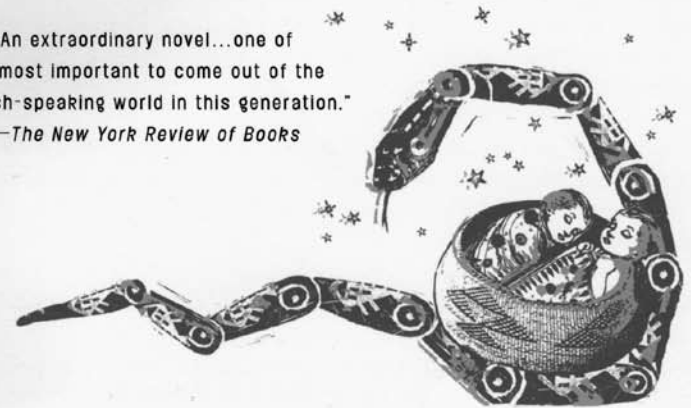


**READER'S GUIDE**  
**MIDNIGHT'S**  
**CHILDREN**  
**SALMAN RUSHDIE**

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

**SALMAN  
RUSHDIE**

"An extraordinary novel...one of  
the most important to come out of the  
English-speaking world in this generation."  
—*The New York Review of Books*



**MIDNIGHT'S  
CHILDREN**

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WITH INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

OF THE BOOKER PRIZE

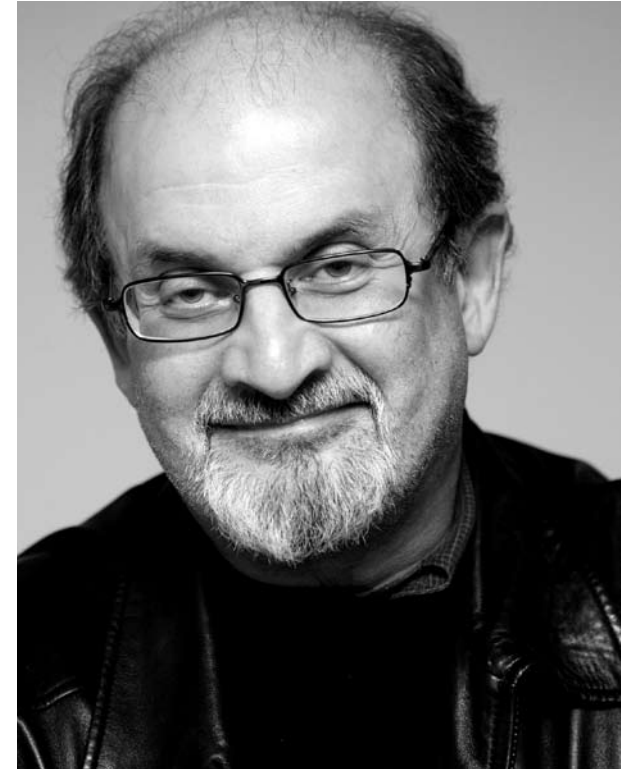
# SALMAN RUSHDIE

Salman Rushdie became one of the world's best-known living writers when he was sentenced to death for his words. On Valentine's Day, 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, insisted that any "zealous Muslim" should kill him for writing the novel *The Satanic Verses*. Forced into hiding for a decade, Rushdie was shuttled between safe houses, estranged from his native India, which banned the book and forbade him a visa, and tortured by the evident failure of his ideal of a diverse, multitudinous world where "everywhere was now part of everywhere else."

"The warring halves of the world—East and West—were also the warring halves of my soul," he has said of that dark period. Rushdie was a product of the migration and hybridization he embraced; the *Independent* called him "the poet laureate of mongrelisation" in his pre-fatwa career. Born in Bombay in 1947, he was educated in England beginning with boarding school at Rugby at age 13. His parents were wealthy secular Muslims and Anglophiles who moved from Delhi before the Partition massacres to a massive house they called Windsor Villa in more tolerant Bombay. His father, Anis Ahmed, was a Cambridge-educated attorney and businessman whose literary bequest to his son was his fabulous, never-ending bedtime stories: "It was accepted that stories should be untrue," Rushdie has said. "That horses and also carpets should fly."

