

Salman Rushdie on Censorship, the Da Vinci Code and Islam

"These are times in which reality is no longer realistic," author Salman Rushdie said during a recent lecture at Roger Williams University in Bristol. Rushdie, whose allegorical and fantastical fiction often takes on controversial political, social, and religious issues, decried the fundamentalism reigning in much of the Muslim world, as well as the invasions posed closer to home by the Patriot Act.

He suggested that public and private life can no longer be separated in the way they once were. The individual is always subject to decisions made "in rooms we don't know about" by the powerful — politicians, currency speculators, and religious leaders.

The sports arena setting for Rushdie's April 6 lecture was uninspiring. The room was dark and the author, wearing a dark jacket and tie, spoke from the lighted stage, a scoreboard above him. Following his hour-long talk, he entertained questions as a single glaring light shone on the audience, most of which was seated on hundreds of folding chairs. During this period, a number of restless undergraduates shuffled out.

Rushdie, who paid homage to the recently deceased Saul Bellow at the outset and closing of his remarks, moved freely in his lecture from the odd complacency of the American public in the wake of the 2000 election (which he described as stolen), to the fate of literature in many Muslim countries: "One of the tragedies of the Islamic world is that so many of its greatest writers have been forced into exile."

Rushdie's thoughts on censorship and the need for writers (and people in general) to continually retell, reinterpret, and reconfigure the meta-narratives of family, nation, and religion are particularly compelling given his own experience. In 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, or death sentence, in response to Rushdie's fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*. As a consequence, Rushdie was in hiding for much of the '90s.

I remember this episode well. I was working in a Los Angeles bookstore and there was a suggestion by the chain's headquarters, in light of the edict, that we continue to sell the book, but not display it prominently. We made jokes about this policy, yet at the same time, if writing a dense 550-page work of the imagination could result in a death decree, might not some local fanatic decide to punish those selling the tome? Nothing happened (to us at least), and as result of the *fatwa*, the book, which sold only moderately well after having been released months earlier (Danielle Steele and Robert Ludlum were our big movers), became a hot item and quickly sold out. Customers with no knowledge of Islam, more comfortable with *People* than literary fiction, clamored for the book, badgering staff such that we had to establish waiting lists. Naturally, by the time *The Satanic Verses* was back in stock, the furor had quieted, for our clientele anyway, and it was on to the next big thing.

The unintended consequence of the *fatwa* was making Rushdie a heroic figure; instead of a pariah, he became to many a symbol of artistic freedom. In the West, the problem for literature seems to be less censorship, than its reduction to an afterthought in a frenzied entertainment marketplace where the blockbuster reigns supreme. "The worst novel of the last 100 years," said

Rushdie of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, further lamenting that the Harry Potter series seems to account for the other half of currently sold books. Moreover, Rushdie noted that when his first book came out in 1975, there were two-dozen independent publishers in the UK and the US; three or four multinational conglomerates now control almost everything.

Yet Rushdie expresses optimism about the novel, pronouncing it, "a culturally and economically sustainable form." He suggests that the "death" of the novel, which has been anticipated for many years, has yet to come and probably never will. Rushdie argues that more books are read than ever, and that even if the television show *Friends* is more popular than a good novel, so what? Finally, Rushdie notes that the novel's low-tech form, requiring only a "person with a pencil," remains a far better vehicle for individual artistic expression than a medium such as film, in which production costs are so high that the creator is beholden to financiers.

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