



TO UNDERSTAND
JUST ONE LIFE YOU
HAVE TO SWALLOW
THE WORLD



HE HAD DECIDED TO
LIVE FOREVER OR DIE
IN THE ATTEMPT

ENDING AT
EVERY MOMENT
BUT NEVER ENDING
ITS ENDING



ONCE
UPON A
TIME...

A MAN
SHOULD
SUFFER
GREATLY
FOR HIS LORD



THE ONLY
WAY TO GET
RID OF A
TEMPTATION
IS TO YIELD
TO IT

THE LITERATURE BOOK

BIG IDEAS SIMPLY EXPLAINED



FATE
WILL
UNWIND
AS IT
MUST



HUMAN BEINGS
CAN BE AWFUL
CRUEL TO ONE
ANOTHER

EVERY
MAN IS THE
CHILD OF HIS
OWN DEEDS



I AM NO BIRD;
AND NO NET
ENSNARES ME

IF THIS IS THE BEST OF
ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS,
WHAT ARE THE
OTHERS?



DEAD MEN ARE
HEAVIER THAN
BROKEN HEARTS





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humanism During the Renaissance, an intellectual movement springing from a revived interest in classical Greek and Roman thought; today, a largely secular, rationalist system of thought that emphasizes human rather than divine agency.

legend A traditional story, linked to historical events, people, or locations, and operating within the realms of the possible (as opposed to a **myth**, which incorporates supernatural elements), although the exact dates and details may have been lost.

Pg 341

magic realism A **postmodern** style of artistic expression that in literature takes the form of a traditional **realist narrative** into which bizarre or supernatural elements are introduced, forcing the reader to reevaluate the reality of the surrounding **fiction**.

metafiction A type of **postmodern** writing that uses techniques to remind the reader of the artificiality of a fictional work (for example by including the author as a character,


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**TO UNDERSTAND JUST
ONE LIFE
YOU HAVE TO SWALLOW
THE WORLD**

***MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* (1981),
SALMAN RUSHDIE**



IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

Magic realism goes global

BEFORE

1935 *A Universal History of Infamy* by Jorge Luis Borges is published, often considered the first work of magic realism.

1959 Günter Grass writes *The Tin Drum*, founding magic realism in German literature.

1967 *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez takes magic realism to new heights of wonder.

AFTER

1982 Chilean-American author Isabel Allende's first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, becomes a global best seller.

1984 British writer Angela Carter writes the magic realist *Nights at the Circus*.

2002 Haruki Murakami publishes the dreamlike novel *Kafka on the Shore*.

Magic realism is a literary style in which magical or surreal elements appear in an otherwise realistic and traditional narrative structure and setting. Originally used to describe the work of certain German artists in the 1920s, the term was then applied to literature, in particular to the works emanating from Latin America in the mid-20th century. The Cuban Alejo Carpentier and the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges are often considered the precursors of the form, while the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez brought it to its peak in the boom years of the 1960s and '70s. From Latin America, magic realism spread around the world, with a number of American and European writers adopting the style, or elements of it, in their work. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, magic realism merges with postcolonial themes and Indian references to give the novel its unique flavor.

Aspects of magic

Magic realist writers depict bizarre, inexplicable, or overtly supernatural events alongside ordinary events in the real world in such a way that

“

Memory's truth ... selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality.

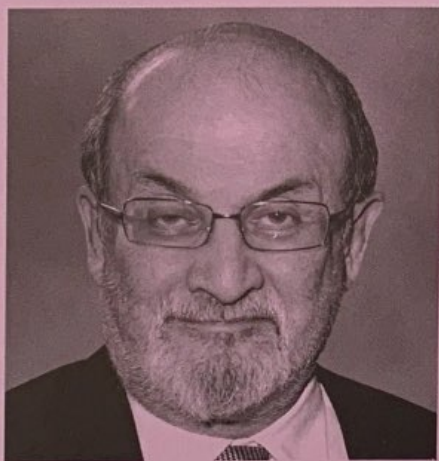
Midnight's Children

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the strange phenomena seem completely normal. Plots are often labyrinthine, and the world may be depicted in exaggerated detail or color, adding to the surreal complexity of the novel's vision. In some respects, magic realism requires the reader to take on a more active role than in other forms of fiction, because the elements of the novel are disconcerting, and may impact the sense of reality experienced by the reader.

