

## 9/11, HOUSTON, AND SALMAN RUSHDIE

On the Other Side of Fury



*He looked at the bloodstains drying on the darkened square, evidence here in New York City of the force of a gathering fury on the far side of the world: a group fury, born of long injustice, beside which his own unpredictable temper was a thing of pathetic insignificance, the indulgence, perhaps, of a privileged individual with too much self-interest.*

FURY, SALMAN RUSHDIE (SEPTEMBER 4, 2001)

**THE FIRST INDICATION THAT THE RULES OF THE GAME HAVE CHANGED** comes when we receive what seems like a threatening phone call in early August about the reading in September that will open our season. It's the hottest part of the day on one of those hazy, burnt-smelling summer afternoons in Houston, when the 100-degree heat makes a clear sky look milky, and the grackles squawk and hiss and click and chuckle, and the A/C in our office, one of the many gray-and-white 1920s bungalows surrounding the Menil Collection, can't keep up. My pants stick to the seat of my desk chair. The phone message left during the night is, I think, a sign of both menace and cowardice. I play it again: "You are presenting the apostate Salman Rushdie. We know who you are, Richard Levy." Click.

The message sounds unfinished. A male voice, deep, with a strong accent—a non-native speaker of English. Had he lost his nerve, his train of thought? Was that really all he had to say? Or was it a bad connection?

I call to my colleagues, "Hey, would you come listen to this?"

**W**e are excited. Salman Rushdie has agreed to read from his new novel *Fury* in Houston on September 10, 2001, to open the 2001–2002 season of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. This reading will be part of his first official book tour since the fatwa was declared against him in early 1989 following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. We have succeeded in convincing the Random House publicity department that our literary reading series merits a place on Rushdie's book tour, not an easy thing to do, given the typical East

Coast view of the middle part of the country (especially south of the Mason-Dixon line) as several contiguous flyover states.

It soon becomes apparent, however, as that hot summer and our preparations for the season progress, that this is not going to be the usual opening reading. Rushdie has been living for years under police protection in England since Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran declared the fatwa in 1989 calling for his death in response to a book he wrote. And what a book to be cursed for. Published in 1988, *The Satanic Verses* is a tour de force, an undeniably brilliant novel, an extension of the burst of creative energy that had earlier produced two other great, bristling, and singular novels, the widely praised *Midnight's Children* (1981), a brocade of wild invention and twisted reality that follows a thousand children born at midnight on the eve of the brutal partition of India, and *Shame* (1983), set in a kind of manic, imaginary Pakistan.

*The Satanic Verses*, with the same kind of verbal and visceral intensity, has as its framework a fantastically inventive battle between Good and Evil, seen through the lens of the immigrant experience. It begins with a plane filled with South Asian travelers exploding in midair over London, after which the two main characters—both actors—wrestle as they fall to earth (a fall that seems to take forever and that they magically survive), one turning into a kind of evil angel, the other into a kindly devil.

For some, *The Satanic Verses* is filled with one blasphemy after another. Rushdie's smartest-kid-in-the-class antics, this time aimed at Islam, are too much for those Muslims who, to put it mildly, lack a postmodern sensibility. The title refers to certain verses supposedly spoken by Muhammad as part of

BY RICH LEVY

the divinely revealed messages of the Koran that were then withdrawn on the grounds that the devil had sent them, deceiving Muhammad into thinking they came from God. In the novel, Rushdie also uses the name Mahound, a derogatory term for Muhammad dating back to the Crusades. Perhaps most offensive to Muslims, he creates a brothel staffed by prostitutes who are given the names of Muhammad's wives, the esteemed "mothers of all believers."

As a result of this death sentence, Rushdie went into hiding. He also became a cause célèbre of the free speech movement and wrote several fine novels in the 1990s. But each time anyone approached a publisher about bringing Rushdie to Houston in connection with a new book, the response was that he might give a reading here, but it could not be announced in advance—a thorny problem for a presenter.

In 1998, the government of Iran, under more moderate leadership, spoke against the fatwa as a precondition to reestablishing diplomatic ties with Britain.

Rushdie has been living in New York largely without incident for a year or two, and the time is right for a public appearance in Houston.

**A**s we prepare for the big night, one Alley staffer whose husband is a police officer suggests that we contact the Houston Police Department to make sure they are apprised of the situation. And, she adds, the local FBI office. Why not?

We call our contact at HPD, who works off-duty on occasion at Brazos Bookstore. He is now, it turns out, head of intelligence for the department. He knows all about the reading and even has the event on his calendar.

