



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Kunapipi

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 6

1982

Interview

Salman Rushdie

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Rushdie, Salman, Interview, *Kunapipi*, 4(2), 1982.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol4/iss2/6>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Interview

Abstract

This interview was recorded in Gothenburg, Sweden, on 5 September 1982. The questions were prepared by Jean-Pierre Durix in collaboration with Kirsten Holst Petersen, Jacqueline Bardolph, Anna Rutherford and Carole Durix.

Salman Rushdie

INTERVIEW

This interview was recorded in Gothenburg, Sweden, on 5 September 1982. The questions were prepared by Jean-Pierre Durix in collaboration with Kirsten Holst Petersen, Jacqueline Bardolph, Anna Rutherford and Carole Durix.

JPD: *What were the circumstances in which you wrote Midnight's Children? Did you write it in England or in India?*

I wrote it in England. I went to India and Pakistan for five months before starting it. I was going to Pakistan with my family at that time. But I also

felt that if I was going to embark on something of that scale, then I could not entirely rely on my memory. So I visited a lot of the places that I had been to before and that I knew I would want to use, and also some of the places which I suspected I might want, for instance Benares, where I had never been before. I had never heard of this curious edifice there — a hostel for bereaved women. I discovered it by chance. In Benares, you can hire a fishing-boat; a fisherman will row you down the Ganges and you can look at all the palaces. At one point, we heard the sound of wailing floating towards us over the waters. It got louder and louder and then died away. I discovered that it came from an old Maharajah's palace which had been taken over by the government and made a hostel for widows who came to Benares to mourn. They literally had to do nothing to be there except mourn. I suppose that if they didn't mourn, they got thrown out... Because I had already by that stage had the notion of using the nickname Widow for Mrs Gandhi, the widows' hostel suddenly seemed very useful, and so, in the book, it became a sort of prison. But then, after that trip, I just went back to England and wrote the novel.

JPD: Were there preliminary sketches to this book on which you obviously must have worked for a long time? How did it take on that shape?

It came in a very chaotic way. I had little bits of it, to begin with. The first chapter particularly was the first story that I had. And I had various fragments of narrative to do with Bombay. Originally there was only one child. And then it became two children when I decided to swap them. Then I thought that you can't have just two children born in an hour in a country like India. It must be more. And if it's more than two, why these two? I did mathematical calculations about the birth-rate of India, with calculators, and worked out that, in fact, a thousand and one children an hour is roughly accurate. If anything, it's a little on the low side. There are probably twelve or thirteen hundred children being born every hour. So the population — allowing for the death rate — is increasing at something like six or seven hundred an hour. Having discovered that there was going to be a very large number of children, I had the idea of spreading them across the hour and giving them differing kinds of magical gifts depending on the point during the hour at which they were born. During the first draft of the book which took, by far, the longest part of the writing — probably two and a half out of the four and a half years of it — I was completely uncontrolled. It was enormously long, very

over-written and loose. In a way I was just seeing what happened. I find that I've always done this, even when the book has not been quite of that size. The first draft is really a way of finding out what the book is about. In the end, I had an enormous typescript, probably a thousand pages, which was completely undisciplined. But, out of that, I found myself putting the story into the first person, as a way of controlling what was otherwise a mess of material. And the moment I put it into the first person, I really thought that it had begun to work. Then I wrote something which was reasonably close to the final version in about another year, and just added little layers to it for quite a long time after that.

JPD: *How do you situate yourself in relation to other English-speaking Indian writers, people like Mulk Raj Anand, Narayan or Raja Rao?*

Not at all really. This idea that there is a school of Indian-British fiction is a sort of mistake. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Narayan have many more affinities to Indian writers in the Indian languages than they do to a writer like me who just happens to be writing in English. Apart from the accident that we all use English, I don't think there's a great deal in common. *Midnight's Children* was partly conceived as an opportunity to break away from the manner in which India had been written about in English, not just by Indian writers but by Western writers as well.

