Midnight's Children Study Guide

Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie

Contents

Introduction

When it was published in 1981, *Midnight's Children* won the Booker Prize, Great Britain's equivalent of the U.S. Pulitzer Prize; in 1993, the novel was awarded the □Booker of Bookers,□ a honor accorded to the best novel to be published in the competition's first twenty-five years. The book follows the life of Saleem Sinai, who is born at the very moment in 1947 when India gained its independence from British colonial rule. The infant Saleem is switched at birth with a child from a rich family and as a result leads a life of luxury until the mistake is discovered. Like the other children born that night, whom he dubs □the children of midnight,□ he finds himself to have mystical powers; despite the advantages conferred on him, Saleem's life takes him down paths of struggle and ruin before he is able to find peace.

Midnight's Children, roughly based on the early life of its author, Salman Rushdie, is considered a masterful blend of fiction, politics, and magic. Critics credit it with making the worldwide literary audience aware of the changes that India underwent throughout the twentieth century. With his masterful control of the English language and his ability to render even the most minute events in full, vivid details, Rushdie takes readers on an imaginative trip that makes them see his native country in a way that they never did before.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Indian

Birthdate: 1947

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay, India, on June 19, 1947, just two months before the protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, whose birth coincides with the moment India receives its independence. He attended school in Bombay and in Rugby, England. At Cambridge, he joined the Cambridge Footlights theater company. After graduation, he lived with his family, which had moved to Pakistan in 1964, then he returned to England and worked for an advertising agency. In 1975 he published his first novel, *Grimus*, about a Native American who receives the gift of immortality. In 1976, he married Clarissa Luward, the first of four marriages.

Midnight's Children was published in 1981 and was an instant literary success, garnering the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for fiction), an Arts Council Writers' Award and the English-Speaking Union Award. The book established Rushdie's international reputation. His next book, *Shame*, published in 1983, won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger and was a finalist for the Booker Prize. He then published *The Jaguar Smiles*, a non-fiction account of his 1986 travels in Nicaragua.

In 1988 Rushdie published the book that put his picture on newscasts worldwide and made him a household name beyond the literary world. His fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, contained a section parodying the prophet Mohammed, offending millions of Muslims worldwide. On February 14, 1989, the government of Iran, led by the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, ordered a fatwa, or decree of death against Rushdie. The Iranian government lifted the fatwa in 1998, but extremist Muslim groups continued to call for his death. Rushdie has lived in constant fear of assassination, and as a result has had only a handful of public appearances since 1989: one notable appearance took place in 1999, when he joined the rock group U2 onstage to sing their song □The Ground Beneath Her Feet,□ which was inspired by a novel Rushdie published that year. After the fatwa was lifted, however, his public appearances became more frequent.

Rushdie's first marriage ended in 1987, and he was remarried the following year to author Marianne Wiggins, but that marriage ended soon after the fatwa was imposed. He was married to Elizabeth West from 1997 to 2004. In 2004 he married model/actress Padma Lakshmi. He has a son from his first marriage and a daughter from his second.

Rushdie continues to publish frequently. His most notable novel since *The Satanic Verses* was *The Moor's Last Sigh*, published in 1994. His two books of essays, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* and *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-fiction 1992-2002*, are considered virtuoso performances. His ninth novel is 2005's *Shalimar the Clown*, about the assassination of a U.S. antiterrorism expert by his Kashmiri chauffeur.

Plot Summary

Book One

Midnight's Children is the first-person narrative of Saleem Sinai, an obscure thirty-year-old pickle factory worker who writes the fantastic story of his life each night, reading it aloud each night and having it commented on by a doting woman named Padma. He starts his story by describing how his grandfather came to the Kashmir region of India in 1915 after receiving his medical degree from Oxford and how he was approached by a wealthy landowner to examine his daughter. He was not allowed to look at her, though, and during each examination for months could only view her through a hole in a sheet that was held up by attendants. Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, fell in love with his grandmother, Naseem Ghani, by viewing her in parts.