His mother, Negin, was a teacher from Kashmir who came from a devout but progressive Muslim family. As "the keeper of the family stories," Negin shared the gossip and scandal of the family's past with her son, who later re-imagined them in his novels.

Rushdie's education in England turned him into both a cultivated, Europeanized intellectual and an astute observer of the racism and oppression directed against a third-world "other" in the Western world. At Rugby, he endured racist taunts until he caught a classmate writing "wogs go home" on a wall and, in a rage, threw the boy against it. At Cambridge during the height of the 1960s, he was influenced by New Wave cinema, radicalism and a love of theater. After Rushdie's graduation, his father tried to make him take over operations of a towel factory in Karachi but Rushdie again returned to England, where he began writing and



acting, and started working as an advertising copywriter to make money. His first published novel, *Grimus*, was not a critical success but paid him enough to travel with his future first wife to India and Pakistan for five months. After the journey, he made a commitment to write something "much closer to my own knowledge of the world." He finished that book, *Midnight's Children*, in 1979.

The novel was immediately hailed as one of the most important books to come out of the English-speaking world in a generation. It helped change the way Westerners viewed India and the way Indians wrote about their home. It also helped establish Rushdie as a public personality who believed the writer's role to be subversive and antagonistic to systems like the state.

After *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie continued to challenge systems of power. In his next novel, *Shame* (1983), an allegory of Pakistan and its leaders, he called the country itself a "failure of the dreaming mind." But the book that most profoundly challenged ideological and religious restrictions, *The Satanic Verses*

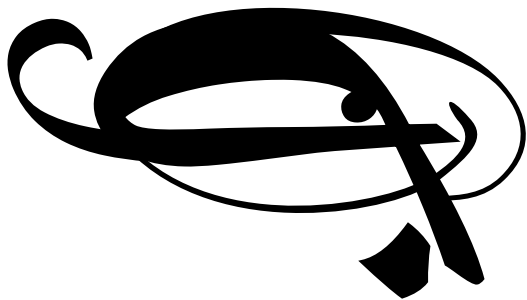
# THE PARTITION OF INDIA

(1988) also most profoundly changed his life. A year into the fatwa against him, Rushdie wrote that he felt “as if I have been plunged, like Alice, into the world beyond the looking glass, where nonsense is the only available sense.”

It wasn't until 1998, when an agreement between Britain and Iran ended the fatwa, that Rushdie could resurface regularly and resume something of a public life. During the years of hiding, he produced a children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990); a book of essays entitled *Imaginary Homelands* (1991); a book of short stories, *East, West* (1994) and a novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). He has since published four more novels, most recently *The Enchantress of Florence*, in 2008.

In his life and art, Rushdie often exemplifies a line from a Robert Browning poem he frequently quotes: “Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.”

“Something in me, not consciously willed, takes me to those edges,” he has said. “Part of the nature of the artist, at least as I see it, is to increase—by however little—the sum total of what it is possible for us to understand. Nothing of great interest for me is done sitting safely in the middle of the room.”



