

Original parables

Robert Irwin

SALMAN RUSHDIE
The Satanic Verses
 480pp. Viking. £12.95.
 0670825379

There is no evidence in Salman Rushdie's fourth novel of any flagging of the author's inventive powers; quite the contrary, an alarming increase. Rushdie is possessed by a story-telling demon. *Satanic Verses* takes its title from a well-known incident in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet came under pressure from the citizens of Mecca to moderate his unbending monotheism and to accommodate his new faith to the traditional polytheism, especially the cult of three local goddesses. Obligingly, he came up with the convenient verses, "Have ye considered al-Lat and al-Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other? These are the swans exalted, whose intercession is to be hoped for." The Meccans were naturally delighted, but very shortly afterwards Muhammad received a true Koranic revelation from the Archangel Gabriel. He then revoked the compromising verses, stigmatizing them as dictation from the Devil.

"There was. There was not", as Arab storytellers traditionally begin. Rushdie gives us a story not about Muhammad, but the Prophet Mahound, a story not about Mecca but the city of Jahilia ("paganism" or "ignorance" in Arabic), not about "Islam" but about the religion of "Submission", not about the Archangel Gabriel, but about a fretfully dreaming native of Bombay, Gibreel, who in his dreams finds himself forced to act as simultaneous Archangel and Devil to the demanding Mahound. Mahound sleeps in Gibreel's dream and Gibreel enters his. Revelations are forced out of Gibreel and he is forced to watch the consequences. The strange fairy-tale of the rise and triumph of the religion of Mahound unfolds in the passionate and garish manner of a Bombay talkie. Gibreel's point of view

is always on the move, he hates static shots, so he's floating up on a high crane looking down on the foreshortened figures of the actors, or he's swooping down to stand invisibly between them, turning slowly on his heel to achieve a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree pan, or maybe he'll try a dolly shot . . .

The tale is full of sentiment and colour, flashing eyes and wagging hips. Mahound is opposed by the witchy Hind, uncrowned queen of the aristocratic Shark tribe of Jahilia. Later, the opposition is joined by an erstwhile disciple, Salman the Persian, who has become disillusioned by the transformation of Mahound the Mystic into Mahound the Law Giver. At the centre of this strange fable about the incompatibility of poetic revelation and religious revelation stands the poet Baal. It is a superb story, a brilliant novella in its own right.

Just as events in long-ago Jahilia echo in distorted fashion the true story of the origins of Islam, so that story in turn has echoes and half-echoes in the later story of the Imam, a grim religious bigot in exile in London (who is and is not the Ayatollah Khomeini in exile in Paris) and his uncompromising struggle against the westernized Ayesha, Empress of contemporary Jahilia. Here Rushdie offers us a finely observed portrait of an exile whose vision is so blinkered, and so narrowly focused on the demands of religion and vengeance, that in a sense he does not inhabit London and has never left his homeland. It ends in apocalypse, one apocalypse among the many, great and small, that punctuate *The Satanic Verses*. Again, the story has been dreamed up by Gibreel.

A third tale unfolds in Gibreel's dreams. Set in contemporary India, it is the tale of the impact on a small community of a visionary butterfly-eating girl who summons the villagers to set out on pilgrimage for Mecca. If they will follow her, forsaking all that they have, then, when they arrive at the sea, the waves will part before them and dry-shod they will walk on towards Mecca. This mysterious Indo-Muslim version of the Children's Crusade completes Rushdie's trilogy on the theme of religion and its inexorable, unwelcome and dubious demands. One may guess that Rushdie sympathizes with the doubting Salman and the despairing Baal, but in another part of the novel

he has one of his characters argue that "We can't deny the ubiquity of faith. If we write in such a way as to pre-judge such belief as in some way deluded or false, then are we not guilty of élitism, of imposing our world-view on the masses?"

These enigmatic and engrossing parables, long short stories, are embedded in a frame story. This frame story is no perfunctory affair of yarning in a club or of Scheherazade talking for her life. The frame story, concerning the intertwined destinies of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, is much longer and more complex than the stories it frames (and it feeds into and draws on the framed stories), and it is with their epic saga that the novel opens. Gibreel and Chamcha are falling towards England, falling from an exploding jumbo jet, the Bostan. (*Bostan* is Persian for Paradise.) Gibreel, the one who angelically presides over the framed stories, is a Bombay movie star, who in time will find work turning those stories into celluloid dreams. Chamcha, also from India, is an enthusiastic expatriate in Britain, working in television and radio. And yet in some mysterious way they have been chosen, as rivals and friends, to incarnate the ambiguous forces of good and evil.

