

38. Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children* (1981)

The story starts 160

Midnight's Children is a complex novel, at once the history of India, the story of a boy's coming to age, the saga of his family and the epic of the liberation of a people. Born on the night of India's independence, Saleem, the protagonist and narrator, is a special boy, endowed with the gift of telepathy.

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do¹, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-handed joined palms² in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out³, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth⁴ into the world. There were gasps⁵. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe⁶; but his accident was a mere trifle⁷ when set beside what had befallen⁸ me in that benighted⁹ moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blindly saluting clocks I had mysteriously handcuffed¹⁰ to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers¹¹ had prophesied me; newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say¹² in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer¹³, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled¹⁴ in Fate – at the best of times¹⁵ a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time. Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling¹⁶, over-used body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade¹⁷, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling¹⁸ of the improbable and the mundane! I have

1. **that won't do:** it. *non va bene, non basta*

2. **Clock-handed joined palms:** The hands were united like the two hands of a clock

3. **spell it out:** explain it clearly

4. **tumbled forth:** came out, was born (it. *sono capitombolato fuori*)

5. **gasps:** expressions of surprise and shock

6. **big toe:** it. *alluce*

7. **trifle:** trivial thing (it. *sciocchezza*)

8. **had befallen:** had occurred to

9. **benighted:** obscure for him

10. **handcuffed:** united (it. *ammanettato*)

11. **Soothsayers:** Prophets

12. **I was left entirely without a say:** it. *Non ho potuto emettere parola*

13. **Snotnose ... Sniffer:** they are all derogatory nicknames

14. **embroiled:** deeply involved (it. *immischiato*)

15. **at the best of times:** it. *nel migliore dei casi*

16. **crumbling:** falling into pieces, disintegrating (it. *che cade a pezzi*)

17. **Scheherazade:** the narrator of the *Arabian Nights*

18. **commingling:** union

been a swallower¹⁹ of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving²⁰ inside me; and guided only by the
 25 memory of a large white bedsheet²¹ with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre, clutching²² at the dream of that holey²³, mutilated square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock-ridden, crime-stained²⁴ birth.

19. swallower: one who has eaten (it. *inghiottitore*)

20. jostling and shoving: it. *sgomitando e spingendo*

21. large, white bedsheet: it. *largo lenzuolo bianco*. Here the narrator refers to when his future parents met. His father, in fact, was a doctor and his mother had gone into his surgery room as a patient. According to Islamic law, a doctor could visit a woman through a white bedsheet with a hole in it

22. clutching: grasping (it. *aggrappandosi a*)

23. holey: it. *bucato* (*gioco di parole*, 'holy' significa 'sacro')

24. clock-ridden, crime-stained: ruled by time, marked by a crime

Salman Rushdie

East West (1987)

Good advice is rarer than rubies 161

The following story is set in Pakistan, at the British Consulate. Miss Rehana comes to the Consulate to get a visa to join her fiancé in England. She catches Muhammad Ali's attention. He is a conman, who 'sells' good advice, and warns her that if she answers one question differently from her fiancé, she won't get the visa. Yet she refuses his offers. After the interrogation, Miss Rehana meets Muhammad Ali again; she thanks him for his advice, and...

- They stood in the dust of the afternoon compound near the bus, which was getting ready to leave. Coolies were tying bedding rolls¹ to the roof. A hawker² shouted at the passengers, trying to sell them love stories and green medicines, both of which cured unhappiness. Miss Rehana and a happy Muhammad Ali ate their pakoras sitting on the
- 5 bus's 'front mud-guard'³, that is, the bumper⁴. The old advice expert began softly to hum a tune from a movie sound track. The day's heat was gone.
- 'It was an arranged engagement⁵,' Miss Rehana said all at once. 'I was nine years old when my parents fixed it. Mustafa Dar was already thirty at that time, but my father wanted someone who could look after me as he had done himself and Mustafa was a
- 10 man known to Daddyji as a solid type. Then my parents died and Mustafa Dar went to England and said he would send for me. That was many years ago. I have his photo, but he is like a stranger to me. Even his voice, I do not recognise it on the phone.'
- The confession took Muhammad Ali by surprise, but he nodded with what he hoped looked like wisdom.
- 15 'Still and after all,' he said, 'one's parents act in one's best interests. They found you a good and honest man who has kept his word and sent for you. And now you have a lifetime to get to know him, and to love.'
- He was puzzled, now, by the bitterness that had infected her smile.
- 'But, old man,' she asked him, 'why have you already packed me and posted me off to
- 20 England?'
- He stood up, shocked.
- 'You looked happy – so I just assumed... excuse me, but they turned you down or what?'
- 'I got all their questions wrong,' she replied. 'Distinguishing marks I put on the wrong
- 25 cheeks, bathroom decor I completely redecorated, all absolutely topsy-turvy⁶, you see.'
- 'But what to do? How will you go?'
- 'Now I will go back to Lahore⁷ and my job. I work in a great house, as ayah⁸ to three good boys. They would have been sad to see me leave.'