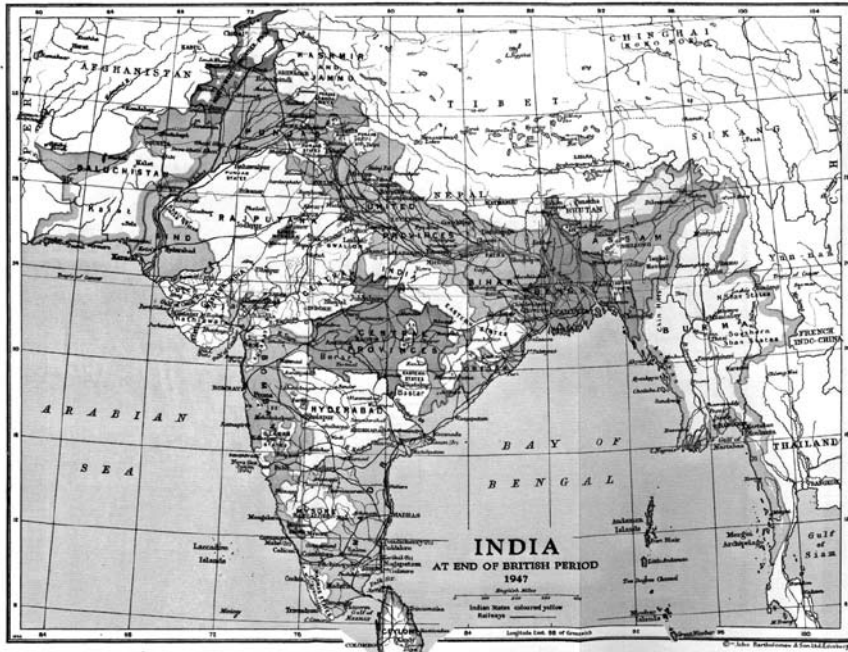
After the critical failure of his first novel, Salman Rushdie decided either to embark on something “littler” or undertake the biggest imaginable literary risk. He chose the latter—what would become *Midnight's Children*—because he couldn't “think of anything more artistically dangerous.”

The book recreates over 60 years of Indian history—from 1915 until 1978—during the contentious period before and after Indian independence from British rule in August 1947. The narrator, Saleem Sinai, born at the exact moment of Independence and with a face that resembles a map of India, is “handcuffed to history” with a fate “indissolubly chained” to that of his country.

The novel is much more than a lesson in Indian history, but it invariably addresses the major historical moments in those six decades. The movement for Indian independence began decades before the chronological start of the novel, 1915, but that was the year Mahatma Gandhi returned to India and began to shape the course toward autonomous rule through civil disobedience. Indians staged large anti-British protests in 1919, which stirred enough fear that General Reginald Dyer declared martial law in the State of Punjab. In April, his troops fired on an unarmed crowd gathered in Amritsar, injuring more than 1,500. In Rushdie's version of the massacre, Aadam Aziz was saved by a sneeze.

The 1920s and 30s saw the growing alliance of religious groups with certain political parties—Hindus aligned with the Indian National Congress, while Muslims joined the Muslim League. As the British—depleted after World War II and beleaguered by general strikes against their government in India—began to consider granting Indian independence, the Muslim League began arguing for a separate country for Muslims.

In 1946, riots in the cities marked the beginning of a growing wave of violence between Hindus and Muslims. In June 1947, the various sides, including the British Viceroy Earl Mountbatten, agreed to the creation of an independent Pakistan and the new borders were to be drawn within a month. The rushed partition of the countries was catastrophic: nearly a million people were killed



India at the end of the British Period (1947)

and five million were displaced as Muslims forced Hindus to leave Pakistan and Hindus forced Muslims to leave India.

Partition also created the disputed State of Kashmir and an ongoing legacy of violence more than half a century long. Pakistan claimed the Muslim-Majority State and invaded it, but its ruling Hindu Maharaja asked India to intervene.

During the next decade, India, under Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted two successive Five-Year Plans to develop the country's agriculture and industry. The country largely prospered despite a ballooning population, persistent poverty and illiteracy, and periods of both international and domestic unrest, like the language riots depicted in Rushdie's novel that led to the partitioning of the State of Bombay along linguistic lines.

At the same time, Pakistan, split into East and West by more than 1,000 miles of India, struggled to coalesce. In 1958, General Ayub Khan organized a coup and overthrew Pakistan's civilian leaders. In Rushdie's novel, it is Saleem's uncle, General Zulfikar, who forces the president out of his house.