"Oh yeah, we know the protesters. They come out whenever the Israelis are in town. They always fax us in advance, a day or two before the event." He thinks they may bus in people, and says they'll have placards. And one or two of the young guys might get a bit feisty. "But usually," he says, "they're well behaved."

Later that day, I call the Houston FBI office. I'm passed from one person to another until someone introduces herself. Must be the low agent on the totem pole. I tell her we'll be hosting a reading, a public presentation, by Salman Rushdie on September 10 and pause for that to sink in.

"Salman who?" she asks, with no hint of irony.

I explain the situation: *The Satanic Verses* and the fatwa, with its accompanying death threat; the murder of the book's Japanese translator and the near-fatal wounding of its Norwegian publisher, among others; our reading series, the new book, and Rushdie's book tour; the protest emails and calls we've received (most of them similar, as if callers are reading from a script), including the few troubling ones. Despite the hubbub, I make clear, it's a great honor to have Rushdie in Houston.

She pauses for a moment, as if reviewing her notes, then says thank you and hangs up. Well, I think, that's that.

Several hours later, after lunch, a colleague buzzes me. "Rich, I think it's the woman from the FBI."

She reintroduces herself, Agent so-and-so, and then, without skipping a beat, asks, "Would you please tell me about the death threats you're receiving?" No, I explain, we aren't receiving death threats; Salman Rushdie has received them.

**ABOUT THREE WEEKS BEFORE THE READING, THE PHONE RINGS, AND IT'S** one of our board members, an executive at Continental Airlines, which customarily flies to Houston the writers for our reading series. He has someone from the FAA in his office, and the two of them are on speakerphone. The gist of the call: Rushdie cannot fly on a commercial airline—he is banned from commercial flights as a danger to himself and others. Our board mem-

ber is quietly apologetic.

I email our contact at Random House. She replies that they are working on a solution and that the tour will proceed as planned. Next thing we know, the publisher has arranged for Rushdie to take a private plane.

First Rushdie will read in New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and then Houston. After Houston, he will go to Minneapolis for some sort of library fundraiser, then Denver and the West Coast. We are his single dip into the South. We have broken the ice. There are readers in the South! We feel the pressure to have a great crowd, publicity, event, and book sales. This is a kind of audition. Our adrenaline is pumping.

The evening of September 10 is broiling, bright, steamy. The reading is to begin at 7:30, and the crowd starts to assemble outside the theater at 4:30 p.m. (the series has no advance ticket sales). The nominal price of five dollars, free for students and seniors, ensures no one is kept away from the readings. Soon the ticket line runs down the steps and up the block. Our staff of three, with reinforcements from the Alley crew, takes charge, directing the line and keeping order.

Rushdie is dining at a restaurant across the street from the theater with the interviewer and a small group of board members. I walk up to Alley Theatre artistic director Gregory Boyd and managing director Paul Teatreault, who are amazed at the crowd. They point outside.

A very different kind of crowd is gathering in front of the theater, occupying the dozen or so steps leading down to the sidewalk—not to block the way, but to give audience members a kind of gauntlet to run. Women in hijabs and bearded men in black-and-white keffiyehs and long, loose-fitting shirts hold printed signs stapled to wooden sticks that read, "Death to Rushdie" (on the back: "Death to Israel"—dual use posters). Some chant and others call out slogans, while the women quietly hold their signs.

The bicycle officers keep the walks free, other officers on foot maintain a path up the steps, and the cops on horseback keep folks off the street. We can't believe it. There are probably 200 protesters in front of the theater.

I step outside into the brutal heat and ask several young men if they have read any of Rushdie's books. They look at me in disgust. "Of course not," one says. These folks clearly aren't interested in attending the reading.

Then we watch as the crowd on the steps shifts to the corner and rushes two cars parked at the entrance to the restaurant. It turns out the valet is Iranian, and he informs the crowd that Rushdie is at the restaurant and on his way out. A few people pound on the car, but in a flash police on horseback move them and everyone else back onto the curb. The scene is calmed, leaving just one or two loud young men. Rushdie and the dinner guests get into the cars, drive around the corner and into the theater's alleyway, scooting into the stage door undetected.

**I**n the green room, Rushdie is fascinated and disgusted by the situation. He has not encountered a whisper of protest in New York, Boston, or Chicago—and now, here in Houston.... He's surprised to find such fundamentalism in Texas. (We are not.)

