

Joseph Anton: A Memoir

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NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY

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On February 14, 1989, Valentine's Day, Salman Rushdie was telephoned by a BBC journalist and told that he had been "sentenced to death" by the Ayatollah Khomeini. For the first time he heard the word fatwa. His crime? To have written a novel called *The Satanic Verses*, which was accused of being "against Islam, the Prophet and the Quran."

So begins the extraordinary story of how a writer was forced underground, moving from house to house, with the constant presence of an armed police protection team. He was asked to choose an alias that the police could call him by. He thought of writers he loved and combinations of their names; then it came to him: Conrad and Chekhov—Joseph Anton.

How do a writer and his family live with the threat of murder for more than nine years? How does he go on working? How does he fall in and out of love? How does despair shape his thoughts and actions, how and why does he stumble, how does he learn to fight back? In this remarkable memoir Rushdie tells that story for the first time; the story of one of the crucial battles, in our time, for freedom of speech. He talks about the sometimes grim, sometimes comic realities of living with armed policemen, and of the close bonds he formed with his protectors; of his struggle for support and understanding from governments, intelligence chiefs, publishers, journalists, and fellow writers; and of how he regained his freedom.

It is a book of exceptional frankness and honesty, compelling, provocative, moving, and of vital importance. Because what happened to Salman Rushdie was the first act of a drama that is still unfolding somewhere in the world every day.

Praise for *Joseph Anton*

"A harrowing, deeply felt and revealing document: an autobiographical mirror of the big, philosophical preoccupations that have animated Mr. Rushdie's work throughout his career."—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"A splendid book, the finest . . . memoir to cross my desk in many a year."—Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*

"Thoughtful and astute . . . an important book."—*USA Today*

"Compelling, affecting . . . demonstrates Mr. Rushdie's ability as a stylist and storyteller. . . . [He] reacted with great bravery and even heroism."—*The Wall Street Journal*

"Gripping, moving and entertaining . . . nothing like it has ever been written."—*The Independent (UK)*

"A thriller, an epic, a political essay, a love story, an ode to liberty."-Le Point (France)

"Action-packed . . . in a literary class by itself . . . Like Isherwood, Rushdie's eye is a camera lens -firmly placed in one perspective and never out of focus."-Los Angeles Review of Books

"Unflinchingly honest . . . an engrossing, exciting, revealing and often shocking book."-de Volkskrant (The Netherlands)

"One of the best memoirs you may ever read."-DNA (India)

"Extraordinary . . . Joseph Anton beautifully modulates between . . . moments of accidental hilarity, and the higher purpose Rushdie saw in opposing-at all costs-any curtailment on a writer's freedom."-The Boston Globe

Salman Rushdie is the author of eleven novels-Grimus, Midnight's Children (for which he won the Booker Prize and the Best of the Booker), Shame, The Satanic Verses, Haroun and the Sea of Stories, The Moor's Last Sigh, The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Fury, Shalimar the Clown, The Enchantress of Florence, and Luka and the Fire of Life-and one collection of short stories: East, West. He has also published three works of nonfiction: The Jaguar Smile, Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991, and Step Across This Line, and coedited two anthologies, Mirrorwork and Best American Short Stories 2008. He is a former president of American PEN.Prologue

The First Blackbird

AFTERWARDS, WHEN THE WORLD WAS EXPLODING AROUND HIM AND THE lethal blackbirds were massing on the climbing frame in the school playground, he felt annoyed with himself for forgetting the name of the BBC reporter, a woman, who had told him that his old life was over and a new, darker existence was about to begin. She had called him at home on his private line without explaining how she got the number. "How does it feel," she asked him, "to know that you have just been sentenced to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini?" It was a sunny Tuesday in London but the question shut out the light. This is what he said, without really knowing what he was saying: "It doesn't feel good." This is what he thought: I'm a dead man. He wondered how many days he had left to live and thought the answer was probably a single-digit number. He put down the telephone and ran down the stairs from his workroom at the top of the narrow Islington row house where he lived. The living room windows had wooden shutters and, absurdly, he closed and barred them. Then he locked the front door.

It was Valentine's Day but he hadn't been getting on with his wife, the American novelist Marianne Wiggins. Six days earlier she had told him she was unhappy in the marriage, that she "didn't feel good around him anymore," even though they had been married for little more than a year, and he, too, already knew it had been a mistake. Now she was staring at him as he moved nervously around the house, drawing curtains, checking window bolts, his body galvanized by the news as if an electric current were passing through it, and he had to explain to her what was happening. She reacted well, beginning to discuss what they

should do next. She used the word "we." That was courageous.

A car arrived at the house, sent by CBS television. He had an appointment at the American network's studios in Bowater House, Knightsbridge, to appear live, by satellite link, on its morning show. "I should go," he said. "It's live television. I can't just not show up." Later that morning the memorial service for his friend Bruce Chatwin was to be held at the Orthodox church on Moscow Road in Bayswater. Less than two years earlier he had celebrated his fortieth birthday at Homer End, Bruce's house in Oxfordshire. Now Bruce was dead of AIDS, and death had arrived at his own door as well.

"What about the memorial," his wife asked. He didn't have an answer for her. He unlocked the front door, went outside, got into the car and was driven away, and although he did not know it then, so that the moment of leaving his home did not feel unusually freighted with meaning, he would not go back to that house, his home for five years, until three years later, by which time it was no longer his.