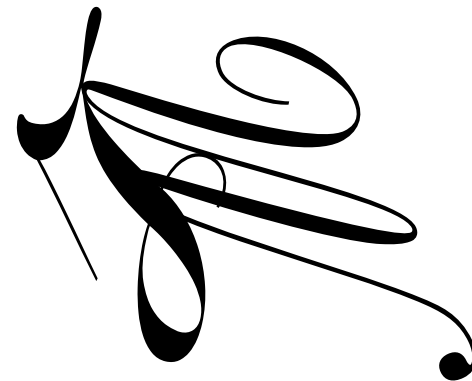
Between 1961 and 1971, the two countries were shaped by a series of wars: India fought China over a small part of Kashmir and lost decisively; India and Pakistan went to war over Kashmir in 1965—a conflict that wiped out nearly all of Saleem's family in a few bomb blasts; and, in 1971, Pakistan's military government was tested when an independence movement in East Pakistan declared the sovereign State of Bangladesh. India joined the fighting and helped secure Bangladesh's independence but the struggle caused a massive displacement of refugees and a dramatic loss of life.

The defining moment in *Midnight's Children*—the event toward which all of Saleem's narrative advances—was a domestic tragedy during which India's new democracy faltered. In 1975, a popular movement began protesting poor economic conditions and government corruption. Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter and India's prime minister, was found to have committed election fraud during the 1971 election and her leadership was declared invalid. Thirteen days later, Gandhi instituted a State of Emergency that enabled her to rule the country by decree: she conducted mass arrests, censored the press, began a program of forced sterilizations, and demolished old Delhi's ghettos. The Emergency succeeded at creating an economic recovery for the country but it did so at the cost of human rights and civil liberties. It lasted for two years, until 1977, when Gandhi called for an election and lost.

Saleem's son, Aadam, born at the exact moment of the Emergency, is also handcuffed to history, but unlike the children of Independence—"broken promises; made to be broken"—he does not "surrender to dreams." Saleem calls him "the child of a time which damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it together again." But even the chastened future Rushdie's book imagines after the Emergency is not without magic: Aadam's first word is abracadabra.

# QUESTIONS

1. What role does Padma play in shaping Saleem's narrative? Is she the model reader of his story?
2. Saleem's story begins in a bumbling way: "I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date." Why does he struggle to begin directly? Why does he use words of bondage, like "handcuffed," "chained," and "no escape" to describe his relationship to the history of his country?
3. Why does Saleem constantly question the validity of the facts he presents and admit that remembered events are out of order or invented?
4. Why is leaking an important element of the novel? The idea recurs as a description of Saleem's nose, the way Saleem's life leaks into his country's, the way emotion leaks into chutney, and the final "sperectomy: the draining-out of hope" by the Widow. Why is it important to have a motif that is both grotesque and mythical to convey these ideas?
5. Saleem says that "above all things" he "fears absurdity." Why? What does that fear say about his fledgling country?
6. How does Saleem—and Rushdie—teach us how to read the book he is writing? Give some examples of these lessons.
7. Why do you think Rushdie made Saleem a changeling? What are some of Shiva's characteristics and how do they mirror, or oppose, Saleem's traits? What do the two characters suggest about the role of class in India?
8. What does the silver spittoon represent and why does Saleem cling to it, especially when he has lost all recollection of his past?
9. Saleem quotes Walt Whitman—"I contain multitudes." He also rebels against the tyranny of masses of people who would define themselves by only one thing: religion, nation, language, class. What is the conflict between the individual and the group in *Midnight's Children*? Why is the book's last line about "forsaking privacy" and being "sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes"?
10. Saleem calls the midnight's children "broken promises; made to be broken." What promise do they represent? How are they broken? Why would they be "made" to be broken and what does that say about the independence they represent?



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Major funding for Babel Provided by:



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