



Midnight's children

By Salman Rushdie

First published in 1981

Genre & subject

India - Social life and customs

Classical fiction

Synopsis

Born at the stroke of midnight at the exact moment of India's independence, Saleem Sinai is a special child. However, this coincidence of birth has consequences he is not prepared for: telepathic powers connect him with one thousand other 'midnight's children' all of whom are endowed with unusual gifts.

Author biography

The only son of Anis Ahmed Rushdie, a University of Cambridge-educated lawyer turned businessman, and Negin Bhatt, a teacher; Rushdie was born in Bombay, India, into a Muslim family of Kashmiri descent. Rushdie wrote in his 2012 memoir that his father adopted the name Rushdie in honour of Averroes (Ibn Rushd).

He was educated at Cathedral and John Connon School in Mumbai, Rugby School, and King's College, University of Cambridge, where he studied history.

Discussion starters

- *Midnight's Children* is clearly a work of fiction; yet, like many modern novels, it is presented as an autobiography. How can we tell it isn't? What literary devices are employed to make its fictional status clear? And, bearing in mind the background of very real historical events, can "truth" and "fiction" always be told apart?
- To what extent has the legacy of the British Empire, as presented in this novel, contributed to the turbulent character of Indian life?
- Saleem sees himself and his family as a microcosm of what is happening to India. His own life seems so bound up with the fate of the country that he seems to have no existence as an individual; yet, he is a distinct person. How would you characterise Saleem as a human being, set apart from the novel's grand scheme? Does he have a personality?
- "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world.... do you wonder, then, that I was a heavy child?" Is it possible, within the limits of a novel, to "understand" a life?
- At the very heart of *Midnight's Children* is an act of deception: Mary Pereira switches the birth-tags of the infants Saleem and Shiva. The ancestors of whom Saleem tells us at length are not his biological relations; and yet he continues to speak of them as his forebears. What effect does this have on you, the reader? How easy is it to absorb such a paradox?
- "There is no escape from form" says Saleem; and later, he speaks of his own "overpowering desire for form". Set against this is the chaos of Indian life which is described in such detail throughout the book. How is this coherence achieved? What role does mythology play in giving form to events in the novel?

- "There is no magic on earth strong enough to wipe out the legacies of one's parents". Saleem is speaking here of an injury; but has he inherited anything more positive? Is there anything inherited which aids rather than hinders him?
- Saleem's father says of Wee Willie Winkie, "That's a cheeky fellow; he goes too far." The Englishman Methwold disagrees: "The tradition of the fool, you know. Licensed to provoke and tease." The novel itself provokes and teases the reader a good deal. Did you feel yourself "provoked"? Does the above exchange shed any light on Rushdie's own plight since *The Satanic Verses*?
- How much affection is there between fathers and sons in *Midnight's Children*? Why is Saleem so drawn to father-figures? What does he gain from his many adopted fathers?
- "What is so precious to need all this writing-shiting?" asks Padma (page 24). What is the value of it for Saleem?
- "...is not Mother India, Bharat-Mata, commonly thought of as female?" asks Saleem; "And, as you know, there's no escape from her". Elsewhere he speaks of "...the long series of women who have bewitched and finally undone me good and proper". To what extent are women "held for blame" for Saleem's misfortunes?
- Saleem often appears to be an unreliable narrator, mixing up dates and hazarding details of events he never witnessed. He also draws attention to his own telling of the story: "Like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings..." How much faith do you put in his version of events?
- With the birth of Saleem's giant-eared son, history seems about to repeat itself; but Saleem senses that this time round, things will be different. How have circumstances changed?
- *Midnight's children* is a novel about India, and attempts to map the modern Indian mind, with all its contradictions. In your discussions, how much difficulty have you had in addressing the novel from a Western perspective? Is there an 'otherness' which makes it hard to assimilate, or are the novel's concerns universal and easily understood?

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