Much magic realism also contains a metafictional aspect, which makes the reader question

Salman Rushdie



Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1947 to Muslim parents of Kashmiri descent, who moved to Karachi in Pakistan soon after the partition of India. He was educated in India and Britain, attending Cambridge University, before becoming an advertising copywriter. *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's second novel, brought him worldwide attention, winning the Booker Prize in 1981 and the Best of the Bookers in 2008, and establishing Rushdie as a leading light of the Indian diaspora. The appearance of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) drew

great controversy when Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* (religious ruling) calling for the assassination of Rushdie for blasphemy. Rushdie went into hiding in Britain. In 2000, he settled in New York and has continued to write on matters of religion and society. He has been married four times and was knighted in 2007.

Other key works

1983 *Shame*

1988 *The Satanic Verses*

2005 *Shalimar the Clown*

See also: *The Tin Drum* 270–71 ■ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* 280–85 ■ *A Suitable Boy* 314–17 ■ *The House of the Spirits* 334 ■ *Love in the Time of Cholera* 335

Magic realism goes global

In the first half of the 20th century, Latin American writers such as Jorge Luis Borges lead **the construction of a new style** of literature that merges the realistic with the fantastical.

From the mid-20th century, the **style is named magic realism** and gains popularity across the globe, from Colombia to Germany to Japan.

Postcolonial, hybrid layers deepen the scope of the form, as **ever more complex and fantastical** examples are offered by late 20th-century figures such as Salman Rushdie.

the way in which they read the work. Metafiction often includes a self-referential narrator, and stories within stories: both devices are present in *Midnight's Children*. These manipulations of reality—magic tricks within the narrative—make demands on the reader and ensure their role is an active one.

The birth of a nation

Politically, magic realist texts often embody an implicit critical position against the dominant ruling elite, and as such they are generally subversive in their stance. In *Midnight's Children*, the fusion of Rushdie's magic realism with postcolonial issues weaves new and vibrant threads into an already complex genre.

Rushdie sets the work partly in the vast, sprawling city of Bombay (now Mumbai)—once a jewel in Britain's colonial crown and now at a crucial moment of history. Events

take place as monumental political shifts are happening with the removal of British authority over India after some 200 years.

At the beginning of the novel, the main protagonist Saleem Sinai is approaching his 31st birthday and is convinced that he is dying. The book is ostensibly the story of Saleem's life—as well as the lives of his parents and grandparents—narrated by Saleem himself to his companion, Padma; but it is also the story of the creation of modern

India. In the opening lines of the book Saleem recounts: "I was born in the city of Bombay ... on August 15th, 1947. ... On the stroke of midnight..." As Saleem says, "at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world." He then goes on to explain, in broad hints that cannot yet be fully understood by the reader, the premise of the book: "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country." »



Mumbai is a densely populated city, teeming with all forms of human life. Rushdie uses rich, vivid language to evoke its myriad elements—squalor, beauty, pathos, despair, and humor.



India's Independence Day on August 15, 1947, was an occasion for celebration, yet chaos soon struck, as Muslims and Hindus migrated between the new nations of India and Pakistan.

As the narrative unfolds, it soon becomes clear that every political event appears to be driven by—or be driving—one or more events in the life of Saleem.

Saleem's arrival at the exact moment of India's independence is wildly celebrated by the Indian media. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, sends him a letter congratulating him on the "happy accident" of his moment of birth, and identifies him with the nation—a role that Saleem adopts, seeing himself as an important historical figure. His life is seen as closely tied to the fate of the newly born India; the bloodshed that ensues directly after partition and the fierce conflicts that occur over the following years are echoed by the concurrent violence within his own family. Saleem's narration of his family's story, and of the

historical events of India and Pakistan, represents his attempt to understand all the elements that make him who he is.