After their marriage, the couple is in Amritsar on April 13, 1919, when British troops massacre hundreds of Indian nationalists. Doctor Aziz avoids being killed in a confrontation when, sneezing, he bends over as the troops fire.

The narrative jumps to 1942, when Aadam and Naseem have grown children, three girls and two boys, and live in Agra. Aadam becomes optimistic about India's coming freedom in advance of the arrival of Mian Abdullah, a social activist known as the Hummingbird. The poet Nadir Khan, dating Aziz's daughter Emerald, is one of the Hummingbird's confidantes: when Abdullah is assassinated, Khan comes to the Aziz house and is hidden in the basement for three years. During his confinement, he and Mumtaz Aziz fall in love and are married. Emerald, feeling jilted, tells the army officer, Major Zulfikar, that Khan is hidden in the house. Zulfikar falls in love with Emerald and marries her; Khan runs away; Mumtaz becomes attracted to a leather merchant, Ahmed Sinai, and marries him, changing her first name to Amina.

Ahmed and Amina move to Delhi: though she does not love him, she does want to have children. Ahmed's business is threatened when he finds out that local criminals demand protection money from businessmen, including him. As tensions between Muslims and Hindus intensify, an angry mob chases a street vendor, Lifafa Das, and, standing between him and the mob, Amina makes a very public announcement that she is pregnant. Ahmed and some other businessmen arrange to make payments to the gangsters, but when they leave a suitcase containing the payment money at a deserted fort, a monkey steals it: that night, Ahmed's warehouse burns down. After Ahmed collects the insurance money, the family moves to Bombay.

In June 1947 they move into the Methwold estate, an historic site being sold by its owner, a descendent of one of the first British in India, who is leaving as independence approaches. When the baby is born, at the stroke of midnight on August 15, the midwife, Mary Pereira, exchanges the Sinai child with the child of Vanita. Vanita is married to the street musician Wee Willie Winkie and dies soon after childbirth. The child whom the Sinais take home is celebrated as a symbol of Indian independence: his

picture is on the front page of the paper, and prime minister sends a letter addressed to him. The other baby falls into obscurity.

Book Two

Saleem's father, Ahmed Sinai, invests his money in a factory designed to create the parts needed for sea walls, but the government freezes all his assets, leaving him weak, an invalid. His wife Amina proves lucky at betting on horses and secretly amasses a fortune, which she uses to hire lawyers to have the accounts unfrozen. When the accounts are freed, the father loses his money by investing with a man who dies, leaving no record of the investments. Saleem's childhood is tough, given the financial strife and the fact that other children pick on him because of his odd looks.

When Saleem is nine, his father hits him on the ear, and he develops the ability to communicate telepathically, to put himself in the minds of other people. When he enters the head of a neighbor child, Evie Burns, she becomes upset, and he learns that other people know when he is reading their thoughts. This discovery leads him to create a network connecting all of the Children of Midnight, the ones who, like him, were born on August 15, 1947 (1001 were born then; only 581 have survived to the age of nine). They all have special powers, ranging from a boy who can walk through mirrors to a girl whose dazzling beauty blinds anyone who looks at her. Saleem uses his ability to find out that his mother is meeting privately with her first husband, Nadir Khan. Through the group he calls the Midnight's Children's Conference, he telepathically contacts Shiva, the child with whom he was switched at birth, who believes that he, not Saleem, should be the conference leader, advocating violence and control.

Saleem is injured at school; a blood type test reveals that neither of the people he thinks are his parents actually are. He is sent to live with his uncle Hanif and aunt Pia, who are in the film business. Saleem finds out that the financier of their films, Homi Catrack, is having an affair with the wife of a navy officer, and he sends an anonymous letter to the officer, who then shoots Catrack and his wife; Uncle Hanif, without financing, kills himself. Saleem's whole family gathers for forty days of mourning. Saleem is then taken to Pakistan, where his telekinetic powers are too weak to contact the Children. Living with his uncle General Zulfikar, he is involved in the military plans for a coup.

