

## MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Midnight's Children is not a beach read. To appreciate and enjoy Rushdie's complex and original book, the reader needs to absorb each sentence. Not that this is in any way a labor. The writing is alive, charming, vivid and populated with strange and variously mad, bad, dangerous, unbelievable, and otherwise madcap "wild and crazy guys," as Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd so wonderfully satirized in their Saturday Night Live skit.

But in the process of creating a warm, compassionate and splendidly human tale, Rushdie also makes serious points about India in its beginning decades of nationhood – and how easily individuals can be drowned when caught in the riptides of history.

The novel traces the destiny of a Muslim Indian family from 1915 to 1977, when Indira Gandhi's Emergency Rule was about to end, as a result of a general election which she herself called. A false burst of over-confidence, not unlike the recent sad experience of the U.K. Prime Minister, Teresa May.

To begin, a brief summary of this three-time Booker Prize-winning epic.

The story is told by a narrator-protagonist named Saleem Sinai. He is a child born on the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the same minute and hour that India became independent from Britain. He is only the first of 1,000 Indian children born in the first hour of the first day of independence. But Saleem, by being the first, becomes the poster child for the new India.

And as will become clear as the children grow older, each child has an unusual psychic power. Saleem eventually discovers his power is telepathy. He is able to connect with all the other 1,000 children and convene telepathic conference calls.

And in the first of many such interwoven political events, at the same time that Saleem is celebrated in the newspaper and receives a letter from the Prime Minister – his father, a rich Muslim in an overnight Hindu state receives a letter that the Indian government has frozen all his assets. He is suspected of sympathizing with the new Pakistan.

Unfortunately, Saleem is not a beautiful baby – his skin is stained with birthmarks, he has bulbous temples, and a sprawling cucumber of a nose. And known only to the presiding midwife, Mary, he is not his father's biological son. No, alas, he is actually the son of a poor Hindu itinerant street musician, Wee Willie Winkel, whose wife has died in childbirth. The midwife for both births has switched the babies' nametags in a moment of revolutionary fervor while under the influence of a Socialist boyfriend, "giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to accordions and poverty." Saleem, born to Hindus, becomes Muslim, and Shiva, born to Muslims, becomes Hindu.

The sprawling cucumber nose is seen as a genetic resemblance to the real grandchild's grandfather, a Dr. Aziz, whose central feature is his nose:

"A Cyranose, a proboscissimus, you could cross the river on that nose – comparable only to the trunk of the elephant god Ganesh."

To further enrich the tale of the switch, Saleem is also not really the son of Wee Willie Winkel. He was actually sired by a well-to-do Englishman, William Methwold, who seduces women with his perfectly-parted hair – which is actually a wig.

Before the story reaches this pivotal point, the first 100 or so pages of the novel take the reader back to the courtship of the (supposed) grandfather of Saleem, when he, a well-to-do Muslim physician, courts his future wife by examining her progressively through a series of circles cut in a sheet. After three years of this unusual courtship Dr. Aziz, already in love with her body, finally sees her face, "a soft face that is not all ugly." They are married.

This tale of India and the changeling sons is told from the viewpoint of the narrator being in 1977, which is the novel's present, and by Saleem, who is now age 30 and living in a Bombay pickle factory. Saleem tells his life story to a woman, Padma, whom he calls "dung-lotus." She is rather thick, illiterate, and superstitious – but she loves him. And I don't think I'm giving away the ending if I reveal that by the end of the book, Saleem marries her.

Now, back to the supernatural talented 1,000, with abilities as strange as:

- a boy who has the ability to step through mirrors and re-emerge on the other side.
- a girl whose fingers were so green she could grow prize aubergines in the desert.
- a blue-eyed child from Kashmir who can change his sex by stepping into water.
- a boy who could increase or reduce his size at will (and who had mischievously been the cause of wild panic and rumors of the return of Giants).
- a boy who can travel through time.
- and a girl, Parvati-the-witch, with powers of sorcery.

But only to Saleem himself is given “the greatest talent of all – the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men.”

Thanks to his gift, Saleem organizes this magical group of Midnight’s Children into a vast conference call, which night after night he telepathically convenes. They reflect on the issues India faced in its early statehood – discussing the myriad of cultural, linguistic, religious, and political differences faced by a diverse nation.