The story of the working out of the evil and good that they do defies sensible summary, encompassing, among other things, problems posed by illegal immigrants, racist policemen, a dying father, sexual jealousy, Englishness, race riots, the Union Carbide explosion, Thatcherism, schizophrenia, massacres in Assam, bad breath, exile and fiction. There are marvellous things in it, most notably another separately framed story concerning Gibreel's entrapment in an English widow's memories of her youth on the Argentinian pampas, an entrancing narrative of romance and flashing knives, equipped with multiple endings (shades of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*).

Rushdie is endlessly inventive. Yet somehow the frame story is less satisfying than the stories it frames. In a chapter in *The Poetics of Prose* entitled "Narrative-Men", Tzvetan Todorov argued that Sinbad the sailor's personality could not be separated from his story. In *The Arabian Nights* all traits of character are immediately causal. We know that Sinbad loves to travel because he does travel: we know that he travels because he loves to travel. In a similar manner in *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta only seem to know who they are by seeing what they have done. So the chronicle of their adventures seems confusingly arbitrary in its development, and it poses problems for the reader which have nothing to do with metaphysics or ethics. There are perhaps praiseworthy reasons for the apparent lack of structure. Just as it is difficult for a writer to portray a dull dinner party interestingly, it may well be that an attempt to show how good and evil are confounded in people's acts and motives will be confusing in itself. Also, arbitrariness may come from Rushdie's stated aim (possibly disingenuous and surely impossible) to allow his protagonists freedom of will. This is a God-like decision on the part of the novelist and, as God, Rushdie inserts himself in his novel (shades of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* again).

In the absence of a more formal structure, the novel is held together by a bemusing cat's cradle of cross-referenced names and images. Imam's henchmen are avatars of those in the service of Mahound. Mount Cone is the name of the mountain where Mahound receives his revelations; Allie Cone is the mountaineer whom Gibreel loves. Chamcha dreams of a glass jinn who has become his own bottle. Later Chamcha will be interned with Glass Bertha in a sinister hospital. And so on. All this is further enriched by echoes of or references to fictions that parallel Rushdie's own – *The Arabian Nights* obviously, also *Othello*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *The Golden Ass*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Doubtless there are others. Once an image, pun or reference has been brought into play, Rushdie gallops off with it in all directions. The reader may find himself exhausted, but he is never in danger of being bored. In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie has created a fictional universe whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. It is several of the best novels he has ever written.

Consolatory fables

Susannah Herbert

STEPHEN DOBYNS
The Two Deaths of Señora Puccini
 260pp. Viking. £11.95.
 0670819808

Another evening in a nameless South American city; to the accompaniment of violent revolution and intense sexual passion, intermittent allegories of failed communication are narrated. Familiar subjects, but intentionally so; in *The Two Deaths of Señora Puccini*, the American poet Stephen Dobyns pays affectionate tribute to the grand old men of Latin American letters, avoiding both slavish imitation and cheap parody, and shows the ease of a veteran ventriloquist, skilled in many genres.

When three former schoolmates meet for a lavish reunion dinner at the house of Dr Pacheco – a respected surgeon and notorious Don Juan – the scene seems set for a rambling Márquezian chain of romantic reminiscence. Dobyns counterpoints the violence and luxury with Pacheco's account of his unreciprocated passion for the girl whose picture on the mantelpiece attracts his guests' comment and speculation. But this is not the nostalgic self-delusive reverie of *Love in the Time of Cholera*; rather, Pacheco's chilling tale of "the woman I chose to destroy" enacts the sequel to the events it describes, provoking his victim's revenge by torturing her with the true story of her entrapment. The tale's subject, Antonia Puccini, listens impassively throughout, acquiescing in the history of her subjection, enslaved by Pacheco's passion and her involuntary, uncontrollable sexual response. The Doctor represents her passivity as a lure, and describes the obsession which drew him beyond moral limits, to rape and even, perhaps, to murder.

The initial horror of his guests – the boor Malgiolio, the spineless bureaucrat Dalakis and the book-reviewing narrator, Batterby – yields first to curiosity and then to the urge to confess. Each man, like Pacheco, has experienced passion; each has evaded its consequences. Pacheco's story is thus a catalyst for their self knowledge. Dobyns's prose links by metaphor and juxtaposition the book's three

hungers – for food, for stories and for sex – forming them into one vast appetite before which the façades of decency crumble.

As the guests' stories proliferate and overlap, their relations to this central appetite become clearer. Each fiction attempts to deflect the implications of desire: either transforming passion's narrating victim from spectator into participant or disguising personal choices as inevitable acts of fate. Pacheco once told stories against Antonia Puccini to ensure her financial ruin and sexual vulnerability; even more dangerous, however, are those self-deceiving stories repeated to control the emotional repercussions of the past. Batterby's invention of the death of his wife is one such fiction; a lie told to conceal from himself the truth of her adultery and his anger. Invention, here, is not the ideal imposition of pattern but the evasion of self-knowledge and failure.

