THE PROPHET SALMAN

SOME AUTHORS ARE NATIONAL TREASURES. SALMAN RUSHDIE IS AN INTERNATIONAL NECESSITY. FROM HIS DAYS IN HIDING TO HIS LIFE ABOVE GROUND IN NEW YORK, RUSHDIE DOESN'T WRITE ABOUT ONE BIG WORLD. HE WRITES ABOUT ALL OF THEM

As a general rule of literature, books outlive their authors. But in the strange, wickedly prodigious case of the writer Salman Rushdie, history thankfully has it that Rushdie outlived his book. First a timetable: It has been twenty-two years since the ripe, tragicomic novel *Midnight's Children* turned the Bombay-born author into a literary wunderkind, capable of fusing hard national politics with intimate family histories, outlandish magical superpowers with the debris of real human desire. It has been fifteen years since *The Satanic Verses* caused a tidal reaction in the Islamic community, set off demonstrations, debates, book burnings, and the notorious fatwa issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini, declaring death to the writer if caught. A dazed but dedicated Rushdie slips into hiding. He does not stop writing. It has been five years since that fatwa was finally lifted by the Iranian government, and it's nearing four years since the author moved from London to New York, a free man, out and about, with eight full-length books of fiction under his belt. Lessons for the present: Worlds change. Orders reverse. Every generation picks for themelves the books necessary to their lives. Salman Rushdie is perhaps today's most indispensable author. The issues he tackles have only become more prescient: nationalism, emigration, religion, countries, cultures, and characters, falling together or standing apart. His novels are comic and devastating and in them a sublime secret is revealed: sometimes fictions have more truth than facts. Rushdie takes time from work on his next novel to discuss the fine fact of living post-fatwa with plenty of other tales snapping to be told. **Christopher Bollen**

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN I don't know if it was just nerves, but I had the strangest dream about you last night. In it, I had to go through all of these hidden doors and hallways to get to a small safe room, where the windows were covered with blankets and the books were bound in cardboard. Inside the room you were giving a reading to a group of young students. The fatwa on your life ended five years ago. At this point you must be pretty sick of this public perception of you.
SALMAN RUSHDIE Yeah, well, it's a rather outdated idea of me.
CB But the fatwa still has its aftereffects. I remember when I carried *The Satanic Verses* around with me, people had a very obvious reaction to it. I noticed at Barnes & Noble they don't keep your books out on the shelves. They are relegated to the shelf behind the counter.
SR Oh, I talked to them about that, and they said that's because people steal my books. Barnes & Noble said they have a group of writers that are their "most stolen authors," and they keep them behind the desk. It's actually great company. I'm with Paul Auster and Nick Hornby…
CB So really it's quite an honor.
SR Is this the Barnes & Noble in Union Square you are speaking of? Each store has its own list. I guess in Union Square I'm very popular.
CB When did you first start writing?
SR I first started writing seriously a little bit in college and then afterwards. As a kid, I was good at English. I wrote a short story when I was 10 or 11, which, mercifully, was lost. I was always a very big reader. I was the kind of child who always had his nose in a book, I'm afraid.
CB What kind of stuff would you read?
SR The great thing about my parents is that they understood the important thing was to let me read whatever I wanted, as long as I was reading. I would read everything from regular children's books that were around to Batman comics. And my mother tells me—although I have no memory of it myself—that when I was little, when people asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I would always say I wanted to be a writer. Of course, when you are 8 or 9, you have no idea what you are saying. When you say you want to be a writer, what you're saying is that you want to be part of the world you love being in as a reader. I never really had another plan for my life other than being a writer. Except when I was in college, I had a certain fantasy about being an actor.
CB And for a while you did act, correct?
SR Actually, in college I did much more acting than writing. I was very involved with university drama groups at Cambridge. But I still did bits of writing. I was actually fired from the university newspaper once.
CB For what?
SR It's a pretty funny story. There was a moment—this is in the mid '60s in Cambridge—when there was a rash of thefts from students' rooms. >

"I'VE OFTEN THOUGHT IT'S A HARD FATE TO BE IN A RUSHDIE NOVEL. YOU GET VERY BEATEN UP."
—SALMAN RUSHDIE

Someone was going in, pinching music equipment and stuff. I was asked to write a piece for the student newspaper about this. Having read rather too much New Journalism at the time, I thought, Well, the thing to do is be the thief. You know, go from room to room and just see what would happen if you were the thief. See if people were leaving their rooms unlocked. If you go into empty rooms, make lists of things you could have pinched if you wanted to.