When he returns to Bombay, Saleem's father arranges an operation to fix the boy's draining sinuses, and as a result Saleem develops an extraordinarily keen sense of smell but loses his telekinetic power. His 15-year-old sister becomes a popular singer in Pakistani radio. Saleem confesses love for her, and she is repulsed, refusing to ever see him again. War breaks out between India and Pakistan: Indian bombs kill Saleem's grandmother, his aunts Pia and Emerald, and his parents.

Book Three

Saleem wanders around Pakistan with amnesia. He joins the army and leads his patrol up the Padma river, away from the war, and the other men are slaughtered deep in the

jungle. He comes across Parvati-the-witch, one of the Midnight's Children, who recognizes him from the image that he projected, and he is taken under the care of her and Picture Singh, a snake charmer. They hide him from the Indian army then help sneak him back into India to the family of his uncle Mustapha, where he stays for 420 days, mourning the dead. He then returns to the Magician's Slums, to Picture Singh and Parvati, and becomes a Communist. He marries Parvati and finds out that Shiva, the child with whom he was switched at birth, is a war hero who has fathered hundreds of children. Saleem cannot have children with Parvati because he keeps thinking of his sister, but she gives birth to Shiva's son. Government forces, led by Shiva, attack the ghetto, and Parvati is killed. The remaining children of midnight are sterilized by the government.

Saleem accompanies Picture Singh to Bombay. There, Picture challenges another man at a nightclub for the title of greatest snake charmer in the world, and he wins in a long competition. Saleem smells chutney, which reminds him of his childhood: he goes to the factory where it is made and finds the factory is run by Mary Pereira, his old nanny. She hires him, and he works in the factory by days and tells his story to Padma by nights.

Characters

Mian Abdullah

The founder of the Free Islam Convocation, Mian Abdullah is assassinated by government agents in Agra in 1942.

Aadam Aziz

Aadam Aziz is Saleem's grandfather. The story starts by telling how, as a young doctor, Aadam Aziz met Saleem's grandmother. He lives an unhappy life with her. He is briefly involved in politics in Amritstar in 1919, helping people who are being suppressed by British troops and nearly being shot for it, and again in Agra in 1942, when he is friends with the Rani of Cooch Naheen, who is involved in subversive politics. Aadam dies in 1964 after returning to Kashmir to find a religious icon, a strand of the Prophet Mohammed's hair.

Hanif Aziz

Hanif Aziz, one of Saleem's uncles, becomes a celebrated film director and marries Pia, a famous actress. While Saleem is living with them, he sends an anonymous letter that gets their financier, Homi Catrack, shot by a jealous husband; deprived of income, Hanif commits suicide.

Mumtaz Aziz

See Amina Sinai

Mustapha Aziz

Mustapha Aziz is one of Saleem's uncles, a brother of his mother. After most of the family members have been killed when India bombs Pakistan, Saleem goes to Mustapha's house and lives there for forty days of mourning, even though his uncle and his aunt want him to leave.

Naseem Aziz

Naseem Aziz, the narrator's grandmother, is the daughter of a wealthy landowner who brings the single young doctor, Aadam Aziz, to examine her. Her father only allows Aadam to view her through a sheet with a hole in it, and so he falls in love with her a little at a time.

After they are married, Naseem turns into a hard, bitter woman. She is domineering, ruling the lives of her daughters when she sees them. It is at this time in her life that she gains the nickname Reverend Mother, indicating that she is as domineering as a nun. She also develops a verbal tic, adding the phrase □whatsisname□ into the middle of sentences at random.

Late in life she convinces Saleem's Aunt Pia to go to Pakistan with her and open a gas station.

Brass Monkey

See Jamila Sinai

Evelyn Lilith Burns

A tough girl from the United States who lives in Saleem's neighborhood when he is a boy, Evelyn Lilith Burns, also called Evie, is a leader of the children until one day when, first learning about his telepathic power, he enters her thoughts and finds out that other people are aware of him when he is there. The experience is disorienting to Evie, who is more aloof after it.

