

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

Vintage Living Texts
Salman Rushdie

Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes

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About the Book

In **Vintage Living Texts**, teachers and students will find the essential guide to the works of Salman Rushdie. **Vintage Living Texts** is unique in that it offers an in-depth interview with Salman Rushdie, relating specifically to the texts under discussion.

This guide deals with Rushdie's themes, genre and narrative technique, and a close reading of the texts will provide a rich source of ideas for intelligent and inventive ways of approaching the novels.

Also included in this guide are detailed reading plans for all three novels, questions for essays and discussion, contextual material, suggested texts for complementary and comparative reading, extracts from reviews, a biography, a bibliography and a glossary of literary terms.

Whether a teacher, student or general reader, the **Vintage Living Texts** series gives you the chance to explore new resources and enjoy new pleasures.

About the Authors

Jonathan Noakes has taught English in secondary schools in Britain and Australia for fifteen years. For six years he ran A-level English studies at Eton College where he is a house-master.

Margaret Reynolds is Reader in English at Queen Mary, University of London, and the presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Adventures in Poetry*. Her publications include *The Sappho Companion* and (with Angela Leighton) *Victorian Women Poets*.

Also available in Vintage Living Texts

Martin Amis

Margaret Atwood

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GUIDE TO
CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE

SERIES EDITORS
Jonathan Noakes
and
Margaret Reynolds



VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text – without ever telling you what to think.

Content

All the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the author's word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control.

Every title in the series is author-focused and covers at least three of their novels, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative material.

How to use this series

In the reading activities that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on, whether it's a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In that case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Ask Yourself'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an examination. In that case you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. Whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides are like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate levels. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject criteria for GCE AS and GCE A Level English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can easily be selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways in which the awarding bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and we hope they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references for *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* refer to the Vintage editions.

Salman Rushdie

Introduction

IN THE INTERVIEW included here you will see that Salman Rushdie speaks movingly about the moment, during work on one of the many drafts of *Midnight's Children*, when he realised that he had found his own voice. It was as exciting when he told the story to us, as it must have been when it happened. And little wonder, because that voice – so distinctive, so wise, so shrill, so clever, so funny – is like no voice heard before or, though it has had many imitators, since. Rushdie's work is so particular, in terms of subject matter, themes, setting, storytelling devices and formal literary method, that no one but he can speak in his tongue. Or tongues. Rushdie writes in English, but his mother tongue is Urdu. It's not the most important fact about his work, but it is one of the keys that unlock not just one space, but a whole city of rooms.

In the course of our interview Rushdie said, 'Me – I'm a city boy'. He was making a point about a radical difference in character between his own work and that of the South American writer Gabriel García Márquez (to whom he is often compared). But in fact the statement stands on its own. Salman may be a city boy, but Rushdie is a city writer. Whole tribes live in his work and there they multiply and grow to people worlds.

This is true of the many characters and generations of characters that appear in *Midnight's Children*, in *Shame* and in *The Satanic Verses*. But it is also true of the literary method that Rushdie uses. Rushdie has said that the guiding

principle behind *Midnight's Children* is 'excess', just as his essential view of the character of India is one of excess, or – as he puts it – 'too muchness'. That 'too much' frames all his work. Even a brief glance at one paragraph will throw up allusions to classical myth, to an Indian song tradition, to films, to symbols and signs – and that's before you even begin on the language, which is likely to draw on obscure English idioms, Urdu, Hindi, and any number of European languages.

As with the references, so with his typical writing technique. Rushdie loves every kind of figurative language, so metaphors and similes and comparative conceits jostle with puns and wordplay and game playing of all kinds. You will find that we cite many examples in the reading activities that follow. But you will also find that you will be able to pinpoint many more.