CB It's a lot like investigative reporting on the six o'clock news.

SR Yeah. My mistake was that one of the rooms that I chose to investigate was the room of the editor of the newspaper, who had left his room unlocked, and it was filled with expensive stereo equipment. I happily wrote about how I could have stolen all of his equipment, and he fired me.

CB Did he publish it?

SR He published it. And then he fired me.

CB So you've always been a writer who's stirred up controversy.

SR That was an early trend. But that editor went on to produce a soap opera in England and I didn't.

CB Instead you published a book, *Grimus*. That's your first book. I've looked for it…

SR I wouldn't bother.

CB It's a science-fiction story.

SR It's sort of fantasy fiction. There's not much science in it. What it was was an attempt to use a story out of Persian mystical literature and to make a Western science-fiction novel out of it. There's a book called *Conference of the Birds,* by Attar, to which, I suppose, the closest equivalent in Western literature is *Pilgrim's Progress*. It's about a group of birds that goes on a pilgrimage toward a bird god, and they have allegorical adventures along the way. When they get to the end of the journey to the top of the mountain where the god is supposed to live, they discover that by virtue of going through all of those trials and tribulations, they themselves have become the god that they were seeking. That's the story of the poem. My version is quite different, but it uses that theme and tries to make a contemporary fantasy novel about it. And it's… It's not very good.

CB [Laughs] Do you think you needed to go through a book that you think isn't good to get to *Midnight's Children*?

SR In retrospect I do. *Grimus* didn't do very well when it came out. Although now there's a lot of people who like it, I have to say. Somebody came up to me once and said they thought it was my best book, which is one of the most depressing things anybody ever said. The thing that's wrong with it, for me, is that I don't fully hear my voice in it. It feels, if I read it now, like someone very young trying to figure out what kind of writer they were and not fully succeeding. One of the big problems is that it's so completely fantasticated. I needed to start somewhere much closer to, well, to home, if you like. And then I began to think about my childhood in Bombay, and that eventually developed into *Midnight's Children.* In a way, yes, getting it wrong is a good way to getting it right.

CB You continually write about migrations, moving, and, more often than not, you use India as the starting point. But your last novel, *Fury,* takes place almost solely in New York. Is India a Rushdie constant, or are you moving away from it?

SR No, I don't think so. It's not a linear movement, you know, a writer's career. It goes in all directions. I mean, the book that I'm writing now has more to do with India than *Fury* did, although part of it is again set in the United States. At this point in my life, I have the privilege of having access to different worlds. As a writer, I really like that a) I don't have to be stuck in any one world, and b) I don't have to somehow artificially go looking for some other place to write about. The circumstances of my life have given me material from very different parts of the world. I'm interested in using all of it. And the balance will change from book to book.

CB In *Midnight's Children,* there's that beautiful part about a game: "All games have morals; and the game of Snakes and Ladders captures, as no other activity can hope to do, the eternal truth that for every ladder you climb, a snake is waiting just around the corner; and for every snake, a ladder will compensate…but I found, very early in life, that the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity—because as events are about to show, it's possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake." Here's where your knowledge of multiple worlds comes in. You don't go for the easy character profiles. You go for ambiguity. Even your bad guys are humane.

SR I don't want ever to have a character you can describe as only one thing, because I don't know anyone like that. Even the people I like the least you can't only describe in terms of what's wrong with them. If you are trying to tell the truth about them, you can't. I think writing is about trying to tell as much truth as you can. It makes me want to see many sides to things. It does help to come from too many places. I can very easily imagine myself in a number of cultural positions. It's a luxury, as a writer, to have access to that. On the other hand, I've always envied those for whom the opposite is true, writers so deeply rooted in one tiny patch of the world or one community that it becomes an inexhaustible resource for them. Writers, like Faulkner, who can take this tiny patch of the Earth and find the whole of human life in it. That's not the kind of writer I am able to be because of how my life has been. I guess you always envy what you can't do.