Evie's personality is patterned after that of a cowgirl. She has an air rifle and goes around the neighborhood shooting cats with it. One day, Saleem's sister, the Brass Monkey, who is sympathetic to the cats, waits for her and fights her. Soon after that, Evie's father sends her home to the United States.

Homi Catrack

Homi Catrack is a financier of films in Bombay. He has an affair with the wife of navy officer Commander Subarmati. Saleem sends a note to the commander, tipping him off. The commander shoots his wife and her lover, triggering a scandal that fills the news in 1958.

Joseph D'Costa

Joseph D'Costa betrays his girlfriend Mary Pereira and her sister Alice, which leads Mary to change the Sinai baby with Wee Willie Winkie's. For years after his death, Mary sees the ghost of Joseph periodically around Methwold's estate, a constant reminder of her guilt.

Lifafa Das

When Saleem's parents are newlyweds in Delhi, Lifafa Das walks the streets with a box for showing photos. One day an angry mob sets on him, accusing him of being a child molester because he is a Hindu in a Muslim part of town; to save him, Amina announces to the crowd that she is pregnant.

Ghani

The father of Saleem Sinai's grandmother, Ghani is a wealthy land owner who calls the doctor frequently to examine his daughter, clearly promoting a romance between Aadam Aziz and his daughter, Naseem. Ghani brags about the expensive European artwork that decorates his house, even though he is blind.

Naseem Ghani

See Naseem Aziz

The Hummingbird

See Mian Abdullah

Sonny Ibrihim

Sonny Ibrihim is Saleem's childhood friend.

Nadir Khan

Nadir Kahn is an anti-British poet who dates Saleem's aunt Emerald and then, while hidden from British troops under the Aziz house, falls in love with her sister Mumtaz and marries her. Their marriage is a secret, since he cannot come out from hiding in the basement of the Aziz house. Emerald, whom he dated first, betrays his hiding place to the police, forcing him to run away, and Mumtaz is left still a virgin after two years of marriage. Kahn shows up later in the story, meeting Amina Sinai (the name that Mumtaz has been going by) at the Pioneer Café, but Saleem lets his mother know that she is being watched, and she breaks off their relationship.

Ilse Lubin

A college friend of Aadam Aziz who comes to visit him while he is courting Naseem Ghani, Ilse Lubin goes for a ride on the lake with the boatman Tai and mysteriously ends up drowned. A brief suicide note (□I didn't mean it□) is later found.

William Methwold

A descendant of the William Methwold who was one of the original British occupiers of India, this William Methwold sells his estate to several people, including Saleem Sinai's parents, in order to leave before Indian independence in 1947.

Padma

Padma is the narrator's confidante, the person to whom he tells the story of his life. Her name means □The One Who Possesses Dung.□ Throughout the novel, Saleem tells the story that he is writing to Padma, who is uneducated and illiterate. She listens and comments critically, telling him what parts she likes and what parts she finds impossible.

In the end, Padma convinces Saleem that he should be married, if only for the sake of his son, Aadam. The novel ends with Saleem marrying Padma.

Parvati-the-witch

Parvati-the-witch is one of Midnight's Children. Saleem runs into her in Pakistan, while he is suffering amnesia, and she helps him remember who he is. She helps smuggle him back into India and then marries him. Saleem cannot have children with her because every time he touches her he thinks of his love for his sister, Jamila. Parvati becomes pregnant by Shiva instead and has a son whom Saleem raises as his own after she dies in a government raid against the Magician's Ghetto.

Mary Pereira

A midwife at Dr. Narlikar's nursing home in 1947, Mary Pereira loses her boyfriend to her sister: bitter about love, she exchanges the Sinai baby with Wee Willie Winkie's baby when they are born. Filled with regret soon after, she arranges to become the Sinais' nurse and thus is the person primarily responsible for Saleem's upbringing.

Rani of Cooch Naheen

In Agra, the Rani of Cooch Naheen is a supporter of the Free Islam Convocation and sponsor of Mian Abdullah.

Reverend Mother

See Naseem Aziz

Shiva

The true son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai, Shiva was switched with a poor family's baby at birth. He is known for his powerful, bulbous knees. When he is a boy, Shiva is a tough-talking street urchin, a bully. When he finds out about the Midnight's Children's Conference, he claims to be co-leader. Saleem fears him and tries to keep him out of the telekinetic conference.