1. **Coolies were tying bedding rolls:** it. *Portatori stavano legando rotoli di coperte*

2. **hawker:** it. *venditore ambulante*

3. **front mud-guard:** it. *parafango anteriore*

4. **the bumper:** it. *paraurti*

5. **arranged engagement:** it. *fidanzamento pianificato*

6. **topsy-turvy:** it. *a soqquadro*

7. **Lahore:** city in north-west India

8. **ayah:** nurse, governess, nanny (Indian English)

- 30 'But this is tragedy!' Muhammad Ali lamented. 'Oh, how I pray that you had taken up my offer! Now, but, it is not possible, I regret to inform. Now they have your form on file, cross-check can be made, even the passport will not suffice.
- 35 'It is spoilt, all spoilt, and it could have been so easy if advice had been accepted in good time.'
- 'I do not think,' she told him, 'I truly do not think you should be sad.'
- 40 Her last smile, which he watched from the compound until the bus concealed it in a dust-cloud, was the happiest thing he had ever seen in his long, hot, hard, unloving life.



Salman Rushdie

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990)

A fairy-tale, an adventure novel, the autobiographical story of a father and son, the book is about the land where stories are made. It deals with the storyteller Rashid (Rushdie?), who is 'the Shah of Blah, with oceans of notions and the Gift of the Gab' and his only son Haroun. Rashid is a very creative and inventive talker because he drinks the water from the Sea of Stories, but one day he loses his gift and his son leaves on a quest to recover it. The plot also includes a mad bus driver named Butt and Iff, a water genie, the wonderful, utopian city of Gup always full of light and the dystopian land of Chup, always dark. Above all, it includes P2C2E (Processes Too Complicated To Explain). It is a pastiche of children's literature, popular culture, films (Star Wars and Star Trek), western literature (Coleridge, Kafka, Lewis Carroll) and Indian spices from the country's tradition.

The tale starts 162

After the dedication poem to his son Zafar, in which he turns the child's name into an acrostic, Rushdie begins his narrative in a traditional way.

Zembla, Zenda, Xanadu:
 All our dream-worlds may come true.
 Fairy lands are fearsome too.
 As I wander far from view
 Read, and bring me home to you.
 Rushdie opens the frame of the many stories composing the book.

There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. It stood by a mournful¹ sea full of glumfish², which were so miserable to eat that they made people belch³ with melancholy even though the skies were blue.

- 5 In the north of the sad city stood mighty factories in which (so I'm told) sadness was actually manufactured, packaged and sent all over the world, which never seemed to get enough of it. Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news. And in the depths of the city, beyond an old zone of ruined buildings that looked like broken hearts, there lived a happy
- 10 young fellow by the name of Haroun, the only child of the storyteller Rashid Khalifa, whose cheerfulness⁴ was famous throughout that unhappy metropolis, and whose never ending stream of tall, short and winding tales⁵ had earned him not one but two nicknames. To his admirers he was Rashid the Ocean of Notions, as stuffed⁶ with cheery stories as the sea was full of glumfish; but to his jealous rivals he

1. **mournful:** sad

2. **glumfish:** it. *pesci tristi*

3. **belch:** burp (it. *riuttare*)

4. **cheerfulness:** happiness

5. **stream of tall, short and winding tales:** it. *flusso continuo di storie incredibili, brevi, tortuose*

6. **stuffed:** full of

- 15 was the Shah of Blah. To his wife, Soraya, Rashid was for many years as loving a
husband as anyone could wish for, and during these years Haroun grew up in a home in
which, instead of misery and frowns⁷, he had his father's ready laughter and his mother's
sweet voice raised in song.
Then something went wrong. (Maybe the sadness of the city finally crept in⁸ through
20 their windows.)