But alas for his telepathic talent, when Saleem is 15, he has an operation to drain his continually inflamed sinuses and he loses his telepathic powers. But the operation also gives him, for the first time of his life, the ability to smell. He discovers that his extraordinary nasal talent detects not only physical odors, but also those identifying the psychological and moral state of fellow humans.

But then another blow strikes – during the Pakistan-India war, Saleem’s entire family, except for himself and his sister, (who now is a singer under the name Jamilia Singer and the most famous entertainer in Pakistan), is killed in an air raid. His sister is fine, but Saleem is hit in the head with his grandfather’s silver spittoon, which causes him to lose his memory.

All clear so far? Now on to the conclusion of the plot. Saleem, with faded memory, but still with his supernatural sense of smell, is betrayed by his sister pop-singer, and conscripted into the Pakistan army. They use him to track subversive intellectuals, and various adventures follow:

- Saleem escapes the army by fleeing into the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove swamp in the world.
- Once out of the jungle, he meets Parvati-the-witch (one of the Midnight Children) who hides him in her ghetto village.
- Unsuccessful in getting Saleem to love her, Parvati has an affair with Shiva, who you will remember was the other changeling child and is now a war hero, because of being able to kill with his massive powerful knees.
- Parvati comes back to the ghetto, pregnant with Shiva's child, where Saleem is convinced to marry her so the people of the ghetto village will think the child is his.

A strange justice results: once again a child is being born to a father who is not his real father – but now by a terrible irony, the child is the true grandchild of his assumed father's parents.

But Parvati's son, instead of the classical Aziz nose, has enormous ears – so large that when the midwife contortionist triplets first see him emerging, they thought the head of a tiny elephant appeared.

The adventure now nears its end. The government raids and levels the ghetto, Parvati is killed, and Saleem is captured.

And one-by-one, Saleem, under government persuasion, reveals the name and location of all the Midnight Children that are still alive – 429 have already died – India is not a healthy place for children.

All of the remaining 581 are captured and forcibly sterilized, since Indira Gandhi feels her government threatened by their power. The Midnight Children are then set free, and Saleem, escaping to Bombay, tastes some chutney from a street stand and instantly recognizes it as that made in his childhood by midwife Mary – she who was responsible for the changelings.

Mary now owns a pickle chutney factory in Bombay. Saleem goes there, meets Padma guarding the gate, and the story has come full circle.

Now that I have made the plot of the book totally clear, let me proceed to some other observations.

For me, reading this book was not unlike my feeling when, as a young boy, I found a book of fairy tales –

It was opening a magic box and out rushes:

folklore, politics, history, myth, wit, some occasional dung, not to mention a blind art expert, a poet who cannot verse, vultures, cobras, peep shows, many, many clocks and dare I say it in mixed company: the nose as a genital organ. Not to mention what seemed like 100 or more different characters, weird and otherwise:

- Bombay movie stars
- millionaire boy gurus
- a pop singer who never shows her face
- purposely deformed beggars
- contortionists
- extortionists
- merchants
- magicians
- servants
- snake charmers
- werewolves
- eccentric aunts
- indulgent uncles

A breathtaking ride through the first 30 years of Indian nationhood – taking in the religious divisions, the linguistic wars, the repressive rule of Indira Gandhi, the tragedies of partition, the painful birth of Bangladesh. It is joyful, it is comic, but it is also dark – it acknowledges that life in India can be bloody and miserable – full of uncertainty, corruption, failure, senseless slaughter, and pain.

Where else would healthy teeth be pulled, so they could be replaced with gold, in anticipation of having to flee for your life to a new land, a new start, with nothing but the clothes on your back, and at a moment's notice. Rushdie charms, but he also rages.

Let me insert here a few words to refresh your memories on the events of August 1947, when after three hundred years in India, the British, in clumsy haste and with little concern for the chaos they had left behind, departed. This is one historical bookend to the period covered by the story of the “Midnight Children.”

Across the Indian subcontinent, communities that had co-existed for nearly 1,000 years exploded in a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence, with Hindus and Sikhs on one side, and Muslims on the other – a mutual genocide. In Punjab and Bengal – provinces abutting India's borders with West and East Pakistan – the carnage was especially intense, with massacres and savage sexual violence.

