

A Biographical Sketch of Salman Rushdie

By Nicholas Ogan

Presented to the Novel Club May 5, 2020

Salman Rushdie was born in Mumbai in 1947. His Muslim father was a well-educated businessman, attorney, and civil servant, his mother a teacher. He began his education in local schools, and was then sent by his father to the famous Rugby School in England, whose fabled xenophobia and brutality made him predictably miserable. He then followed in his father's footsteps to Cambridge, where he studied history. In the academic year of 1967-68, Rushdie, then and now a devout atheist, took a course on Muhammad, the rise of Islam, and the early caliphate. In the course of his studies, Rushdie learned about what is known as the incident of the satanic verses. It seems that the Prophet came down from the mountain one day, and recited these words: "Have you heard of al-Lat and al-Uzza, and al-Manat the third, the other one? They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is greatly to be desired." In his autobiographical *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, Rushdie explains what happened next. "At a later point—Was it days later? Or weeks, or months?—he returned to the mountain, and came down, abashed, to state that he had been deceived on his previous visit; the Devil had appeared to him in the guise of the Archangel, and the verses he had been given were therefore not divine, but Satanic, and should be expunged from the Qur'an at once." Rushdie thought this was a good story, and he remembered it. He couldn't have imagined at the time how profoundly this tale would influence his life.

Rushdie graduated from Cambridge in 1968. In 1981, he had his first great success with the publication of *Midnight's Children*. The 13 years in between these dates were difficult ones for Rushdie. After graduation, he moved to London, where he was

living on the dole when a friend told him that there was easy money to be made in advertising. Rushdie took the “copy test” at J. Walter Thompson. He failed miserably. However, he was able to find work at another agency, and for the next 13 years supported himself comfortably as a copywriter. During these years, he wanted desperately to be a serious writer, but he was not successful. All he wrote during these years was, as he puts it “unbearable amounts of garbage.” He did manage to publish one novel called *Grimus*, in 1975, but it was neither a critical nor a commercial success. In an effort to return to his roots, he went on a long, low-budget trip to India. On his return, he started working only part-time at advertising so that he could devote more time to his writing. In 1981 he left advertising in order to become a full-time writer. He says that he took a “sneaky pride” in some of his work in advertising, particularly in the so-called “bubble words” he invented for Aero chocolate bars, a popular Nestlé confection made of aerated chocolate. He enjoyed seeing the billboards with IRRESISTABUBLE, DELECTABUBBLE, and ADORABUBBLE, as well as the buses with TRANSPORTABUBBLE, and the storefronts with AVAILABUBBLE HERE, not to mention the trade advertising saying PROFITABUBBLE.

Rushdie’s chef-d’oeuvre, *Midnight’s Children*, was published in 1981. It was well received critically, and won the Booker Prize that year, beating D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel* by a vote of three to two. In 1993, it won the Booker of Bookers award, commemorating twenty-five year of the prize, and in 2008, it won the Best of Booker, commemorating forty years. The success of the novel marked a turning point in Rushdie’s life. He writes in *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*: “The good years began...He

had seven good years, more than many writers are granted, and for those years, during the bad times that followed, he was always grateful.” During this period, he published *Shame*, in 1983, and, in 1987 *The Jaguar Smile*, a non-fiction book about Nicaragua. He seems to have spent a great deal of time attending literary conclaves all over the world, meeting most, if not all of the world’s most famous writers, and collecting numerous awards along the way. He was in France, the United States, India, Nicaragua, Australia, and Pakistan, where he attended his father during his final days.

Rushdie’s personal life has always been a bit messy. He has been married and divorced four times, and had at least one long term affair, and, it is said, numerous brief liaisons, generally with much younger women. From his first marriage, he has a much-loved son Zafar, born in 1979, and from his third marriage another son, Milan, born 1997.

Rushdie spent more than four years writing *The Satanic Verses*. He finished it on February 17, 1988. Publication rights were sold for an undisclosed, but, Rushdie implies, a very large sum. It was published in London in September 1988. The English critics loved it, and it won the Whitbread Award for Novel of the Year in November 1988. Muslims around the world, however, were enraged by many elements in the novel they considered blasphemous. The book was banned in India, Iran, Bangladesh, Sudan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Thailand, Tanzania, Indonesia, Singapore, Venezuela, and Pakistan. In Bolton, outside Manchester, and in Bradford, furious Muslims burned the book in protest. In February ‘89, 10,000 protesters attacked the American Cultural Center in Islamabad. Six of them were

killed in the melee. In the United States, there were scores of threats against bookstores. Two stores in Berkeley were bombed as were the offices of a community newspaper in New York that published an editorial defending Rushdie. In England, at least six bookstores were bombed.