As an adult, Shiva becomes a celebrated army hero in the India-Pakistan war. He enters into hundreds of affairs with women and leaves them when they become pregnant, leaving hundreds of children when he dies. The one woman about whom he is concerned, though, is Parvati-the-witch: he leads the attack on the Ghetto of the Magicians, where Saleem is living with Parvati. She dies in the attack. Soon after, there is a regime change, and Shiva is court-martialed as a traitor. Saleem tells a story of his being shot while in military prison by a woman who had his child, but later he says that the story was a lie.

Aadam Sinai

Aadam Sinai is the son to whom Parvati gives birth. Her natural father is Shiva, but Saleem raises the boy as his own, and the story ends with his trying to be a father to the boy.

Ahmed Sinai

The father of Saleem Sinai, Ahmed Sinai married Mumtaz Aziz after her first husband left her, and he encouraged her to change her name to Amina. Over the years, his fortune goes up and down: he is a wealthy merchant, then is ruined by a fire, then has insurance money to invest, then his holdings are frozen by the government, then they are unfrozen. In the end, he operates a successful towel manufacturing plant in Pakistan. He dies when India invades Pakistan in 1965.

Amina Sinai

Originally named Mumtaz, Amina Sinai, the narrator's mother, first marries Nadir Kahn, a revolutionary poet. He is wanted by the government for involvement with revolutionaries, and their marriage takes place in secret while he is hiding in her family's basement. After Kahn goes into hiding, Amina marries Ahmed Sinai and changes her first name. She has a run of good luck betting on horses when her husband's bank account is frozen and is able to pay for lawyers with the money she earns from gambling, in order to have his money released. She dies in 1965, during the bombing of Pakistan by Indian forces.

Saleem Sinai

Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, tells a story that begins decades before his birth, with details about his grandparents' courtship and his parents' lives before he is born. Regarding the details of his own life what he narrates is so fantastic that Padma, the person who listens to his life story night after night, often refuses to believe him.

Saleem is born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the very moment at which Great Britain granted India, its former colony, its independence. Minutes after his birth to a poor street singer and his unfortunate wife, who dies during childbirth, he is switched with the son of a wealthy merchant family, and they raise him. He is an ugly child with a large, constantly congested nose. When Saleem is young, a blow from his father triggers telepathic ability in him, which eventually lets him bring all of the children born on that night in August into mental contact with each other. He finds out that his rival, Shiva, who was born at approximately the same time, wants to control the Midnight's Children, to use the special powers they all have to rule the country. After an operation to fix his sinuses, Saleem loses his telepathic ability.

When his parents learn after a blood test that Saleem is not their real child, they send him to Pakistan to live with relatives. He is there when India invades Pakistan. Most of his family is destroyed, and Saleem, having lost his memory, travels the countryside as a conscript in the army, going deep into territories that are sparsely inhabited. He regains his memory when Parvati-the-witch, one of the children who was connected to him telepathically, recognizes him. Parvati is part of a traveling magic show, and she helps him sneak back into India. She is killed, and Saleem is left to raise Aadam, the child fathered by his rival Shiva.

In the end, Saleem works at the pickle factory run by his old nurse. It is a job for which he is particularly well suited because he has an extraordinarily keen sense of smell. Padma, an uneducated worker who has listened to his stories throughout the book, tells Saleem that a man his age, 31, should be married, and so he marries her.

Jamila Singer

Saleem's younger sister, Jamila Singer starts life known as Brass Monkey, a plucky, tomboyish girl. After Saleem is found not to be her biological brother, she deals with his exile out of the country by turning to the Catholic religion.

In her teens, living in Pakistan, Jamila is found to have a beautiful singing voice; a friend of the family puts her on the radio, and she becomes a national sensation and a symbol of Pakistani pride. She is never seen in public, and nobody knows that she is actually Indian. Saleem falls in love with her, but she refuses to see him and sends him away.

