

Salman Rushdie, Midnight's Children

Monthly discussion group, Book I

## READING

1. As Saleem Sinai the narrator repeatedly tells Padma (and us), “To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world” (p. 121). Thus he overwhelms his audience by proliferating characters. But key figures will keep popping up in his story.

- **As you are reading, can you ascertain how each of the following characters is related to Saleem's life?** (You will find the following helpful link (along with other supplemental material) on the Mission Impossible web site: [https://www.epl.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Midnights\\_Children.pdf](https://www.epl.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Midnights_Children.pdf) )

Padma

Aadam Aziz

Tai

Naseem Ghani, later the Reverend Mother

Alia

Mumtaz, later Amina

Emerald

Mian Abdullah, the Hummingbird

Nadir Khan

General Zulfikar

Ahmed Sinai

William Methwold

Wee Willie Winkie

Vanita

Mary Pereira

Joseph D'Costa

Shiva

2. For Rushdie, swallowing the world means swallowing history. On the Mission Impossible website you will also find this helpful link to an essay on the novel's historical context, plus a timeline of historical events:

[https://www.epl.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Midnights\\_Children-1.pdf](https://www.epl.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Midnights_Children-1.pdf)

**As you are reading, can you identify the relationship between the each of the following historical events and Saleem's life? Are these connections momentous, ironic, comical, and/or absurd?**

- In the 1630s, William Methwold, a shareholder in the British East India Company, a joint-stock company formed to trade in the Indian Ocean, lobbies the crown for the acquisition of Bombay from the Portuguese. (It was eventually ceded to Charles II in 1688 as part of the dowry of the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza).

- In 1917 Mahatma Gandhi begins his campaign of *satyagraha* (a non-violent “holding to truth”) against British rule in India—a campaign that continues until independence. Despite his campaign for non-violence, bloody sectarian violence periodically erupts.
  - For example, on April 13, 1919, in Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, Brigadier General Dyer orders the massacre of hundreds who were protesting peacefully against the limitations of civil liberties and the arrest of pro-independence activists.
  - On August 9, 1945, the USA drops the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki.
  - On August 14, 1947 Pakistan achieves independence from the United Kingdom, and partition from India, whose independence is declared on August 15, 1947—at midnight.
3. The story Saleem tells of his family before his birth includes several moves. You can track them here: <https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/india>.
- From Kashmir, where an ancient boatman ferries Saleem’s grandfather across a paradisaal lake, before “army tanks messed everything up” (p. 5) in the long dispute that resulted in three Indo-Pakistani wars
  - To Amritsar, right over the border from what is now Pakistan, the site of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre
  - To Agra, southeast of the national capital Delhi, site of the Taj Mahal and of revolutionary activities before independence
  - To Bombay (now Mumbai), India’s most populous city and financial center

**If, as Saleem claims, “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (p. 3), what significance do you see in these geographical shifts in the novel?**

## ANALYSIS

4. As Rushdie details how characters in Saleem’s family encounter the events that mark the birth of the nation, what differences do you note between the roles of the male characters (Aadam Aziz, Mian Abdullah, Nadir Khan, Major Zulfikar, Ahmed Sinai, Joseph D’Costa) and the female characters (Naseem, Mumtaz/Amina, Emerald, Vanita, Mary)? Do you note similar differences between Saleem, the storyteller, and Padma, his audience?
5. How do Saleem’s physical descriptions of place and people represent the “Many-headed Monsters” that compose the Indian subcontinent?
- Why is Saleem himself so ugly—with a huge runny nose, a face stained with birthmarks, and a head prematurely bald?
  - In general, why does Rushdie emphasize the grotesque in his representations of human physicality and the sights, sounds, and smells of India?
  - What effects does Rushdie achieve with the style of Saleem’s storytelling: the structure of his sentences and paragraphs (e.g. last paragraph on p. 122), the introduction of words in India’s many languages, the abrupt shifts of chronology, etc.?
6. To keep his sprawling narrative from spiraling out of control, Rushdie employs three useful devices:

- a) The frame, in which the thirty-year-old owner of a pickle factory, tells his life story to his caretaker, who mirrors our role as an impatient and confused audience.
  - How might the frame of storytelling mirror the novel’s subject—the building of a nation?
  - How do you evaluate Saleem’s claim that India was “quite imaginary . . . a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy . . . India, the new myth—a collective fiction . . . a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God” (p. 125)?
  
- b) The insertion of enigmatic, but tantalizing previews of events to come (e.g. last full paragraph on p. 41) and of abbreviated and elliptical summaries of what has already transpired (pp. 118-21). Did the previews provide sufficient suspense to keep you reading? Did the summaries help you digest what you had just read?
  
- c) Key images, objects, and situations that are repeated almost as mnemonic devices (often in the summaries) and that seem to have, at least, the potential for symbolic resonance:
  - the perforated sheet
  - mercurochrome
  - pickles, chutney
  - the silver spittoon
  - the portrait of the young Raleigh sitting at the feet of a sailor pointing out to sea
  - “Mountbatten’s ticktock”

What significances do you find in these odd props and short-cut references?

7. Some of character names and descriptions evoke the mythic substrata of the ancient history and religions of the Indian subcontinent. As the novel unfolds, can you hear resonances to the meanings of key names/descriptions—resonances that enhance its narration of the creation of modern India and Pakistan?
  - Aadam—man of the earth (Arabic)
  - Saleem—peace (Arabic), with a nose comparable to the trunk of Ganesh: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganesh>
  - Sinai—the beautiful or the blessed (Arabic)
  - Padma—lotus (Hindi)
  - Shiva—the destroyer (and the creator): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiva>
  - Mary and Joseph—“parents” of Jesus
  
8. The following questions are for Mission Impossible participants in past challenges who might be interested in exploring how books talk to each other.
  - In Mrs. Dalloway, set on one day in May 1925, Virginia Woolf obliquely comments on the British raj, through the character of Mrs. Dalloway’s past suitor Peter Walsh. It might be interesting to bring Woolf’s perspective on the crumbling empire into dialogue with Rushdie’s representation of the end of British rule.
  - In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel Garcia Márquez pioneered the technique that later came to be called “magical realism” in order to tell his epic story of the Buendía

family that traverses the history of Columbia. In what ways does Rushdie use this technique in Midnight's Children to tell a comparable story?

- In The Cairo Trilogy, Naguib Mahfouz chronicles the struggle of Egypt to free itself from British colonial domination through the story of one patriarchal family. In what ways is Rushdie pursuing a similar project in Midnight's Children? How does Rushdie's vision differ from Mahfouz's?