CB I read a quote from the mid '90s in which you say that if the fatwa were removed, you would face the same dangers as that of a minor pop star.

SR And nowadays even less. Even minor pop stars are in more trouble than me.

CB But you are a celebrity, nonetheless. And a celebrity that—because of the fatwa—people are particularly intrigued to see in the flesh. Does that run counter to being a writer? Most writers like to blend into the background.

SR Not really. A lot of my life is spent just sitting at my desk, trying to do my day's work. And when you are doing that, all of that other stuff just goes away, frankly. You don't think about it. The problems I am facing in the working day just take over. [Pause] It is an odd thing that happened. I got very well known, more well known than writers normally are. And to an extent that hasn't gone away. It's all right. It gets you tables at restaurants. It means I get to meet a lot of interesting people who I maybe otherwise wouldn't. But beyond that it's not a very big factor. And, frankly, I can still walk around New York without people walking into lampposts. It's New York. Nobody gives a damn. That's one of the great things about being here. People say, "That's Al Pacino. So?" People who are well known like living here because the city lets you get on with it. I went to a movie a couple of weeks ago at the Angelika, and a friend of mine, the filmmaker Todd Solondz, happened to be there too. He was twenty people behind me on the escalator, and he was trying to attract my attention but didn't want to yell my name out. And there was this woman standing next to him who saw that he was trying to attract my attention and scolded him. She said, "Leave him alone, just the way people leave you alone!" Todd was so upset and embarrassed that he didn't even tell her, "No, I know him." I got this message from him on how he'd been told off.

CB In another quote from the same period you say, "It's very difficult for a writer in the twentieth century to look at the world and avoid taking a tragic view of it." I read *Fury* a year after September 11, even though it came out before…

SR A strangely transformed novel, I think.

CB Yes. And since then the furies you write about, circling over Manhattan, have come down and crashed into buildings. In the twenty-first century, I suppose, we are just as tragic.

SR Yeah, but my instinct has always been to write about tragedy in the manner of comedy. I have always been someone who likes to write against the grain of things. In a lot of my novels—take, for example, *Shame*—almost nothing happens that isn't tragic. And yet the manner of the novel is relentlessly comic. So yes, the worse it gets, the more it pushes me toward comedy.

CB *The Satanic Verses* was the first book of yours I read. But for years I grew up hearing about it, about the fatwa and going into hiding. I thought the book was not a work of fiction but some sort of anti-Islamic nonfiction treatise. But *The Satanic Verses* really is beautiful, imaginative, extremely romantic even.

SR I really think that it was the worst thing that happened to my writing. The attack on my writing was unfunny, incomprehensible, alien, religious, etc. Somehow for people who didn't know my writing the characteristics of the attack were assumed to be also the characteristics of my writing.

CB It created a fear of reading you, in a sense.

SR Yes. People thought, It must be some arcane, incomprehensible, anti-Islamic, dark, alien matter. Then people pick up the book and discover that it's a comic novel. It's a novel that's pleasurable in a novelistic way.

CB It's that tragedy/comedy paradox. In *Midnight's Children,* the narrator goes so far as to say that no one in this story is going to die of natural causes. And no one does. Everyone dies tragically.

SR Yes, they all get wiped out. I've often thought it's a hard fate to be in a Rushdie novel. You get very beaten up. I'm trying to be nicer to my characters. In *Fury,* for instance, I was really anxious about the character of Neela. I didn't want to kill her. I thought maybe there was a way of not killing her. I kept trying to find it, but she needed to get killed. So I killed her.

CB You would consider yourself a political writer?