After the India-Pakistan war, she is thought to be dead, but Saleem is certain that she has gone to live in a convent.

Tai

Tai, the boatman on Lake Dal, becomes a foil for Aadam Aziz when he moves to the Kashmiri region. He mocks the doctor for being too self-important. Tai becomes increasingly eccentric and stops bathing. When the doctor's college friend Ilse visits, she is last seen in Tai's boat before she drowns. Tai is rumored to have died in 1947 while protesting the struggle for Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

Vanita

Wife of Wee Willie Winkie and the real mother of Saleem Sinai, Vanita has a baby just as India is granted independence, but her baby is exchanged with the Sinai baby in the crib. Vanita dies soon after the baby is born.

Wee Willie Winkie

The actual father of Saleem Sinai, Wee Willie Winkie loses his own child when it is switched with the Sinai child soon after the babies are born. Wee Willie Winkie is a traveling singer who happens to be around the Methwold estate in August 1947. After he loses the child's mother in childbirth, he stays around Bombay for a while, a ruined alcoholic, singing on the streets with his ruined voice.

Major Zulfikar

Investigating the assassination of Mian Abdullah in Agra in 1942, Major Zulfikar falls in love with Saleem's aunt Emerald and marries her.

Themes

Identity

Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, examines the thirty years of his life covered by this novel (and the thirty-six years that preceded it) in order to understand who he is. Throughout the story, he is torn by conflicting evidence that his is either a special, magical existence or quite an ordinary one. He is born to common parents, so poor that he finds out at one point that the man who is his natural father would have broken the legs of the boy he thought was his son, in order to make him a more effective beggar. For the first ten years of his life, though, neither Saleem nor his family knows of his humble roots, and so he is raised as the son in an educated and wealthy family. Because he was born at midnight on the day of Indian independence, he grows up knowing that his birth was marked with honors, by a newspaper article and a letter from the prime minister. He comes to find that he has supernatural powers, which he uses to communicate with the other children born on the same day he was, finding that they are all gifted, but not as gifted as he is, except for Shiva, the child with whom he was switched at birth. He sees himself in them, especially in Shiva. He understands his powers through their powers, and he lacks the personal attributes which Shiva, whom he understands to be his opposite, has, particularly aggression.

Saleem's later years are humbling, which helps him understand the life of a poor anonymous peasant such as the one to whom he was born. In the bombing of Pakistan that kills off most of the members of his family at the end of Book Two, he loses his memory. Thereafter he uses the name □Buddha□: though the name implies religious insight, he achieves nothing in this guise other than leading his fellow soldiers to their deaths. He lives in a ghetto among carnival workers, adapting a Marxist philosophy, but in the end the homes of the poor are simply bulldozed by the rich. The novel ends with Saleem's finding a balance in his life, an identity that is both anonymous and singular: he works in a pickle factory as a humble laborer, but there, with his extraordinary sense of smell, he is able to create the greatest pickles and chutney ever known.

Post Colonialism

The fact that Saleem Sinai's life begins just as the era of Britain's colonial control of India ends links the life of the novel's protagonist to India's post-colonial growth. As the novel's narrator, looking back over the events of his life, Saleem proclaims himself to be dying of the same problem that can be seen of any country that has been thrust abruptly from immaturity to maturity: he is, he says, □falling apart.□ At first, newly independent India is strong and thrives, enjoying inherited wealth the way that a child like Saleem, born into a prosperous family, might enjoy a secure sense of privilege. Like Saleem's Midnight Children's Conference, though, there are always underground organizations, and these alliances produce someone like Shiva who competes for control and pushes a violent agenda. Saleem's fortunes totter back and forth, just as the nation's do,

depending at times on chance, coincidence, and the willingness of those around him to ignore his illegitimacy, as the people of India prove willing to accept the illegitimate military rule that imposes martial law. When India invades Pakistan, Saleem's life is changed forever by the loss of his family, and India's identity is changed by its brutal suppression of the county that was its twin. In the end, Saleem reaches a state of peace but only by accepting his own lingering frailty, a sign that Rushdie finds India to be continuously vulnerable.

