

Undeterred, Salman Rushdie Discusses His New Memoir, 'Knife' - *The New York Times*

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By Sarah Lyall

Last May, nine months after the knife attack that nearly killed him, Salman Rushdie made a surprise appearance at the 2023 PEN America literary gala. His voice was weak and he was noticeably thinner than usual; one of his eyeglass lenses was blacked out, because his right eye had been blinded in the assault. But anyone wondering whether the author was still his old exuberant self would have been immediately reassured by the way he began his remarks, with a racy impromptu joke.

“I want to remind people in the room who might not remember that ‘Valley of the Dolls’ was published in the same publishing season as Philip Roth’s ‘Portnoy’s Complaint,’” he said, riffing on an earlier speaker’s mention of Jacqueline Susann’s potboiler. “And when Jacqueline Susann was asked what she thought about Philip Roth’s great novel” — with its enthusiastically self-pleasuring main character — “she said, ‘I think he’s very talented but I wouldn’t want to shake his hand.’”

It was classic Rushdie, improvisational literary wit deployed during a solemn occasion, in this case his acceptance of the organization’s Centenary Courage Award. It was also a triumphant signal that his brush with death — more than three decades after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa calling for Rushdie’s murder over the novel “The Satanic Verses” — had dampened neither his spirit nor his determination to live life in the open.

His new book, “Knife,” which will be published April 16, is a harrowing account of the attack and its aftermath, and a reminder of how gravely injured he was. It’s also a deeply moving love story that attributes much of his recovery and good spirits to the tender, brave support of his wife of three years, the poet and novelist Rachel Eliza Griffiths. (They met at an event in 2017 and flirted over drinks at the after-party; he walked smack into a glass door as he attempted to follow her onto the roof deck. The rest is history.)

“I wanted to write a book which was about both love and hatred — one overcoming the other,” Rushdie said in a recent interview. “And so it’s a book about both of us.”

Nearly a year had passed since the PEN speech. The Rushdie sitting in the Manhattan office of his longtime agent, Andrew Wylie, was considerably more robust than the one who had appeared onstage.

He is still dealing with the physical repercussions of the attack, including bouts of fatigue. One side of his mouth pulls a bit when he talks, the result of damage to a nerve in his neck. His left hand has only partially recovered; his right eye is permanently unusable.

But Rushdie’s voice has regained its rich timbre and air of quick, antic amusement. His manner is just as relaxed, and his mind just as supple, as ever. So easily does he allude to and quote from books and popular culture that it can feel as if everything he’s read and seen and heard is at the forefront of his mind, instantly accessible like some sort of personal Google service.

Though Rushdie considered calling his new book “A Knife in the Eye,” a reference to the worst of his injuries, he decided on a single-word title, as sharp and staccato as the object itself. “Knife” can mean many things, he writes. It’s a weapon, of course, and an artistic device in books, movies and paintings. In Rushdie’s book, it’s a metaphor for understanding.

“Language can be that kind of knife, the thing that cuts through to the truth,” Rushdie said. “I wanted to use the power of literature — not just in my writing, but in literature in general, to reply to this attack.”

It came seemingly from nowhere, long after the danger to his life seemed to have receded. In London, where he lived when the fatwa was issued, Rushdie had round-the-clock Special Branch protection mandated by the British government. (I knew Rushdie and his family during this period when I was a London correspondent for The New York Times.) But he jettisoned that protection when he moved to New York more than two decades ago.

“You know, America’s view of security is, if you think you’re in danger, get a gun,” Rushdie said. “Or at least get somebody with a gun. But for me, it was a kind of freedom. At least it allowed me to make my own choices.” For all that time, he said, “everything felt pretty normal. I felt like I was living a fairly conventional writer’s life.”

On Aug. 12, 2022, Rushdie was onstage at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York — ironically, he was speaking about City of Asylum, a program that provides safe haven to writers under threat — when a black-clad man ran full-tilt onto the stage, wielding a knife. (The man was Hadi Matar, who has pleaded not guilty to charges of second-degree assault and second-degree attempted murder and is awaiting trial.)

The blade struck Rushdie 10 times. It severed all the tendons and most of the nerves in his left hand. It penetrated his right eye just short of his brain, destroying the optic nerve. It slashed into his neck, across his upper right thigh and along his hairline, and pierced his abdomen.