On Valentine's Day, 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader of Iran, issued a *fatwa* on Iranian Radio: "We are from Allah and to Allah we shall return. I am informing all brave Muslims of the world that the author of *The Satanic Verses*, a text written, edited and published against Islam, the Prophet of Islam, and the Qur'an, along with all the editors and publishers aware of its contents, are condemned to death. I call on all valiant Muslims wherever they may be in the world to kill them without delay, so that no one will dare insult the sacred beliefs of Muslims henceforth. And whoever is killed in this cause will be a martyr, Allah willing." To incentivize the faithful, a \$6 million bounty was offered.

There was an enormous worldwide controversy over *The Satanic Verses*. The book became a huge best seller in America. Rushdie earned \$2 million dollars from its sales in the first year of the *fatwa*.

Of course, we know that Rushdie is still alive, but we need to realize that the threat to his life was a very real one, and considering all the violence that the controversy caused, it seems somewhat surprising that he was not killed. Here are a few highlights on the mayhem engendered by the controversy: In February 1989, twelve people died in a riot over the novel in Mumbai. In August 89, a bomb being constructed by a man intending to kill Rushdie accidentally exploded in a London hotel,

killing the would-be assassin. In 1991, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses* was stabbed to death by an assassin, and its Italian translator was also attacked. In July 1993, at a literary festival in a hotel in Sivas, Turkey, a mob of Islamists demanded the immediate execution of Aziz Nesin, who had announced his intention to translate and publish *The Satanic Verses* in Turkey. The mob set the hotel on fire. Nesin escaped but thirty-seven people died. In October 1993, the Norwegian publisher of *The Satanic Verses* was shot three times. He survived after a long recuperation

Against his better judgment, having heard from Ali Khamenei that he might be forgiven if he were to apologize and disown the book, Rushdie issued a statement: "I recognize that Muslims in many parts of the world are genuinely distressed by the publication of my novel. I profoundly regret the distress the publication has occasioned to the sincere followers of Islam. Living as we do in a world of many faiths, this experience has served to remind us that we must all be conscious of the sensibilities of others." But Rushdie's so-called apology, which he later regretted, had no effect. The *fatwa* was not revoked.

Outraged by the *fatwa*, the British government broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. And since the threat to Rushdie's life was very real, the government offered to put him under its protection. He was assigned a team of four armed men, two officers and two drivers, as well as two bullet-proof Jaguars, which weighed as much as small tanks. He needed a new name, a name he could use to write checks without attracting attention. He thought of several Asian names, but the "prot" team rejected these as too dangerous. So, he started to try out

names of his much-loved writers. Possibilities were Vladimir Joyce, Marcel Beckett, Franz Sterne. These all struck him as absurd, and he kept on trying till he found one that sounded right, taken from Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekov: Joseph Anton. This was to be his name for the next eleven years. His “prot team”, by no means a literary lot, insisted on calling him Joe, much to his displeasure.

Initially, Rushdie constantly moved around, staying at no fewer than 56 different rental houses, hotels, and houses of friends. Eventually, he decided he needed a permanent home. He bought a large house in North London at 9 Bishops Avenue, where he lived for 7 years, with his four protectors. There was extensive work required to prepare the house, and it was imperative to keep the real owner secret. The cover story was that the house was to be occupied by an American publisher named Joseph Anton. Perhaps the contractor wondered why bullet proof glass was necessary for the windows and there had to be a safe room upstairs. Rushdie surmises that everyone involved knew who the actual owner was but kept quiet.

Initially, Rushdie’s protectors were very strict in limiting his activities, and he was basically not allowed to go anywhere without his armed guards. Eventually, presumably based in intelligence accessible to the British government, he was allowed to leave Great Britain. Once he left the country, Great Britain was not responsible for his protection. Rushdie made numerous trips to America during these years. When he attended a ceremony at the Low Library at Columbia University, he flew over on a military RAF plane, since no commercial airline would risk having him on board. When he arrived in New York, he was

driven to Columbia in a 9-car motorcade complete with a large white limousine and motorcycle escort, flashing lights and sirens. Rushdie says he thought such a public display was counterproductive, but, reading between the lines, one gets the feeling that he quite liked it. As time went on, Rushdie took many trips abroad, travelling all over the world to receive literary awards, attend literary meetings and just to vacation with friends. On many of these trips, he had no security at all, so it seems that his prosecutors had lost enthusiasm for the kill.

