

IN PRINT

Salman Rushdie has put together a number of short stories under the title EAST, WEST. This was published in 1994 by Jonathan Cape. Speaking of the title, Rushdie says "sometimes I feel like a hiatus between two cultures... a character pulled in both directions, refusing to make a choice between the two... [to be] a hinge between these cultures, or one of the hinges, has always been a gift for me as a writer, I think, to have the possibility of two very different worlds to inhabit and dream about and write from... A journalist asked me whether the title might not also have had a slash instead of a comma, but ... I didn't really feel like a slash, I felt more like a comma".

We publish below some extracts from an interview with Rushdie by Robert Dessaix which appeared in 24 HOURS, a journal published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in December 1994.

RD: 'Hinge' is a very good word. But how do you feel about the categorisation of writers as 'post-colonial' or 'non-post-colonial'? Aren't you rather sceptical about the usefulness of that kind of term?

RUSHDIE: Yes, I've become more distrustful of the application of political theory to literature as I've gone on writing. Which is not to say I'm not interested in politics-anyone who reads my writing will see that it has political content and always has had. I just don't think it's really the most interesting way of looking at writing...

Writers of my generation, coming from my kind of background, clearly do inhabit a post-colonial world, but ... I don't spend my life thinking about being the child of colonised peoples very much. I just write out of the situation I find myself in... It's fair enough to say it's post-colonial culture that I and writers like me inhabit-indeed, Australian writers would no doubt say they inhabit it as well. But it's only the most obvious way of looking at what's going on in the writing.

RD: Now, in reading these stories, it seemed to me that you had as your thematic core two main concerns: firstly, the manipulation of desire-particularly the desire for happiness-and, secondly, the necessity for complicity [in achieving our desires]. People need to force complicity, or at least invite complicity, in their desires from others, don't they?

RUSHDIE: That's very well said. [And] I think in fact 'desire' is more accurate than 'love', although I have thought about them as various kinds of rather displaced love stories or anti-love stories. In the first story, *Good Advice*, for example, there's a woman resisting an arranged marriage and, as it turns out, the place she wants to be and the affections she has are not what she's supposed to have. She wants to stay in the East, not be sent to the West, as has been arranged for her. And there are other stories about required and unrequired loves or passions, too. But yes, the collection is about desire: for love, but also for home, for power...

RD: And status...

RUSHDIE: Yes, status, and in the case of the story about Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain, there's the desire of both characters for a kind of transcendence, for a transcendence that comes from going beyond the edge of the world, the edge of things, and entering history.

RD: A story that is going to become almost a classic, I should think, is *At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers*, about the magic slippers which grant our every desire. In this story the greedy materialists of the modern world try to manipulate us through telling us what we should desire. What is the way out? Is it not to bid at the auction?

RUSHDIE: I don't know. Each individual reader will have to decide what the way out is. This story is a particular favourite of mine, partly because I've always been very engaged with *The Wizard Of Oz* movie. So in *At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers* you could say that the world of *The Wizard of Oz* is projected into the world of *Blade Runner* and the two come together.

What's interesting for me about any story set in the future, as *The Ruby Slippers* is, is that it should really be a story about the present. One of the reasons I wrote the story in the present tense, even though it's about an unpleasant, futuristic dystopia, is that it's also about a version of the world we live in now. It's about a world in which everything is for sale: the Taj Mahal, the souls of the dead, the Sphinx, the Alps, the Statue of Liberty-everything is for sale.

It's also about a world in which everyone is sick. The ruby slippers themselves become a totem in this world. And one of the great sicknesses of this world is homesickness, a sickness which pervades more than one of the stories in this collection. The ruby slippers give you the power to go home. You click your heels together and you say: 'There's no place like home'. But the story asks: 'What is that any more-home? And how do you get there?' So this story is very much at the centre of the concerns of the collection as a whole: the idea of home, the loss of it, the search for it, the need for it and the need to escape from it. If you wanted to say the collection was about one thing, it would be about the idea of home. I also hope it's a funny story-it made me laugh when I was writing it, anyway!

RD: Well, the tone and the style switch so quickly in these stories-there's such a palette of styles and tones and colours that it becomes quite difficult to adjust yourself to each story as you come to it.

RUSHDIE: It's quite varied, yes. That's deliberate. [I wanted] to put together a very large number of different ways of writing and ways of thinking about writing to see what kind of sparks they made as they rubbed off against each other.

RD: The story I had trouble understanding is Chekov and Zulu, about the old school friends now working in Indian security in London.

RUSHDIE: Well, expatriate communities have always interested me, people who are out of place, in this case affluent Indians in the West in diplomatic circles-something I know a little bit about. The starting point for this story was two Indian diplomats in London who had been schoolboy friends and remained friends, so I partly wanted to write about friendship, a kind of displaced friendship, displaced from India to England.