Rushdie remembers thinking two things as he saw the assailant hurtling forward, he writes. The first was that death had finally come for him: “So it’s you. Here you are.” The second was disbelief that it was happening so late in the game, after this long uneventful stretch. “Really?” he thought. “Why now, after all these years?”

As the blows rained down, people rushed to Rushdie’s aid, led by the City of Asylum co-founder Henry Reese, 73, who was interviewing the author onstage and who sustained a shallow knife wound and a badly bruised right eye as he held down the assailant.

“If it hadn’t been for Henry and the audience, I wouldn’t be sitting here writing these words,” Rushdie says in the book. “That Chautauqua morning I experienced both the worst and best of human nature, almost simultaneously.”

At first it was unclear whether he would survive.

“The gravity of his wounds was just insane, like something out of a horror film,” said Andrew Wylie, who has represented the author for decades. Rushdie remained in the hospital for nearly two months. Even after returning home, he had vivid, horrific dreams — about the blinding of the Duke of Gloucester in “King Lear,” about the opening sequence of the Luis Buñuel movie “Un Chien Andalou,” in which a cloud drifting across the moon becomes a razor blade slicing an eye. He had medical appointments almost every day, different specialists for each affected body part. “Everyone had to sign off on the various repair jobs,” he said.

Rushdie had been toying with an idea for a novel before the attack. But “when, finally, it felt like the juice was beginning to flow again, I went and opened up

the file that I'd had, and it just seemed ridiculous," he said. "It just became clear to me that until I dealt with this, I wouldn't be able to write anything else."

"Knife" is a visceral, intimate book, in contrast to an earlier memoir, "Joseph Anton," a 2012 book that was written in the third person, so that the central character existed on the same level as the supporting players.

"I wanted it to read like a novel," Rushdie explained of the earlier book. But "Knife" is different. "This is not novelistic. I mean, somebody sticks a knife in you, that's pretty personal. Pretty first person," he said.

The book contains a long passage in which Rushdie imagines interrogating his assailant, but he never mentions him by name. "My Assailant, my would-be Assassin, the Asinine man who made Assumptions about me, and with whom I had a near-lethal Assignment," he writes. "I will refer to him more decorously as 'the A.' What I call him in the privacy of my home is my business."

What he feels now is not anger, exactly.

"Obviously I'm not particularly pleased about him," he said. "And if I gave it some attention, I probably am angry. But where does that get you? Nowhere. And it also becomes a way of being captured by the event, you know, to be possessed by a kind of rage about it."

His therapist has helped, he said, as has a natural steeliness. "Sometimes you don't know how resilient you are until the question is asked, until you're obliged to face very tough things," he said.

Rushdie is close to his two sons, Milan and Zafar. The loving way he talks about Griffiths reflects a late-in-life contentment after a colorful romantic life featuring four earlier wives, including the novelist Marianne Wiggins and the celebrity chef Padma Lakshmi. When his family met Griffiths, he said, "they all kind of said, 'Finally.'"

Rushdie said he wants to be thought of foremost as a novelist. But he has always felt — even before the fatwa — an obligation to be engaged in public matters. For years, he served as president of PEN America, in the forefront of its fights on behalf of free speech.

Presenting Rushdie's award to him last year, PEN America's then-president, the playwright and novelist Ayad Akhtar, said the group was honoring him "because

of what he stood for and continues to stand for, and what this organization is fundamentally all about — freedom.” Akhtar continued: “He has enlarged the world’s imaginative capacities, and at such great cost to himself.”

But Rushdie said that he doesn’t see himself as a symbol of anything.

“I’ve never felt symbolic. I felt — you know, I’m just here.” He laughed. “I’m just Ken.” (This was an allusion to Ryan Gosling’s showstopping song at the Oscars, the night before the interview.) “I’m just me. I’m just somebody who’s trying to be a writer, trying to do his best. And that’s all I’ve ever wanted to be.”

In June, Rushdie will turn 77, the age his father was when he died, a bracing moment in anyone’s life. In his case, it’s magnified by his recent experience.

“I came very close to dying,” he said. “And when you get that close, when you get a really good look at it, it stays with you. It’s much closer to the front of my head than it used to be.”

Yet he’s not afraid. “Did you ever see the musical ‘Spamalot?’” he continued. “There’s a wheelbarrow of plague victims being wheeled across the stage. And when they get to the middle of the stage they all jump off the wheelbarrow and sing this song, ‘He Is Not Dead Yet.’

“Either you succumb to the fear of death, or you don’t,” he said.