AR: *What about Desani's All About H. Hatterr?*

That's one book that I did very much like. I'm not sure that it's a novel, or what it is... But I think it's an extraordinary book. I found it by accident in a bookshop, in those grey Penguins, and it seemed so far ahead of its time I could not believe he had never written anything else since, except philosophy. The way in which the English language is used in that book is very striking; it showed me that it was possible to break up the language and put it back together in a different way. To talk about minor details, one thing it showed me was the importance of punctuating badly. In order to allow different kinds of speech rhythms or different kinds of linguistic rhythms to occur in the book, I found I had to punctuate it in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language; I had to use dashes too much, keep exclaiming, putting in three dots, sometimes three dots followed by semi-colons followed by three dashes... That sort of thing just seemed to help to

dislocate the English and let other things into it. Desani does that all the time in *Hatterr*. Apparently Céline does it as well, in French. At that time, I had never read Céline. But one of the American critics, because there were so many dashes in *Midnight's Children*, assumed that I had got the dash from Céline... His books use dashes instead of full stops, more or less all the way through.

JPD: *What are the European writers that you feel you have a lot in common with?*

I think what happens with most writers, and perhaps more with displaced writers, is that they select, partly consciously and partly not consciously, a family of writers to belong to. And it just seems to me that there is another great tradition in world literature which really hasn't been discussed in the way that the realistic tradition has been. In almost every country and in almost every literature there has been, every so often, an outburst of this large-scale fantasized, satiric, anti-epic tradition, whether it was Rabelais or Gogol or Bocaccio... Wherever you look, you can find examples of this kind of sensibility. That simply was the literature that I liked to read. So it seemed to me that it was also the literature that I would like to write.

JPD: *What is the importance of grotesque characters and of the Baroque in your works? How do you see characters shaping in your mind when you write a book?*

In two ways: they either come out of pieces of people that I knew, or they quite often come out of gestures or of small details of the character from which the rest of the character grows. In *Midnight's Children*, most of the characters are in some way broken. They are not fully rounded. It's to do partly with the fact that they are seen from one point of view. So you see them in the limited way that one human being would see another.

I just find myself writing grotesque characters. It's part of the fact that I think I write very badly when I write seriously. And the nature of comedy is to distort slightly.

JPD: *In *Midnight's Children*, there is a constant dialogue between some characters who attempt or pretend to be heroic and other characters who destroy that heroism. Sometimes there is a dialogue of this kind between the characters and the narrator. How important is this for you?*

The nature of heroism is one of the concerns of the book. It has a character who presents himself as a hero, although he is also aware that he isn't. And heroism is something that is very alive in Indian culture and narrative tradition. For instance, one real life incident, the Nanavati case, is very little changed in the book. The character of Commander Sabermati, and his wife, although their originals weren't neighbours of mine, remain substantially unaltered. And that did become a test-case for India, because there was this enormously good-looking, very popular and dashing young naval officer who was almost certain to become the next chief of the navy, who committed a murder, and everybody wanted him to get off, but, at the same time, they understood that he had killed somebody. There was terrible agony about this. It went on for years. And it got very political. In fact he was found not guilty by the first court that tried him. There is a curious rule in the Bombay judiciary — at least there was then — : if the jury came to a decision which the judge thought was idiotic, he could overrule and reverse it. And that's what happened in that case. The jury found him not guilty and the judge reversed the decision, and it then went to endless appeal courts. It eventually arrived at the President of India who was supposed to pardon him. Whether or not he would be pardoned became a very crucial issue. A woman is abducted by another man who then goes off and murders the abductor... There were newspaper articles at the time — or this may just be a false memory of mine — which compared the Nanavati story to the Ramayana story and said that, if this was Rama, would we be sending him to jail? So there was a kind of dispute between the laws of heroism and the rule of Law. In the end, he was sent to jail. And that was a major decision by India about itself. That kind of notion of the hero is still prevalent there. But it is not one that I subscribe to. And so the dispute between the two views exists in the book.

JPD: How does a writer like yourself stand in relation to history and the problem of memory, of creating the memory?