Four years after the start of the *fatwa*, Rushdie had a meeting with John Major. He told Major, "I'm immensely grateful to the men who look after me, risking their own lives." This was not the Rushdie Major had expected, the one the Daily Mail described as "bad-mannered, sullen, graceless, silly curmudgeonly, unattractive, small-minded, arrogant and egocentric." Major told Rushdie, "Maybe you should say things like that more often, in public, to correct the impression people have of you." Unfortunately, a close reading of *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* may give an impression that at least some of the Daily Mail's adjectives are quite apt.

After the meeting, the Prime Minister released a statement condemning the *fatwa*. The official Iranian newspapers released its own statement: "The author of the Satanic Verses is literally going to get it in the neck."

Throughout this period, Western intelligence networks kept picking up specific, credible information of Iranian hit squads attempting to find and execute Rushdie. He was courageous enough, or foolish enough, to resist the urge to cower at 9 Bishops Avenue. He travelled extensively around Europe. He

appeared before a crowd of 80,000 fans at Wembley Stadium with Bono and U2. He met privately in the White House with Bill Clinton. The controversy continued unabated. Curiously, many in the west, such as John le Carré, Prince Charles and Cat Stevens, seemed to think that Rushdie was getting what he deserved, while, at the same time a group of 100 Arab and Muslim writers published, in French, a book of essays, *Pour Rushdie*, defending the writer.

Around this time, Rushdie published *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The police, in a startling change of policy, agreed to let Rushdie give a public reading. But as the day approached the higher ups in the government got cold feet, and told Rushdie it was just too dangerous, envisioning a mass demonstration and possible violence. Rushdie fought with this decision, and reluctantly, he was allowed to do the reading.

Throughout these years, there was a great deal of negotiating between Iran and the West, details of which were generally hidden from Rushdie, although occasionally some small details were shared with him. A favorite Iranian ploy was to dangle the possibility of what they liked to call the non-implementation of the *fatwa*—cancellation always being impossible—but in the end, they decided implementation was a better idea.

Seven years after the initial *fatwa*, Rushdie was called into the headquarters of British intelligence, where he was informed that the intelligence services had specific information that Iran had set in motion a long-term plan to find and assassinate Rushdie. Despite this, Rushdie was growing increasingly restive under the “prot.” Having four armed police officers living and sleeping in one’s house 24/7, and not being able to leave the house without

the permission of the police had become intolerable for Rushdie. Things came to a head when one of the officers who was cleaning his weapon accidentally fired a shot in the house. The bullet went through the wall, and, although, fortunately, no one was injured, Rushdie was shocked and upset. He confronted his protectors, and, to his surprise, they agreed to a new scheme. They would stop protecting the house, and he would have a single officer to accompany him when he went out. He was informed that these changes, if accepted, were irreversible. A serious concern, given that he received, on his birthday, a message from the new president of Iran, Khatami: "Salman Rushdie will die soon." In any case, Rushdie finally closed the door and let out of his house the four officers who had protected him for the past nine years. He had to ask himself if this was the beginning of a return to a life of freedom, or if he and his family might end up dead.

Eventually, Iran did state they would not enforce the *fatwa*, although it could never be rescinded. Rushdie made a grateful public statement but neglected to make an apology for his sins. The next day, the ambassador elect Muhammadi, restated the *fatwa*, with some Iranian newspapers demanding his immediate murder. But as events played out, it eventually appeared that the *fatwa* was, at long last, not the concern it had been for so many years. That said, the threat never really dies. On the tenth anniversary of the *fatwa*, the Revolutionary Guards in Tehran said the *fatwa* "Would be fulfilled."

There was no decisive turning point in the matter of the *fatwa*. But eventually, thirteen years after his protection by the British started, they finally decided it was okay to end it.

In 2000. Rushdie began to spend more time in New York, where he met and eventually entered a disastrous marriage with the much younger Indian actress and television host Padma Lakshmi.

Rushdie has published a total of twenty books. Though some critics feel the quality has fallen off over time, his books continue to sell well. Aside from his writing, he has played a number of small parts in movies and television. He has written screen plays for movies and television shows. In 2007 he became the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Emory University in Atlanta. He has received innumerable awards around the world for his writing. In 2007 he was knighted in the Queen's Birthday Honours. Today, Rushdie lives in New York, in the neighborhood around Union Square. His net worth is said to be \$15million. I think all will agree that, for a writer, he has had an unusually interesting, remarkable life. Every February 14th, he receives a missive from Iran promising that the *fatwa* will never be removed. He calls the messages "my unfunny Valentines."