There is a restlessness in this method which exactly matches the range of Rushdie's literary subjects. There are two terms that are often mentioned in relation to Rushdie: 'translation' and 'metaphor', and they each mean the same thing, a 'carrying across', the first from the Latin, the second from the Greek. This goes for Rushdie's subjects, too, where there is always a sense of movement, a 'carrying across' of one idea from place to place. Migration, for instance, is one of his key themes, and that measures 'home' against the place of 'exile' or displacement of whatever kind, including voluntary displacement. Identity, closely bound up with 'migration', is a second key theme, but his way of considering and analysing identity means that Rushdie recognises that that is what you do to 'create' a sense of who you are. His characters are never stable, monumentally integrated and consistent. They change, as the world changes. So 'metamorphosis' of all kinds is another theme, acknowledging that process of change, whether in the world around us or in ourselves. Dualities pattern Rushdie's literary vision: love and death; religious belief and religious

fanaticism; generosity and cruelty; the state and the individual; the imperatives of history and the waywardness of the personal life. It is almost as though he cannot have one idea without immediately considering its opposite. But then the great triumph of his work – both in terms of methods and themes – is that it never becomes monolithic, no matter how large it may be, but succeeds in reconciling, coaxing, juxtaposing differences, teasing out connections.

In the interview Rushdie reveals that the first line of *Midnight's Children* was – at one point – a line that now occurs on page 19, 'Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence'. It is a statement about duality: there is a here, and there is a there. But in *Midnight's Children* the narrative knows that that is what it is. The line goes on, 'but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail'. And this is the 'trick' of Rushdie's fiction – it all seems to be there, even when it is not.

Perhaps this is one reason why Rushdie's blend of fact and fiction works so well, and earns his work so many admirers. At the end of the interview Rushdie says, 'We tell ourselves lies. And it's one of the jobs of the supposed writer of lies to unpack those lies and tell the truth.' Reference to 'real' events in the 'real' world figures in almost all of Rushdie's work, but there is a particular section in *Shame* where the narrator (who is and is not Rushdie himself) breaks off to discuss, in angry terms, a little group of true cases of racial attack and hatred, and of family abuses (pp. 115–18). Many critics were taken aback by this insertion of 'fact' into fiction and could not place the motive, the narrative perspective or the moral content. But the point is that in order to perceive what is real, it is sometimes necessary to resort to the imaginary. By definition, we can only ever experience life through our own senses, through our skin. Perception will always be subjective. While that is so, it is absolutely necessary for each one of us, every day, and pretty much at

every moment, to engage in an act of imaginative construction. Only in that way can we see anything from anyone else's point of view. This is why fiction is so important. It's also why it is very often not fiction, but 'real', in that the efforts of our imagination are the closest we can ever come to an approximation of someone else's truth. There is a certain strand of Rushdie criticism that labels his work 'feminist'. This is not quite right, but there is a grain of truth in it – or two grains. Firstly, he does like women. But secondly, there is a sense in which his work occupies that zone which theoretical criticism describes as 'the other'. This kind of theory recognises that many of our cultural and literary discourses are framed around an assumption that there is a 'centre' which is 'absolute' (and white, male, European, upper class, educated) against which all that is 'other' is defined (black, coloured, female, racially elsewhere, without privilege, uneducated), and which – because it is secondary – must always be subservient. Rushdie's work is a work of '*écriture féminine*' (as opposed to 'feminist') because he champions the second order. Or rather – more than that – he simply, uncomplicatedly, puts it first without a political agenda, even though he knows that there is one – and in that way his work challenges conventional order.

A quotation from Rushdie's essay 'Imaginary Homelands' may help.

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere' . . . human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case

is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death.

Even in this short passage all Rushdie's themes appear. Migration, difference, duality, creation, metaphor, 'too muchness', integration and a 'carrying across'. There is, in the end, as there was in the beginning, a generosity in Rushdie's view that lets in many things, and that never tries to force any pattern. A generosity that lets struggles, problems and differences be as they are. And yet, paradoxically, by letting all those disparate elements in, in all their individuality, his work does also achieve a kind of reconciliation. At the end of the interview Rushdie says that love is, more and more, at the centre of his books. Perhaps it always was.