When I started writing the book, because, as I said, it was not then in the first person, I had a sort of Proustian idea that it must be possible simply to recreate, to bring the past back, unchanged, as if it had never been away, and found that it really was not what I could do. Instead of being a book of a Proustian kind, the novel became a novel about the past seen through memory, and about what memory did to it. It became a novel about memory, which is why the narrator is so suspect and makes all kinds of mistakes, some of which he perceives and some of which he does

not. When I was thinking about the book, I had a vivid memory of what it was like living in India during the Chinese war: how frightened everybody was and how the general belief was that the Chinese would be in New Delhi within a few days and we had better all start learning Chinese, and what absolute amazement people felt when the Chinese suddenly stopped and came no further. Anyway I remembered all this with great vividness and then realized that I could not possibly have been there because I would have been in school in England at the time. I wrote to my parents and said: 'Look! Was I there or wasn't I there? Was I on holiday?' And they said: 'No, you weren't here.' But even when I knew that I had not been there, my memory refused to believe it because it informed me that I had. This showed me that memory does play very extraordinary tricks on you. So that's why I made Saleem make that kind of mistake; and even when he realizes that the assassination of Gandhi happens at the wrong point in the book, he can't rearrange his memories, because to do so would unravel too much else. I found that I did not have total recall about the past, that I was only remembering certain things very vividly, sometimes accurately and sometimes not, that, because they were fragments of the past, they became somehow much more powerful, as though they were bits of archaeological remains one had discovered and from which one was trying to reconstruct what the vanished civilization was like. They became symbolic, absolutely trivial things which had no intrinsic value, they became great totems for me, which is another reason why this book is constructed in that fragmentary way. It tries to recognize the way in which memory operates: it exalts certain things which may be unimportant in themselves and become very important because they have lodged in your mind. And then history seen through that obviously becomes a rather odd thing: it becomes distorted. What seem to be irrelevant things become very big. What seem to be very big things are treated very slightly.

JPD: *What is the importance of digressions? How do they stand in relation to the whole economy of the novel?*

I think that they are absolutely crucial. There was some attempt made when the book was with the publishers to clean it up a bit and to centre it more on the main narrative. But I certainly could not have tolerated that because the digressions are almost the point of the book, in which the idea of multitude is a central notion. When I started writing, I just tried to explain one life, and it struck me more and more that, in order to

explain this life, you had to explain a vast amount of material which surrounded it, both in space and time. In a country like India, you are basically never alone. The idea of solitude is a luxury which only rich people enjoy. For most Indians, the idea of privacy is very remote. When people perform their natural functions in public, you don't have the same idea of privacy. So it seemed to me that people lived intermingled with each other in a way that perhaps they don't any more in the West, and that it was therefore idiotic to try and consider any life as being discrete from all other lives. I had to find some way in which that life — Saleem's — could be constantly surrounded by all the other lives that occasionally overwhelmed it and then receded and were shown to be connected with it in all kinds of ways, whether literal or metaphorical, political, social or sociological... So I found the book getting bigger. The logical extension of the phrase 'to understand one life you have to swallow a world' is that the book never finishes. So you have to find some convention for limiting it. But I wanted to show a life in the context of many other lives, some of which penetrated it, some of which simply existed at its periphery. And that's why the narrator keeps telling other stories.

There's another point, which I find myself making more and more, because the part of the book that's been most criticized is the end, the way in which the central character ends in despair. The thing that happens to him is that nothing much happens to him, despite all the hopes and the optimism of the beginning. Indian critics particularly began to see the decline of the narrator as the author's message, which of course it is partially. But it is only one part of the author's message. The other part, which, I think, has not been properly appreciated, has to do with the actual form of the book itself. I tried quite deliberately to make the form of the book a kind of opposite to what the narrative was saying. What I mean is that the optimism in the book seems to me to lie in its 'multitudinous' structure. It's designed to show a country or a society with an almost endless capacity for generating stories, events, new ideas, and constantly renewing, rebuilding itself. In the middle of that you have one rather tragic life. The two have to be seen together. And simply to say that the book despairs is to see it in too linear a way.

Indians are wonderful story-tellers; every Indian you talk to, if you let him, will tell you stories, for a long time. And I wanted to get some of that, the flavour of the told story, into the book, which is why I was very pleased when I introduced the device of having the book narrated to an audience. Padma is one of my favourite characters in the book, because

she was completely unplanned. In the first version, she appeared as a very minor character in the last fifteen or so pages; then, when the narrator began to 'tell' the book, she arrived and sat there, she simply demanded to be told the story and kept interrupting it, telling Saleem to get on with it. She became very important because she literally demanded to be important. And it's nice when a character does that and you feel that they've added something by doing it. Padma enabled the book to become an oral narrative, some kind of stylization of such a narrative, if you like. And that allowed the rhythms of the dialogue, the rhythms of the speech that I had originally invented for the dialogue sections to become the rhythm of the whole book.