The children in the classroom in Bodega Bay, California, sing a sad nonsense song. She combed her hair but once a year, ristle-te, ristle-te, mo, mo, mo. Outside the school a cold wind is blowing. A single blackbird flies down from the sky and settles on the climbing frame in the playground. The children's song is a roundelay. It begins but it doesn't end. It just goes round and round. With every stroke she shed a tear, ristle-te, ristle-te, hey-bombosity, knickety-knackety, retroquo-quality, willoby-wallaby, mo, mo, mo. There are four blackbirds on the climbing frame, and then a fifth arrives. Inside the school the children are singing. Now there are hundreds of blackbirds on the climbing frame and thousands more birds fill the sky, like a plague of Egypt. A song has begun, to which there is no end.

When the first blackbird comes down to roost on the climbing frame it seems individual, particular, specific. It is not necessary to deduce a general theory, a wider scheme of things, from its presence. Later, after the plague begins, it's easy for people to see the first blackbird as a harbinger. But when it lands on the climbing frame it's just one bird.

In the years to come he will dream about this scene, understanding that his story is a sort of prologue: the tale of the moment when the first blackbird lands. When it begins it's just about him; it's individual, particular, specific. Nobody feels inclined to draw any conclusions from it. It will be a dozen years and more before the story grows until it fills the sky, like the Archangel Gabriel standing upon the horizon, like a pair of planes flying into tall buildings, like the plague of murderous birds in Alfred Hitchcock's great film.

At the CBS offices he was the big news story of the day. People in the newsroom and on various monitors were already using the word that would soon be hung around his neck like a millstone. They used the word as if it were a synonym for "death sentence" and he wanted to argue, pedantically, that that was not what the word meant. But from this day forward it would mean that for most people in the world. And for him.

Fatwa.

"I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of the 'Satanic Verses' book, which is against Islam, the Prophet and the Qur'an, and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death. I ask all the Muslims to execute them wherever they find them." Somebody gave him a printout of the text as he was escorted toward the studio for his interview. Again, his old self wanted to argue, this time with the word "sentence." This was not a sentence handed down by any court he recognized, or which had any jurisdiction over him. It was the edict of a cruel and dying old man. But he also knew that his old self's habits were of no use anymore. He was a new self now. He was the person in the eye of the storm, no longer the Salman his friends knew but the Rushdie who was the author of *Satanic Verses*, a title subtly distorted by the omission of the initial *The*. *The Satanic Verses* was a novel. *Satanic Verses* were verses that were satanic, and he was their satanic author, "Satan Rushdy," the horned creature on the placards carried by demonstrators down the streets of a faraway city, the hanged man with protruding red tongue in the crude cartoons they bore. Hang Satan Rushdy. How easy it was to erase a man's past and to construct a new version of him, an overwhelming version, against which it seemed impossible to fight.

King Charles I had denied the legitimacy of the sentence handed down against him. That hadn't stopped Oliver Cromwell from having him beheaded.

He was no king. He was the author of a book.

He looked at the journalists looking at him and he wondered if this was how people looked at men being taken to the gallows or the electric chair or the guillotine. One foreign correspondent came up to be friendly. He asked this man what he should think about what Khomeini had said. How seriously should he take it? Was it just a rhetorical flourish or something genuinely dangerous?

"Oh, don't worry too much," the journalist said. "Khomeini sentences the president of the United States to death every Friday afternoon."

"On air, when he was asked how he responded to the threat, he said, 'I wish I'd written a more critical book.' He was proud, then and always, that he had said this. It was the truth. He did not feel his book was especially critical of Islam, but, as he said on American television that morning, a religion whose leaders behaved in this way could probably do with a little criticism.

When the interview was over they told him his wife had called. He phoned the house. "Don't come back here," she said. "There are two hundred journalists on the sidewalk waiting for you."

"I'll go to the agency," he said. "Pack a bag and meet me there."

His literary agency, Wylie, Aitken & Stone, had its offices in a white-stuccoed house on Fernshaw Road in Chelsea. There were no journalists camped outside—evidently the

world's press hadn't thought he was likely to visit his agent on such a day-and when he walked in every phone in the building was ringing and every call was about him. Gillon Aitken, his British agent, gave him an astonished look. He was on the phone with the British-Indian member of Parliament for Leicester East, Keith Vaz. He covered the mouthpiece and whispered, "Do you want to talk to this fellow?"

"Vaz said, in that phone conversation, that what had happened was "appalling, absolutely appalling," and promised his "full support." A few weeks later he was one of the main speakers at a demonstration against The Satanic Verses attended by over three thousand Muslims, and described that event as "one of the great days in the history of Islam and Great Britain."

Other Books

Salman Rushdie in Context, Salman Rushdie in Context discusses Rushdie's life and work in the context of the multiple geographies he has inhabited and the wider socio-cultural contexts in which his writing is emerging, published and read. This book reveals the evolving political trajectory around transnationalism, multiculturalism and its discontents, so prominently engaged with by Salman Rushdie in relation to South Asia, its diasporas, Britain, and the USA in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Focused on the aesthetic, biographical, cultural, creative, historical and literary contexts of his works, the book reveals his deep engagement with processes of decolonization, emergent nationalisms in South Asia, Europe and the USA, and diasporic identity constructions and how they have been affected by globalisation. The book traces how, through his fiction and non-fiction, Rushdie has profoundly shaped the discussion of important questions of global citizenship and migration that continue to resonate today.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . To begin with, the narrator, the author, the mirror, Joseph Anton -the memoir , and Joseph Anton -the subject2 are all deflections of one and the same autobiographical persona who bears the name Salman Rushdie. And as if complicating this ..."