It seems to energize him, to get him in a pugnacious mood for the reading.

Almost all the people get in unchallenged; the plainclothesmen at the door deny entrance to only two. The theater is packed. Several dozen

**"SHE REINTRODUCES HERSELF, AGENT SO-AND-SO, AND THEN, WITHOUT SKIPPING A BEAT, ASKS, 'WOULD YOU PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT THE DEATH THREATS YOU'RE RECEIVING.'"**

attendees who don't get seats watch the reading on a closed-circuit TV monitor in the lobby. I'm told later that as I was greeting the crowd in the theater and introducing Rushdie, the protesters turned to the east, knelt on the steps, said prayers, boarded their buses, and were gone.

It is the first and only time an Inprint reading makes the ten o'clock news. Hardly a word is said about the reading, the interview, or the endless book-signing line; the reports focus on the protest. After we're finished at the theater, we take Rushdie to a board member's house for a party. He has tremendous energy, speaks to everyone, and stays up late with students, smoking cigars and drinking on the patio. He's clearly glad to be on a book tour for the first time in more than 12 years. To hell with the protesters, he says. Sheep, he calls them. Idiots.

The next morning, September 11, as my nine-year-old son and I are getting into the car after an early doctor's appointment, we hear the first puzzled reports from the site of the World Trade Center on the radio. I drive Tom to school in a haze of disbelief. Who has done this and why?

I remember the morning as bright, sunny, and cooler than the day before; a front has come through. As I run into the office, my colleague Marilyn reports that Rushdie has called. He's at the Four Seasons. His plane is grounded—all flights are grounded—so he has returned to the hotel, but the Four Seasons will not let him check back in. They do not have any open rooms. He needs a place to stay. And he needs someone to come down to the Four Seasons and pick him up. Please.

One more thing, he tells me: he's staying at the Four Seasons under an assumed name, an anagram of Salman Rushdie. When I arrive at the hotel and ask for Dr. Shane Maulis, the two desk clerks stop and look at me. A man emerges from an inner office, takes my driver's license, and vanishes for a few moments. Then, as if in a scene from a bad spy movie, he emerges, gives me an overly long look, and says, "Follow me," walking quickly to the second-floor ballroom. Someone who looks like an off-duty cop is standing outside one of the surrounding conference rooms. He unlocks the door and hands my license to someone inside the room, and that someone, sighing, gives his approval. I go inside. Click. The door locks behind me.

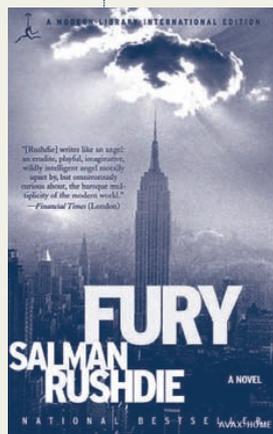
"Drama queens," Rushdie says and shakes

my hand.

What happens over the next few days takes on an aura of the surreal. Up to this point, we've been doing our work; now we're making it up.

Rushdie and I sit locked in the breakout room at the Four Seasons for about two hours. The hotel staff has furnished him with two TVs, two telephones, a dozen cans of soft drinks, and a large tray of pastries. We watch as the towers are struck over and over again, and fall over and over again. After a while we turn the sound down and talk, or make phone calls. Neither of us has much to say. The hijackers, he opines, must be madmen.

Rushdie calls friends and family, including his girlfriend, to assure them that he's all right; I speak to Marilyn, who is searching for a place for him to stay. Briefly I consider my 12-year-old daughter's bedroom, but decide that after a decade in hiding, Rushdie has suffered enough. We discover that the poet Edward Hirsch and his wife Janet, who live in a two-story red brick house next



I ASK SEVERAL YOUNG MEN IF THEY HAVE READ ANY OF RUSHDIE'S BOOKS. THEY LOOK AT ME IN DISGUST. "OF COURSE NOT," ONE SAYS. THESE FOLKS CLEARLY AREN'T INTERESTED IN ATTENDING THE READING.

to our office, are in Washington, D.C., and they consent to have Rushdie stay at their home. Since we are Rushdie's hosts, this is the perfect spot for him—convenient, quiet, and book-filled.

During the next few days, we bring Rushdie bagels and egg tacos for breakfast, and Vietnamese noodles and café sandwiches for lunch. We keep him company, if he so desires. We arrange for a private tour of the Menil Collection. He goes for walks in our bosky neighborhood. Karl Kilian, owner of Brazos Bookstore, hosts him for dinner one night; the director of the Menil Collection entertains him the next evening. He's treated with the secrecy and deference of stranded royalty. He seems slightly restless and a little bored.