The many and the one

Saleem is marked by his large, cucumber-like, and constantly running nose. At the age of 10, he discovers that he has telepathic powers (a not uncommon trait of magic realist protagonists).

“

... perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque.

Midnight's Children

”

This gift allows him to discover that there were a total of 1,001 “Midnight Children,” who were born in the hour after midnight on India's Independence Day. They all have marvelous superpowers, with those who were born closest to the actual second of partition having the greatest powers. By the time Saleem discovers their existence, 420 of the children have already died, and only 581 remain.

Saleem befriends another of the children, Parvati, who can perform magic; another of their number, Shiva, who is at once Saleem's counterpart and nemesis, has incredibly strong knees and a gift for warfare. Parvati and Shiva are named after Hindu gods, thereby illustrating the religious underpinning of India as a cultural entity and adding a further layer of allegory to the novel.

Using his telepathic powers to broadcast their thoughts, Saleem arranges a nightly “conference” of the Midnight Children. There are the same number of children—581—as there are members in the lower house of the Indian parliament, adding political symbolism to their meetings. Their conference is a model of successful pluralism, reflecting the way the new Indian government sought to collate the disparate elements of its vast country. Rushdie implies that troubles arise when such multiplicity becomes suppressed.

The rush of history

As the tale of *Midnight's Children* unfolds, Rushdie shifts his story across the subcontinent, employing the narrative of his characters' tales to tell the history of India, and so too of Pakistan and Kashmir.

In 1962, border tensions between China and India erupted into war; it was short-lived, but

India was defeated and in the novel, public morale "drains away." In Saleem's life, as conflict with China intensifies, his nose gets ever more stuffed until, on the day the Chinese army halts its advance, he has an operation to drain his sinuses. Once again, the events in Saleem's life seem to be entwined with the wider events of history.

However, with his nose finally clear, Saleem finds that he has lost his mind-reading powers. In compensation, for the first time in his life he has a sense of smell. And this itself is another kind of superpower, since he can detect not only smells but also emotions and lies—"the heady but quick-fading perfume of new love, and also the deeper, longer-lasting pungency of hate."

Memory, truth, destiny

The novel is a kaleidoscope of Saleem's memories, and yet the distinction between true and untrue is never clear, even making allowances for the outright magical elements that form part of the book's tapestry. Some characters are overt liars, while in many cases Saleem admits that he has embroidered certain things in order to convey an emotional truth rather than a strictly factual one.

Early on in the narrative, Saleem confesses that he was switched at birth with another baby who was born at the same time. This baby was Shiva, while Saleem's real parents, far from being the relatively rich Muslims who brought him up, are a colonial Englishman, William Methwold,

Saleem's friends Shiva and Parvati are named respectively after the great Hindu god of destruction and the goddess of love, and these attributes are reflected in their roles in the book.

“

Who what am I?
My answer: I am the sum
total of everything that
went before me, of all I
have been seen done, of
everything done-to-me.

Midnight's Children

”

and a poor Hindu woman who died in childbirth. So, paradoxically, the "destiny" he is fulfilling was that of another child; yet because he was brought up as Saleem Sinai, he considers that that is who he is: it is his truth.

Even historical facts cannot be regarded as unassailable. Saleem notes that he recorded the wrong date for the death of Mahatma Gandhi, and yet he is content to let the error stand: "in my India,

Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time." In this novel, the truth is malleable, subjective, and far from absolute.

The end of the book returns to the present day, as Saleem finishes telling his story to Padma. Despite his own prophecy that his body will crack apart, he agrees to marry her on his 31st birthday—which is also Independence Day. To the last, his history is intermingled with India's.

Magical mystery tour

For the reader, *Midnight's Children* is a complex and mesmerizing journey, a mystery tour through the back streets to the heart of modern India. Time speeds up and slows down or is nonlinear. Fate is frequently invoked, futures are foretold, prophecies are listened to and expected to come true. The bizarre and the magical are commonplace and real. Weaving together all these elements of magic realism, Rushdie creates a dense and vibrant tapestry full of violence, politics, and wonder to tell the tale of the early years of independent India. ■