This extreme polarization of Hindus and Muslims occurred over a short several decades in the twentieth century. Up until that time, for centuries, people did not define themselves through their religious faith. Although there are differing opinions as to the cause, most historians blame the clash of personalities between three twentieth-century Indian politicians, Jinnah of the Muslim League and Gandhi and Nehru of the Hindu-dominated Congress Party.

Their relationship by the 1940s had grown so poisonous they could barely even sit in the same room. Jinnah was the man most responsible for the creation of Pakistan versus the single India that had originally been planned. He declared that despite his continued demands for a separate Muslim state, it would always guarantee freedom of religion, but instead unbridled violence and chaos followed.

Before it was finally over, one of the greatest migrations in human history had begun, as millions of Muslims trekked to West and East Pakistan, while millions of

Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction. By 1948, as the great migration drew to a close, more than 15 million people had been uprooted. An estimated between one and two million were killed.

The other bookend to this beginning of the “Midnight Children” period is the second term of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. After winning a massive victory at the polls in the 1971 elections, she continued her despotic approach to government, supporting East Pakistan in its revolt against West Pakistan. Following a horrific civil war, West Pakistan became Bangladesh.

And then in June of 1975, Indira declared an “emergency” in India, based upon accusations of electoral malpractice. She suspended all human rights: property could not be owned by Muslim; the professions could not be practiced by Muslims; there was no freedom of movement, association or speech. Total censorship was imposed.

The emergency period was a time of terror. Bulldozers cleared deprived areas, with inhabitants given as little as 45 minutes’ notice, in order to make way for property developments. Indira’s son ran a program to tackle overpopulation and put so much pressure on local officials to show good results that men were kidnapped and forcibly sterilized.

As the book closes, Prime Minister Indira, as ever convinced only she knew what was necessary for India, canceled the emergency after six months and called an election, convinced she would win it. She did not, and her despotic era ended, and the new government imprisoned her.

And now back to our novel.

In the process of writing this nation-as-family tale, using this framework to cover the events in India, both before and particularly during the 30 years after the independence and partition of India, Rushdie’s unique literary talent is given full rein.

He creates a narrative complex, flexible, and imaginative enough to smuggle the novel’s narrator, the changeling Saleem, into every major event in India’s first 30 years of independent history. Only an exceptionally inventive storyteller would

have the ability to meaningfully integrate decades of personal, political, religious and cultural change – a dozen strongly developed narratives woven together.

And in the process, Rushdie manages to also fill his novel with passages of beauty, humor, mystery – the comic, the tragic, the real, the surreal, the mystic – all blended with the tragedy and pain of violent history.

In some ways, Rushdie's work reminds me of James Joyce's masterwork Ulysses. Rushdie, like Joyce, is obviously very schooled in English and Western literature and the classics – but in addition also in the equivalents in Arabic culture, including 1001 Nights and the Koran. And like Joyce, he must have a phenomenal memory – because he can continually pull in these references to create a cornucopia of gleefully overloaded sentences.

Perhaps this is what caused reviewers, when Midnight's Children was first published, to note its affinities with Tristram Shandy, The Tin Drum, and One Hundred Years of Solitude in its “endless correspondences and elaboration of images into a web of interconnected symbols.” I have read the last two of these books in the past but certainly confess that I don't have the literary background to understand, much less make these comparisons. I am proud of the fact, though, that I did catch some of the more obvious literary echoes from Western literature – such as the grasshopper-green pickle chutney that serves as a Proustian key to Saleem's memories of his midwife and then nanny Mary, and that then leads him to Mary's chutney factory and to Padma.

Perhaps this somewhat “Joycean” flavor is why critics felt that Midnight's Children would never reach a wide audience in America. The book was too long; its scene, subject matter, and countless illusions to classic English and Arabic writings would have no appeal to Americans – and it was not a book that could be gulped down.

But illusions and complexity aside, Rushdie's writing can be wonderfully, vividly descriptive.

-- for example, the description of the Pioneer Café where Saleem's mother goes secretly to meet her disgraced first husband, now the leader of a revolutionary party:



“a real nutputty joint – with filmi playback music blaring out from a cheap radio by the cash-till, a long narrow greeny room lit by flickering neon, a forbidden world in which broken-toothed men sat at reccine-covered tables with crumbled cards and expressionless eyes.”