But despite his phlegmatic demeanor—after all, his long-awaited book tour has been derailed, and he is stranded some place far from where he'd like

to be with his girlfriend—he's quietly thankful for his circumstances. The Menil, which is across the street from us, is as amazing and wonderful a distraction as the art world can offer and, unfailingly polite, he is grateful that several of us are so solicitous of his happiness. I, in return, am grateful that he refuses to engage in false flattery, which relieves us of the need to respond with false modesty. It's a strangely calm, interim situation. I don't begrudge the man his reserve and his moods; I'd probably be quite a bit grumpier were the tables turned.

OVER A LUNCH OF SPRING ROLLS ON DAY TWO, HE asks me if I've ever done one of those cross-country drives across the U.S., a Jack Kerouac-style *On the Road* trip. Yes, I say, though these days I travel non-Kerouac style with my family. "Richard," Rushdie asks, "how would you like to rent a car, and we can drive to LA?" This is where his girlfriend awaits him. "Of course, we'd have to find a rental car first," he muses. I silently assume this would be impossible, but there is something sweet and almost boyish about the question, which causes me to pause for a moment. Then I tell him I can't do it, with three young children in school, my wife at a big law firm, too many things to do in the evening, getting the kids off in the morning—you know. (He doesn't, I think.) He nods, extols the boldness of a friend who has exhibited various kinds of fearlessness, hung out with football hooligans, traveled the world, et cetera, much of it with Rushdie. After a while, he seems to be talking to himself.

We know that as soon as the airports reopen, Rushdie is on the first plane out of here. We check with him Thursday morning over coffee and croissants. He tells us that the pilot Random House has hired will take him to L.A. at the earliest possible opportunity.

At noon that day, we hold our executive committee meeting as scheduled at the Inprint office. Twenty minutes into the meeting, shortly after we explain to our stunned board members what we've been doing for the past few days, as if on cue, Rushdie throws open the front door. "The pilot says it's time; air traffic control has given us clearance. Would you please call me a cab?" Everyone leaps up to shake his hand. Our meeting is on hold. We watch a few minutes later as he smiles and waves, and the cab drives away.

So what did we learn from the Great Man? Any nuggets of wisdom delivered over coffee or tea, which I can now share a decade later? What juicy bits of gossip or stunning insights have stewed in my noggin that finally need to be aired? Zero, zilch, nada, none.

**BUT DESPITE HIS PHLEGMATIC DEMEANOR—AFTER ALL, HIS LONG-AWAITED BOOK TOUR HAS BEEN DERAILED, AND HE IS STRANDED SOME PLACE FAR FROM WHERE HE'D LIKE TO BE WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND—HE'S QUIETLY THANKFUL FOR HIS CIRCUMSTANCES.**

First of all, hanging the mantle of Great Man on him puts the poor guy at a complete and stunning disadvantage. It hangs around his neck the burdensome expectation that he is perennially profound, and that everything he says is brilliant. Not even Salman Rushdie can measure up. Although he may be brilliant, even Rushdie needs some down time. He's also a writer, not a politician, and he's not seeking our votes (thank God). He wasn't chatting for posterity over spring rolls, although we did harvest an anecdote or two. He was simply being himself and a very pleasant guest.

Interestingly, even Rushdie seems to have a foggy notion of the events of that time. He was recently quoted in Emory University's *Emory Report*, in a piece titled "Rushdie on Truth and Memory," as saying the release date of *Fury* was September 11. It was in fact September 4, as he had launched the book in New York and given at least three readings before coming to Houston. But clearly a 9/11 release date makes for a better story. I wonder what he does remember of Houston and what was for us his memorable, impromptu visit.

He also said at Emory that on 9/11 *Fury* was instantly transformed from a contemporary satire into a historical novel, describing a city as it no longer was. He's right. *Fury* is an unusual book in Rushdie's oeuvre—a novel set in the current moment. His satire, of course, spins off into the realm of the absurd—a middle-aged college professor retiring to manage his burgeoning doll empire; but the gist of the novel grabs New York by the lapels and shoves it center stage. It's the gritty, grasping city of the nineties, still arrogant, endlessly growing and clamoring, and somewhat insane. New York was and is changed by 9/11—it's been humbled and done some soul searching. I think in some ways, despite the horrific loss of life and landmark, it's now a better place to live and visit. (Still outrageously expensive, but a better place.) I look at the High Line, a kind of magical park in the air, as an emblem of these greener, more pacific changes.