In this drama of delusion, Pacheco emerges as a tragic figure, able at once to acknowledge his powerlessness and his guilt. "I couldn't help doing it: that was the road I was traveling. That is not to say I'm not responsible. I am completely responsible." His obsession unites in mutual recognition the self which desires and the self which justifies. Unlike his guests, he has two lives, of the mind and of the appetite, of the talkative present and the violent past. In his schoolmates' rejection of the past he sees a pretence which indirectly sanctions the political opportunism that frames the gluttony of their feast. By weaving together the past of the Puccini affair, the present of the dinner and the future implied by the military coup, Dobyns reinforces Pacheco's campaign to undermine the self's consoling fables. To Batterby's hesitant "Surely we cannot be blamed", both Pacheco and Dobyns oppose an ironic refusal "to justify or apologise or condemn".

As self-consciously clever as the writers – Borges, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa – he acknowledges, Dobyns's homage is double-edged. *The Two Deaths of Señora Puccini* concludes as the guests resolve to "reknit our lives, to make them as they had been before". Nothing changes: the old cycles of appetite and apology, desire and delusion, recommence. The South American sages, Dobyns seems to show, may influence the books of their successors, but leave their readers' lives unchanged.

Tinker, Bushman, Scribe

David Papineau

ANTONY SHER
Middlepost
 379pp. Chatto and Windus. £11.95.
 0701144015

Smous, the central figure of Antony Sher's first novel, *Middlepost*, is a wise fool, a small, bearded buffoon who spends the first half of his life sitting on a milking-stool and pondering the oddities of life in the *shtetl*. His most treasured possession is a fantastical Biblical illustration (which the author draws as a frontispiece to the novel) of "The Great Fish Vomiting Out Jonah Upon The Dry Land" – which is roughly what happens to Smous. Dispatched by his family to establish a foothold in South Africa, he is caught up in a series of mishaps and deposited in Middlepost, a tiny outpost in the Karoo desert, a desolate area which, though Sher forbears to mention it, is occasionally watered by the Great Fish River of the Northern Cape.

"Smous" is not a Yiddish name, but rather the Afrikaans word for a tinker, a calling which Smous briefly follows on his way to Middlepost. To his Afrikaner customers, he is "Meneer Smous". "Smous liked it. You only had to say it with a 'sch' and it sounded yiddish – *schmous* . . . I am not just a smous, he thought, I am *the* smous." The affinity between the Afrikaners and the Jews runs through the novel. Both peoples speak Germanic dialects, both have suffered persecution, both have a covenant with God. But many other nations crowd into this energetic book. The Boer War is just over when Smous reaches South Africa, and in Cape Town he meets carousing British soldiers, Hottentots and a brothel of half-caste "sugargirls". He travels to Middlepost in the

company of a Bushman girl, and when he gets there he finds, as well as the Afrikaners, an Anglo-Irish prospector, assorted tribal Africans, and Signor and Signora Scuteri, who double up as itinerant barbers and opera-singers.

All these people tell Smous their stories, but he cannot understand any of them, for he speaks only Yiddish. Indeed very few of the characters understand each other, and even when they can they often pretend they can't, for the Afrikaners won't acknowledge English, nor the English Afrikaans. It was no better back in Lithuania. When Smous's father takes him to the scribe to get English documents for his journey, the scribe can't speak Yiddish, and Lithuanian is illegal, so Smous's father has to converse in Russian, which Smous doesn't understand. Smous never quite finds out what his documents say.

Magical events are as familiar an element in Yiddish story-telling as in Latin American. But Sher needs no magic to heighten his reality. When it is about to rain in the Karoo, plagues of frogs emerge from the dust. And after the rain the desert is briefly carpeted by hundreds of miles of coloured blooms. Smous's Bushman girlfriend has a head shaped like a diamond and buttocks like conical breasts. When she speaks her tongue clicks and snaps with the noises of beetles and birds.

Middlepost is in many ways delightful, but it doesn't quite add up to the sum of its parts. Sher's Babel of languages, which he renders in various inventive versions of English, allows word-play, irony, pathos and farce. But the mutual incomprehension of the characters precludes much plot development, and in the end the story peters out in a series of unrelated incidents. Still, there are many excitements in the adventures of the Smous, and it will be fascinating to see what Sher does next with his talent.

Papineau, David. "Tinker, Bushman, Scribe." *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4461, 30 Sept. 1988, p. 1067.
The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200456047/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.