

BOOK REVIEWS

Joseph Anton: A Memoir. By Salman Rushdie. New York: Random House, 2012. Pp. 636.¹

THE ONCE-FAMOUS novelist Gore Vidal maintained that, in an age in which fiction has lost its authority, "famous novelist" no longer has meaning. "To speak today of a famous novelist is like speaking of a famous cabinetmaker or speedboat designer," he said.

Nevertheless, during the last decade of the 20th century, Salman Rushdie was not just a famous novelist; he was more familiar to more people than even O.J. Simpson. Winning the Booker Prize in 1981 for his second novel, "Midnight's Children," enhanced Rushdie's literary reputation, but it was his 1988 novel "The Satanic Verses" that catapulted him into celebrity, and forced him into hiding. On Feb. 14, 1989, the Supreme Leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued a valentine in the form of a 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." A native of India residing in England, Rushdie had no ties to Iran, but Khomeini's order made him the world's top terrorist target. Anyone killing the author of "The Satanic Verses" could count on a bounty of millions of dollars, as well as admission to heaven.

Like the Dreyfus Affair, the Rushdie affair has inspired commentary both sympathetic and hostile. However, "Joseph Anton" is the author's own riveting account of how it felt to be reviled and endangered by violent strangers because of a book that most had never read.

United Kingdom Special Branch officers took charge of his protection, dubbing their risky work Operation Malachite. When they demanded a code name to confuse potential assassins, Rushdie combined the given names of two favorite writers: Conrad and Chekhov.

"Joseph Anton" begins in 1989, "the year the world changed," before flashing back to Rushdie's nominally Muslim childhood in Bombay. The son of a freethinking, alcoholic wastrel, he inherited a commitment to "human reason and against blind faith, submission, acceptance and stagnation." At school in England, the ugliness of the Rugby Chapel reinforces his religious skepticism: "Obviously no self-respecting God would live there - in fact, obviously there *was* no God, not even a God with bad taste in architecture." After eating a ham sandwich, he is not struck dead with thunderbolts, convincing him "that there was nobody up there with thunderbolts to hurl."

Working for an advertising firm in London, Rushdie struggles to establish a literary career. But the body of this hefty memoir focuses on his years as Joseph Anton, when Rushdie feels imprisoned not only by armed guards who keep him

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quarantined but also by his unwanted identity as the Man Who Maligned Islam. He is forced to move frequently from residence to residence whenever his cover is blown. He has to plead for permission to see his son Zafar, the child of his first marriage and the most precious person in his life.

When the fatwa is issued, Rushdie's second marriage, to American novelist Marianne Wiggins, is crumbling, and the pressures of living under siege hasten her exit. Rushdie woos and marries his third wife, Elizabeth West, under the supervision of Special Branch guards. She gives him a second son, Milan, but cannot keep him from falling for Padma Lakshmi, a moody beauty who embodies for him the romantic dream of American freedom. She dumps him eight years later.

"You saw an illusion and you destroyed your family for it," Elizabeth tells him, and Rushdie cannot disagree.

Some of Rushdie's warmest relationships are with members of his protection team, who serve as constant companions throughout the ordeal. Their supervisors, though, are antagonistic, imposing arbitrary restrictions on Rushdie's movements and insisting that he is not worth the huge expense incurred by Her Majesty's Government because of his nasty book.

Meanwhile, the Italian translator and the Norwegian publisher of "The Satanic Verses" are seriously wounded, and its Japanese translator is murdered. Muslims within Britain and abroad clamor for the author's death, and even fellow writers Thomas Berger, John le Carré, Roald Dahl and George Steiner cast aspersions on Rushdie's motivations and talents. However, Paul Auster, Margaret Drabble, Christopher Hitchens, Harold Pinter and other literary eminences provide the fugitive with places to stay, moral support and the balm of friendship.

Rushdie reopens his wounds by recalling how, in a desperate bid to placate his foes, he signs a statement proclaiming his embrace of Islam. Repudiating his own core beliefs does not get the fatwa lifted but leaves him filled with self-loathing. He does not reject Elizabeth's verdict that he is "a selfish person who goes through life ruining other people's lives." It is only after years fraught with pain, fear and violence that Rushdie is able, in his memoir's final line, to hail a cab alone on the streets of London.

Like Norman Mailer, another celebrity author who would surely envy him his historically momentous subject, Rushdie uses the third person to tell a fascinating story of his own clash with the forces of intolerance. Though Viking Penguin lost its corporate nerve over a paperback edition, he credits their earlier courage in bringing out "The Satanic Verses," calling it "one of the great chapters in the history of publishing, one of the grand principled defenses of liberty.

In 10 dramatic chapters, "Joseph Anton" captures the career of a fallible writer who struggled to sustain the fragile life of the imagination.

Dr. STEVEN G. KELLMAN, Professor, The University of Texas at San Antonio; he is the author of "Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth" (Norton) and "The Translingual Imagination" (Nebraska).