

THE NOVEL CLUB

Minutes
May 5, 2020

On May 5, 2020, members of the 124-year-old Novel Club of Cleveland zoomed into cyberspace, a new-age location without frontiers, dimensions or boundaries, to discuss Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. An unidentifiable setting in space befit this sprawling, confounding 600-plus-page narrative in search of a genre: neither entirely fictional history nor entirely fictional biography. Critics have named it an allegory.

Jennie Kaffen and Catherine LaCroix presided. Nick Ogan presented Rushdie's biography, and Jim Schilling presented the novel's critical paper.

Nick's biography of Salman Rushdie

In their quest to control and preserve their biographies, living writers often pose problems for reviewers. Nick broke through those constraints to write an excellent biography.

Rushdie was born in Mumbai in 1947 to a prosperous and well-educated family. His father was Muslim; his mother a teacher. He was educated in England, first, miserably at Rugby, and then more pleasantly at Cambridge. As a young man, Rushdie worked in advertising, where, according to Nick, wit and humor served him well and enriched commercial jargon with a vocabulary of his own invention. *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, won the Booker Prize and the Booker of Bookers Prize in 1993. However, it was his 1989 novel, *Satanic Verses*, that most captured the world's attention and inflamed the wrath of extreme practitioners of Islam. In 1989 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader of Iran, denounced Rushdie's portrayal of Mohammed and Islam as blasphemous and issued a *fatwa* calling for his death. According to Nick, in response to Khomeini's decree and an offer of a two-million dollar bounty, there have been numerous murders committed in the name of Islam and attacks on persons associated with the book: its readers, publishers, translators, critics and booksellers. Though Rushdie has escaped death, the *fatwa* remains in effect today.

As an aside, Rushdie has been married four times and prefers much younger women. As Nick notes, the author's relationships with women have been generally a "bit messy." Sometimes our writers disappoint us.

Jim's critical paper

Rushdie's accomplishment in *Midnight's Children*, is prodigious. According to Jim, the author's "unique literary talent is given full rein" in a narrative that is "flexible and imaginative enough to smuggle" its chief protagonist, both as child and as adult, into "every major event in India's first 30 years of independent history." It is the reader's job to keep up and stay in the saddle as the novelist gallops through three historically significant decades of India's history, keeping company with easily 100 characters who are sometimes not the persons they—and we—think they are. Superficially, it is a three-generation family history, told by Saleem Sinai, now an adult, whose birth on the stroke of midnight August 15, 1947, coincided with the end of the English occupation and the hopeful creation of a united, independent India. The novel's trajectory—and Saleem's biography—rise and fall on the backbone of India's history—from its liberation to its decline under the repressive government of Indira Gandhi. The exchange of one infant for

another, which opens the novel, becomes the core metaphor for India's political and cultural transformation. Jim notes the episodic magic and fecundity of the plot and cites *1001 Nights*, *Ulysses*, *The Tin Drum*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Tristram Shandy* as among *Midnight's Children's* illustrious forebears. Rushdie is a daring and (apparently) imperturbable writer who has been well served by Jim's insight and skill in unraveling a very complicated and challenging story, filled "with passages of beauty, humor, mystery—all blended with the tragedy and pain of violent history."

Members in attendance agreed that the evening's two papers were among the Club's finest. The meeting was both friendly and disputatious.