SR I'm a writer who's very interested in politics and history, yes. There's directly political writing that I have done a bit of. But, as far as the novels are concerned, the thing I've always thought was that because in our lives and times the distance between private life and public life has disappeared, you have to involve that dimension in your novels in order to explain what is happening in the lives of your characters. Once upon a time, it was possible not to do that. Jane Austen didn't have to do that. She could leave the Napoleonic wars out of the characters' lives because they didn't directly impinge. Except soldiers showed up at parties and looked cool in red uniforms. Now, I think, it is very difficult to explain the ordinary life without some reference to the public dimension, because it affects us all so directly.

CB Do you think religion in general is dangerous, or do you rate certain religions differently?

SR I don't think of it as a danger as long as it remains a private matter. It's a danger when it starts meddling in public affairs. That's not religion-specific. I've written about the problems of Hindu fanaticism in India right now, in which Muslims are the target. And, of course, there is the better-known phenomenon of Islamic radicalism. And, you know, right now in the United States this is a very Christian government. My view is keep religion out of politics. Keep it in the home or the church or the synagogue, where it belongs. Then I've got no problems with it at all. It's none of my business. If people want that in their lives, it's their decision. I happen not to, and that's my decision. But my problem is the politicization of religion, and when that happens, very often large numbers of people start dying.

CB You recently helped make *Midnight's Children* into a play performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company. But you've always had a big interest in film. The movie business comes up a lot in your books.

SR I'm a big movie freak. I grew up in a movie town and have never stopped being interested in movies. When I was young, in college, it was a really great time for the world art cinema. I got a lot of my cultural education in the movies. It's hard to remember or imagine what it was like when films that we now think of as classics of the modern cinema were the new movies. When the new movie was Fellini's *8 1/2.* And the next week it was the new Godard movie. The next week the new Bergman movie. When all of those were being made at a very high speed, it made the movies a very exciting place to go. Certainly at that time in England—I'm talking about the mid '60s—I didn't find the same excitement in the English novel of that period. I've always been very affected by American literature. At that time I was reading a lot of the Mailer-Bellow-Roth period of American literature. Pynchon, too. Other than that, the thing that was really turning me on was the movies. And so, I think, everything I've then done as a writer has been very influenced by the cinema.

CB Do you follow Bollywood films?

SR Only a little bit. My girlfriend's just starred in one. It's a film called *Boom*. She plays one of the lead roles. It was shot mostly in Bombay and Dubai. She gets to rob a bank.

CB You are someone that a younger generation of writers has quickly adopted. It could be argued that Zadie Smith and Jonathan Safran Foer, for example, have been influenced by your style and tone and range.

SR It's a great kick for a writer to discover, first of all, that the next lot of writers are interested in what you've done and find it valuable for themselves—Zadie and Jonathan especially, and other writers in India and elsewhere, who have been kind enough to say that my work was important to them. It's a really good feeling. Because I know that my writing came out of other writing. Books come out of other books. It's always the case that books were helpful to you, got you going on your road. It's very nice to feel I offer that to other writers. I also like it that my readers are still very young. When *Midnight's Children* came out, it did wonderfully well around the world; but I remember noticing at the time that it did particularly well at colleges. If you ask publishers who shows up to a book reading, they will say women in their middle age. And thank goodness for them, because without them we'd all be starving. But what I like at my readings is that the audiences are very young, very ethnically mixed, and that gives me a kick. I'm pleased to still be thought interesting to people who were essentially getting born when *Midnight's Children* was published. It's great to feel you have crossed over into the next generation.

CB One of the reasons is that you tackle issues that have only become more significant: nationalism, religion... But it can be argued that your books have a pretty serious romantic element. And I'm not just trying to lump you in with magical realism. Do you consider yourself a romantic or a realist?

SR Some of each, some of each. There are days when I'm kind of hard-nosed and a bit beady-eyed. And there are other days when I seem to be more interested in fairy tales. I'm talking as a writer. I think, as a person, I am quite romantic. I think, in my time away from the desk, I'm quite romantic. I don't know. You'd have to ask Padma what she thinks on the subject.

CB It's hard to know whether America is a land of romance or realism. You've made India into both. Do you ever go back?

SR I try to. Padma and I are both from India, so we both have roots there. Yes, we try to go back most years. Sometimes for a little while, sometimes for a long time.

Photography Anton Corbijn