Interview with Salman Rushdie

London: 8 July 2002

JN: What was the thing that set you out on your novel, *Midnight's Children*? Was it to do with character, was it to do with the initial setting of Kashmir, was it to do with the whole question of Indian independence?

SR: No, it was just about childhood really. Before I even knew what the story of the book was, I had this idea of wanting to write a novel arising out of my childhood in Bombay, but also a novel about childhood. So that was the first impulse. And then I had an earlier aborted novel, about something else entirely, in which there was a minor character – a rather *different* minor character – called Saleem Sinai who was born at the moment of independence, and everything else about him in this other aborted manuscript was completely uninteresting. But for some reason that idea stuck in my head. And at some point I understood that he would be a useful vehicle. And I suppose it's because I was trying to write about my generation, and to have somebody born at the exact moment of midnight when I was born eight weeks earlier, seemed helpful.

So those two little things went together, and then only really in the doing of it did I discover the larger scale of the novel and this idea of its connection to history – that revealed itself to me as I was properly devising and beginning to write the novel. I had this very – perhaps romantic – memory of a very happy childhood. It's rather odd because Saleem doesn't have a very happy

childhood, but I remember growing up in that city, at that time, as a very magical thing, and that was the germ, and linking Saleem's birthday to that, gave me the book.

JN: What was magical about this childhood in Bombay? What were the things that you remember?

SR: Well, the circumstances of Saleem's life are not unlike mine, in that he more or less grows up in my house and in my little neighbourhood. There we were on this tiny little hilltop above the city – this little group of houses – and it was an idyllic world for children, because it was all very safe: you could run around, there was virtually no traffic, the only cars that came up there – because it was a dead end – were owned by people who lived there, or their visitors. So we could all run wild, and we all knew each other in all these different houses and so we had a sort of extended family. It wasn't a family of blood, but it was a family of friendship. So it was a great space to be a child in. But also, of course, looking back at it from an adult perspective, it was a very interestingly mixed-up group, in that we were of every possible denomination and the families came from every possible part of India, and then also there were European and American families, and so we grew up among Hindus, Parsees, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, etc., who were all just our friends – and also Swedes, English people, Americans, Germans, Lebanese, people from all over the world who came there on a more temporary basis. It seemed normal.

JN: At the beginning of *Midnight's Children* there's the story of the sheet – the sheet with a hole in it, and I was very intrigued with the idea of this as a method, the idea of the part as opposed to the whole, and you almost do it in two ways: very philosophically, but also with language

because then you start talking about the 'partitioned' woman, the 'sectioned' woman, the 'collage' . . .

SR: Well, having found the image of the sheet with the hole, it began immediately to feel like a metaphor for the way in which the whole book was written, and it became helpful to me as a way of understanding how to write the book. To fall in love with something seen only in little bits and to make the composite figure in your own imagination, and then fall in love with it, seemed not unlike what I was trying to do. So all those deliberate uses of phrases, such as the ones you mention, were there to steer the reader in that direction.

JN: But you can't ever resist . . . Once you've got hold of a pun, you do tend to play it out and pile up more and more.

SR: The essential philosophy of *Midnight's Children* is excess. Never do anything unless you do it to excess. Because I was really trying to find, not just a language, but a kind of manner that felt right for the subject matter. One of the things I thought about India was that India is not neat and restrained and highly selected and so on. India is crowded and excessive and vulgar and overblown and far too much for anyone to take in at any given time. So you have to have a literature of that kind of excess, of too muchness. That was one of the things I was trying to do. How do you put this huge cornucopia into a book? How do you put this vast crowd into a book? It seemed to me there were two ways. There's the kind of Jane Austen way, which is just to take one tiny strand – one hair from the head, and examine that in beautiful detail, and imply the rest from your examination of that single strand. And there's the other, which is the Dickensian, Rabelaisian way, which is to try and pour it all in. And I guess I went