-- or the suffocating feeling of dust:

“For forty days, we were besieged by the dust; dust creeping under wet towels we placed around all the windows, dust slyly in each morning arrival, dust filtering through the very walls to hang like a shapeless wraith in the air ... In the ghost-haze of the dust it sometimes seemed we would discern the shape of the past ... “

-- or Saleem’s escape from the army and entrance into the vast expanse of the Sundarbans jungle:

“The jungle closed behind them like a tomb, and after hours of increasingly weary, but also frenzied rowing through ... labyrinthine salt-water channels overtowered by the cathedral-arching trees ... they were hopelessly lost ... (and) the water level was rising ... in the last light there could be no doubt that the jungle was gaining in size, power, and ferocity; the huge stilt-roots of vast ancient mangrove trees could be seen snaking about thirstily in the dusk, sucking in the rain and becoming thicker than elephant trunks ... “

And finally, just one small example of the wonderful madcap writing that floods the pages:

Major Zulfy of the Pakistani Army has just been told by one of Dr. Aziz’s daughters that the fugitive rhymeless poet husband of her sister is hiding in their house. The major races to the house with a force of 15 men, only to find that the fugitive, Nadir Kahn, had just escaped via the outside trapdoor to one of the house thunderboxes – the “throne” lay on one side, the empty enamel pot rolling on the floor.

The Major, bandy-legged, short, flat-headed, nose almost touching his chin, and red with awesome rage, reacts:

“at first (he) hopped up and down in helpless first of temper, (but) controlled himself at last, and rushed out through the bathroom, past the “throne,” alongside the cornfield, through the perimeter gate. But no sign of a running, plump, long-hair, rhymeless poet. Looking left: nothing, look right: zero. Enraged Zulfy made his choice, pelted past the cycle-rickshaw rank.

Old men were playing hit-the-spittoon and the spittoon was out in the street. Urchins were dodging in and out of the streams of betel-juice. Major Zulty ran on on on, between the old men and their target, but he lacked the urchins’ skill. What an unfortunate moment: a low hard jet of red fluid caught him squarely in the crotch. A stain like a hand clutched at the groin of his battledress; squeezed; arrested his progress. Major Zulfy stopped in almighty wrath. O even more unfortunate; because a second player, assuming the mad soldier would keep on running, had unleashed a second jet. A second red hand clasped the first and completed Major Zulty’s day ... Slowly, with deliberation, he went to the spittoon and kicked it over into the dust. He jumped on it – once, twice! again! – flattening it and refusing to show that it had hurt his foot.”

Just two short concluding comments:

- To understand India after independence read this book together with Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance. You will learn more about modern India than reading any history book.
- And finally, I think Sam Jordison, book reviewer of the Guardian, captures best The essence of Midnight’s Children in only two short sentences:

“Salman Rushdie’s madcap characters splash gleefully in the novel’s serious historical tide. A tough book, but a rare treat.”

### Discussion Questions for *Midnight's Children*

1. Rushdie's writing style has been called "hysterical magical realism." Do you feel it was effective in bringing alive his characters and in describing this momentous period in India's history?
2. Rushdie says that his character, Padma, the grumbling consort of the narrator, was meant to be the reader's representative, and that the narrative recapitulation and reinterpretation were intended to provide some feeling of reader control. What do you think he meant, and was either attempt effective?
3. Are there aspects of *Midnight's Children*, which took place in the 30 years from 1947 to 1977, that are still echoed in today's India?
4. Rushdie says that the book that most influenced him was Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. That book – a mixture of bildungsroman, memoir, allegory – tried to define the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century, particularly Germany, using as a central character, the self-afflicted dwarf Oskar – maniac, possessor of supernatural gifts, fallen angel – who writes the book as a 30 year old confined to an insane asylum. How might we see this same structure in Rushdie's book?
5. The book includes a number of factual errors - in Hindu mythology, in describing details of Pakistani army uniforms and personnel, by assuming the early presence of country-wide radio, etc. – as part of the story that the Narrator Saleem tells. Do you think these are product of poor research or were they intentional?