Overlaid on that was the way Western junk culture permeates Indian life, certainly Indian middle-class life, although by no means only middle-class life. These two characters were childhood addicts of Western pop culture, notably the *Star Trek* television series, and have given themselves nicknames from the series which have stuck with them all their lives. [That's what happens] particularly at very elite boarding schools for the children of the rich and powerful, like the Doon School at a hill station near Delhi these two characters are supposed to have gone to-and, indeed, where Rajiv Gandhi went. One Indian politician is still known in India simply as Dumpy because that's what he was called at school...

[This kind of] East-West permeation is very profound and not just the effect of colonialism now, but of the global village.

And there was a final layer: power structures. The story is bracketed at the beginning and end by assassinations; it begins at the moment of Mrs Gandhi's assassination and ends at the moment of her son Rajiv's. The diplomats [belong to] a layer in the power structure which is of people who do not create policy or rule the world but who enable [others to do it]. Captain Kirk couldn't have done a damn thing, as one of the characters says proudly, if it hadn't been for his crew. They see themselves as servants, but extremely important servants. So the story is about what happens to the servants when the top-the head-is cut off.

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RD: Well, to take another example: in the apparently very simple story *The Free Radio* you have a rickshaw driver who has his happiness manipulated-he's been promised a free radio in return for a vasectomy. The radio never materialises, but he drives around pretending he's holding it up against his ear. And then he writes letters from Bombay about how he's becoming a film star. Well, is he mad? Is the narrator-the crabby old man who is reporting all this from a tree in the village square-is he mad? What's happening?

RUSHDIE: The rickshaw driver is trying to combat the wretchedness of his life with imagination. When he holds an imaginary radio to his ear and bicycles around the town pretending to be the broadcaster, it's clear that there's no radio there; this is his fantasy, but it's a fiercely held fantasy ... that is simultaneously heroic and tragic. It's an attempt on the one hand, by a man who has nothing, to imagine something into being, and on the other hand, of course, it's pathetic

because the radio isn't there. I think one can admire the ferocity and passion of the imagination while at the same time being forced to accept the impoverished reality.

I also wanted to do something else in that story... it's hard to write sweet characters in fiction, because they can easily come across as soppy, sickly and sentimentalised ... but I wanted to have somebody who was really a touchingly sweet fellow (the young rickshaw driver) and then to write about him through the eyes of an incredibly nasty fellow, this old retired school-teacher, so that you'd see sweetness through sourness, if you like.

If it worked it would give the story a certain kind of poignancy because the sweet and the sour are in fact connected to each other: however nasty the old man is, he remains interested in the fate of the young man, and however innocent the young man... he can, in the end, see through the old man's nastiness and remain connected to him, still writing him letters when he leaves town. The story's feeling comes from the symbiosis.

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RD: And will the new novel about the Moors you're working on take the more historical approach to fiction?

RUSHDIE: It's not actually an historical book at all. It does make some reference to the Moorish period in Spain, but only as something going on in the heads of the characters. In fact, the novel is entirely contemporary, mostly set in India. It's a book I've come to think of as completing a literary project, begun in *Midnight's Children*, and of which I suspect *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* form a part. It's a project not in terms of a continuous story but in terms of an exploration of the world from which I came and the worlds I moved to and between.

I have this feeling, you see, that the India that came into being at Independence in 1947-the vision of India that came into being then, propounded by Gandhi and Nehru and the other leaders of the nationalist movement-that secularist, liberal India is now coming to an end. It is under a kind of double pressure: firstly, from immensely increasing religious sectarianism and, secondly, from the enormous force of the free market economy. On the one hand you have the growth of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religious extremism to quite an alarming degree and on the other a colossal economic and cultural invasion from outside.

So it seems to me that the India that I began to write about in *Midnight's Children* is undergoing a sea change; it's the end of one phase of history. This new book is an attempt to write about that sense of an ending in the way that *Midnight's Children* was an attempt to write about a sense of a beginning.

RD: On the subject of India, the writer Bharati Mukherjee, I seem to remember, said that one of your great strengths is that although you have a Muslim background and that Muslim sense of duality, of good and evil-which can perhaps be extended to East and West, you also have the wonderfully Hindu sense of chaotic balance and hybridity.

RUSHDIE: I think that's fair enough. I remember one critic of *Midnight's Children* compared its architecture to the spire of a Hindu temple on which life teems, with figures crawling all over it. I think it's inevitable that anybody formed by the experience of India will be hybrid in that way. All these cultures will rattle around inside you-Hindu, Parsi, Sikh, Western, Muslim- all these cultures become a kind of rag-bag or rattle-bag you carry around with yourself out of which you make the world.

Certainly one of the things that showed me how to be a writer was [India's] superabundance-the multitudes, the cornucopia, the crowds, extreme noise, extreme heat, extremes of all things, excess. Yet I started out as a writer by reading books about India which weren't like that at all-neat books, rather shapely, classic books. And I thought: well, that's not what it's like, it's this huge, messy, dirty, raucous, riotous crowd. So I set about trying to find a way of writing like that-writing like a crowd, writing a crowd of stories. That idea was my guiding light and in a way it's remained so. ■

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