JPD: What kind of audience have you got in mind when you're writing a book like this? Have you got one? Who are you talking to?

Well, *me* really. I had a strong belief when the book was being written that it would never be published. At that time, my track record was not good. I had published one novel which had not really distinguished itself, certainly not commercially. Actually the best reviews that it ever got were in France, where people quite strangely compared it to Voltaire. I could not understand why. But, in England, it was not compared to Voltaire. It was compared to less distinguished things... I thought that a writer who embarked, after that, on a novel which was a quarter of a million words long and rather weird by English standards was probably committing suicide. I found it very likely that no publisher would wish to touch it. It had the effect of making me very obstinate, and thinking that, if it was not going to be published, it might as well be the book that I wanted. So I wrote it with reference to no possible reader. I just did what I wanted to do.

AR: How did you come to choose the map of India for the hero's face?

It was a comic notion which struck me when I was looking at the map. I saw it as a nose hanging into the sea with a drip off the end of it, which was Ceylon. It was another way of making flesh the idea of Saleem's link with the country. But really, the nose, having come out of that, went off in another direction... if a nose can go off in another direction.

KHP: It seems to me that the book resists the temptation of social satire of the Naipaul-White type. Is it deliberate?

Well yes! Basically this book grew out of affection and I think that Naipaul's books about India don't. So that's a simple difference.

AR: *I would like to go back to Grimus with the questions of time, space and reality.*

I think *Grimus* is quite a clever book. But that's not entirely a compliment. It's too clever for its own good. At the time of *Grimus*, I was very interested in science fiction. And I was taken with the liberty to discuss ideas that science fiction can give you. I suppose that's why *Grimus* plays so much with science fiction conventions. Bits of that survive in *Midnight's Children*. *Grimus* enabled me to use fantasy without worrying about it.

JB: *There are so many gifted children in science fiction, and in Midnight's Children too.*

Yes! And in a way that worried me. There's John Wyndham's novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, for instance. And it worried me that these children were going to turn into Midwich Cuckoos, that they were going to become demi-gods or monsters. And I really didn't want them to be either.

JB: *You were saying that you were compared to Voltaire. Even in Midnight's Children there's something of Candide.*

Well I expect there is a bit. But Saleem is not as innocent as Candide. Candide is a kind of blank slate on whom the world writes. Saleem is also compared to Little Oskar in *The Tin Drum*. And I think he falls somewhere between Candide and Oskar. Oskar is much more demonic than Saleem. And I suppose the similarity with Candide is that he gets around a lot, too, and gets badly treated. But I don't think he is quite such a naïve person.

CD: *Do you still remain within the Indian community in Britain, as far as your writing is concerned?*

Well, I think, initially yes! It will be some time before I can think of having a non-Indian leading character or major characters. I can't really see myself doing that at the moment.

JPD: *After this book, in which direction will you move?*

In the long term, where I think the writing will go is away from India. The book I am writing now is not about India. But it's about Pakistan, a slightly fantasized version of Pakistan, which is not called anything in the book much, but is recognisably close to Pakistan. I may be wrong but I think that, at the moment, that's about it for me as far as that part of the world is concerned. At some point, the writing is going to perform the same migration that I did. Because otherwise it becomes spurious to spend your life living in the West and writing exotically about far distant lands, maharajahs... I am very interested in writing about the idea of migration and the effect it has on individuals and groups. And somewhere, I think, there's an enormous novel waiting to be written, unfortunately...

The Next Issue Includes:

Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, Anita Desai, Alice Munro. Robert Drewe discusses *The Savage Crows* (Wilson Harris) on 'The Quest for Form', Sujit Mukherjee on 'Tigers in Fiction', Roderick Lawrence on the use of domestic space during the last two centuries in Australia and England, articles on Frank Sargeson and R.A.K. Mason.