7. **frowns:** facial expressions of disapproval

8. **crept in:** crawled inside (it. *s'insinuò*)

Salman Rushdie

Drinking the Cup (1987)



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The story unfolds showing Haroun's quest to help his father regain his word power.

- So Iff the Water Genie told Haroun about the Ocean of the Streams of Story, and even though he was full of a sense of hopelessness and failure the magic of the Ocean began to have an effect on Haroun. He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out¹ of one another like a liquid tapestry² of breathtaking³ complexity; and Iff explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand⁴ represented and contained a single tale. Different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up⁵ with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns⁶. It was not dead but alive.
- 'And if you are very, very careful, or very, very highly skilled, you can dip⁷ a cup into the Ocean,' Iff told Haroun, 'like so', and here he produced a little golden cup from another of his waistcoat pockets, 'and you can fill it with water from a single, pure Stream of Story, like so', as he did precisely that, 'and then you can offer it to a young fellow who's feeling blue⁸, so that the magic of the story can restore his spirits⁹. Go on now; knock it back, have a swig¹⁰, do yourself a favour,' Iff concluded. 'Guaranteed to make you feel A-number-one.'
- Haroun, without saying a word, took the golden cup and drank.
- He found himself standing in a landscape that looked exactly like a giant chessboard. On every black square there was a monster: there were two-tongued snakes and lions with three rows¹¹ of teeth, and four-headed dogs and five-headed demon kings and so on. He was, so to speak, looking out through the eyes of the young hero¹² of the story. It was like being in the passenger seat of an automobile; all he had to do was watch, while the hero 'dispatched'¹³ one monster after another and advanced up the chessboard towards the white stone tower at the end. At the top of the tower was (what else but) a single window, out of which there gazed (who else but) a captive princess¹⁴. What Haroun was experiencing, though he didn't know it, was Princess Rescue Story Number¹⁵ S/1001/

1. **weaving in and out:** mixing together (it. *intrecciandosi dentro e fuori*)

2. **tapestry:** it. *arazzo*

3. **breathtaking:** overwhelming, incredible (it. *impressionante*)

4. **strand:** thread (it. *filo*)

5. **join up:** it. *unirsi*

6. **storeroom of yarns:** it. *magazzino di fili*

7. **dip:** put into (it. *immergere*)

8. **feeling blue:** feel sad (it. *si sentono giù*)

9. **restore his spirits:** it. *rinfrancare lo spirito*

10. **knock it back, have a swig:** drink (it. *manda giù, bevi un sorso*)

11. **rows:** it. *file*

12. **looking out ... hero:** Haroun sees everything from the inside of this character in the story

13. **dispatched:** killed (it. *faceva fuori*)

14. **captive princess:** it. *principessa prigioniera*

15. **Princess Rescue Story Number:** it. *la storia del salvataggio della principessa numero...*

ZHT/420/41(r)xi; and because the princess in this particular story had recently had a haircut and therefore had no long tresses to let down (unlike the heroine of Princess Rescue Story G/1001/RIM/777/M(w)i, better known as ‘Rapunzel’), Haroun as the hero was required to climb up the outside of the tower by *clinging* to the *cracks*¹⁶ between the stones with his bare hands and feet. He was halfway up the tower when he noticed one of his hands beginning to change, becoming hairy, losing its human shape. Then his arms burst out of his shirt¹⁷, and they too had grown hairy, and impossibly long, and had joints¹⁸ in the wrong places. He looked down and saw the same thing happening to his legs. When new limbs¹⁹ began to push themselves out from his sides, he understood that he was somehow turning into a monster just like those he had been killing; and above him the princess caught at her throat and cried out in a faint voice: ‘Eek, my dearest, you have into a large spider turned.’

As a spider he was able to make rapid progress to the top of the tower; but when he reached the window the princess produced a large kitchen knife and began to hack and saw²⁰ at his limbs, crying rhythmically, ‘*Get away spider, go back home*’; and he felt his grip on the stones of the tower grow looser²¹; and then she managed to chop²² right through the arm nearest her, and he fell.

16. **clinging to the cracks:** hanging on to the little holes in the wall (it. *restando aggrappato alle crepe*)

17. **burst out of his shirt:** it. *s’ingrossò fino a scoppiare fuori dalla sua camicia*

18. **joints:** it. *giunture, articolazioni*

19. **limbs:** it. *arti*

20. **hack and saw:** cut to pieces (it. *fare a pezzi e segare*)

21. **grow looser:** it. *la presa s’indebolì*

22. **chop:** it. *sferrare un colpo*