And beyond New York there are changes too. Peace Corps enrollment, for example, which peaked at 15,000 in 1966, is slowly growing from a low of about 4,000 in the 1990s; in the past year it has risen from 7,500 to more than 8,600 in 77 countries.

The National Endowment for the Arts in its 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

found that, for the first time in 26 years, literary reading (which it defines as the reading of any novels, short stories, poems, or plays in print or online) is on the rise. An encouraging finding is that the rate of increase is fastest in the cohort of 18 to 24 year olds, which experienced growth of 21 percent between 2002 and 2008.

In Houston, the nonprofit organization Urban Harvest, which supports the development of community gardens throughout the city, started with a budget of \$500 and a handful of gardens in 1994; there are now more than 100 community and school gardens and urban farms throughout the city, education programs, farmers markets, and a budget of more than \$800,000.

Even the galvanizing of the youth vote to elect Obama in 2008 might be construed as a kind of positive change by some. It was exciting to see that high level of civic participation among college-age students and recent college graduates who had been quite apathetic for the preceding 20 years. I take it as a sign that our moral trajectory may be changing slowly for the better.

Of course, this is my view, from my particular socio-political vantage point. None of these changes can be construed as a direct consequence of 9/11. But 9/11 is a major part of the gestalt of the last ten years and certainly the general direction of the culture nationally has been strongly influenced by it. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial meltdowns, the growth of the Tea Party and Occupy movements, the polarization of the Congress and the country—all of it stems in some way from 9/11 and from our various reactions to it. This is the position I'm staking out. Take it with whatever grain of salt you like.

**FOR ME, THE FURY READING FUNCTIONS AS A** kind of dividing line between a blithe pre-9/11 world and a wide-awake post-9/11 existence that compels us to take stock and consider change. It is as if, faced with loss, we have emerged from the long adolescence of the eighties and nineties.

*Fury* will never be considered one of Rushdie's great books. But it does have moments of wit and relevance that, for me, secure its place on this particular dividing line. The epigraph to this article is taken from a scene late in the book in which the main character, the semi-retired college professor Malik Solanka, loses his young girlfriend to a giant of a man, "hairless...stripped to the waist,"

who hails—like her, like him—from a distant and very different country.

Contemplating the bloody finish to a small riot in Washington Square, Solanka is aware that the animus he witnessed in the park—"the bloodstains drying on the darkened square"—is fueled by "a gathering fury on the far side of the world." He understands the connection between this "group fury, born of long injustice"—this distant, unconscious, destructive, but strangely moral third-world energy—and "his own unpredictable temper," which in a moment of clarity he calls "a thing of pathetic insignificance."

In other words, the blind rage of the Third World is following him to New York, leaving in its wake "bloodstains" on the concrete near his feet. Solanka's transformation, however slight, begins with his dawning awareness that he is (like Rushdie, like many of us) "a privileged individual" complicit in that injustice. It's a world-weary but hopeful moment and, in the context of 9/11, an insight that might serve as a harbinger of an acceptance, in some tiny way, of responsibility.

**T**wo things happened recently from which I take solace. The first: Salman Rushdie returned to Houston and the Inprint Brown Reading Series on December 3, 2010, and was greeted without a hint of unpleasantness by almost two thousand people at Jones Hall. He read from his new book, a novel called *Luka and the Fire of Life*, which like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was written for one of his sons. He loved the open and warm reception he received here, and can't wait to return. What a difference a decade makes.

The other is closer to home—in my family, in fact. My son, who was with me on the morning of 9/11, is now 19, and not too long ago he came into possession of a cell phone with a great screen and an internet connection. He, like many 19-year-old boys, enjoys violent video games (with their politically incorrect scenarios), heavy metal music, action films, and so on. But what surprised me recently is that he also loves to watch the Al Jazeera English news broadcasts on his phone. He watches them every day. He encourages me to tune in so that we can talk about what he has seen and heard. He is developing a broader view of the world. I'm not sure this will make him a better person—I'm not that much of a Pollyanna—but I'm fairly certain that he would not be tuning in to Al Jazeera today if it weren't for 9/11 and our ensuing entanglements in the Middle East. One of the strange gifts of conflict is that you learn something about your opponent and yourself. My fingers are crossed. **c**