Absurdity

Many aspects of Saleem's life as presented in this novel do not make much sense. Some of these, such as the magical powers enjoyed by the children of midnight, can be read as symbols of the inherent promise of the generation born into a free country. In other cases, though, Rushdie gives details that do not easily correspond to any larger message. These details, which are notable but not necessarily meaningful, help to heighten the reader's sense of the absurdity of Saleem Sinai's world.

Saleem's looks, for instance, are presented as a mockery of the traditional epic hero. His nose is his most prominent feature, so large that people remember him years after having last encountered him. His nose looks unheroic and, worse, it is always runny. In his childhood, Saleem has his hair pulled out by its roots and he loses a finger in a slammed door. All of these traits combine to make him look miserably grotesque. It is absurd to expect readers to identify with Saleem.

There are many instances in the novel in which Rushdie makes the case that life in post-colonial India is absurd, from the power of Saleem's archrival to crush enemies with his mighty knees to the cowgirl persona of young Evie Burns to the national fascination with the trial of Commander Subarmati to the fact that Padma, who is the only person who cares about Saleem in the end, has a name that means □Dung Princess.□ There are elements in this book that indicate a higher significance, but there are also cases in which the notable elements are here to indicate that, even at its most grotesque, the world of this novel is a strange place full of wonders.

Fatalism

After all of the events that affect Saleem's life, and all of the ways in which he affects the course of India's development, the story ends on a note of fatalism. Throughout the book, Saleem returns repeatedly to the fact that his life seems to be significant: he was born at the moment of independence, he has the power of telepathy, he can smell the very emotions that surround him. As late in the book as the start of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, he muses that the whole battle was probably waged just to destroy his family. Rushdie does not present the exaggerated elements in the book as having sprung from Saleem's imagination, and yet it is hardly likely that all of India's development would center on the life of one boy.

By the end of the book, Saleem realizes the simple notion that life goes on. He does not want to affect the outcome of the world any more; he just wants to make really good pickles. Though the book starts at a moment of promise, it ends with a mood of realism: Saleem has a son and a new wife to live for, but by the last page he has given up the expectation that he alone will be able to affect drastic changes.

Style

Foil

Rushdie ends the first book of *Midnight's Children* with the revelation that the man who has been telling the tale, known as Saleem Sinai, is in fact the child of other parents, and that the child the Sinai family had was raised by paupers. Because of their connection by birth, Saleem and the other child, Shiva, are set up to function as foils to each other. A foil is a character whose physical and psychological attributes are opposite of another character with whom he is paired; each of the paired characters highlights the qualities of the other.

It is true that Saleem and Shiva are physical opposites: Shiva is strong and handsome, while Saleem is weak and ugly. It is also true that they are temperamental opposites, as Saleem freely admits when he discusses his fear of Shiva's violent nature. Rushdie even brings their lives together at various times, having them vie for leadership of the Midnight Children's Council that Saleem calls together and bringing Shiva into the story when Saleem is unable to impregnate his wife, Parvati. Still, their paths only cross several times: hundreds of pages of the novel go by without Shiva being mentioned. If he were a more conventional foil, Shiva would be a more constant presence, giving readers a gauge by which to measure how Saleem grows and changes.

Method of Narration

Some novels are written in third person, in which the narrator tells the story using □he□ and □she,□ or in first person, in which the narrator relates the story using □I□ and □me.□ *Midnight's Children* is told in first person. Saleem tells his own story. Readers are told at the start of the second chapter and reminded repeatedly that this story is being written by a sick man and commented on by a critical woman named Padma. The nature of Saleem's relationship with Padma is gradually revealed. Rushdie's handling of the telling of the story creates suspense, making readers wonder about the circumstances of its telling until the end of the last chapter.

Episodic Plot

Although readers know that Saleem Sinai is going to survive the events of the novel, they cannot anticipate other aspects of the story's outcome. The plot of *Midnight's Children* does not rise and resolve the way readers may expect; instead, separate episodes are strung together, a series of incidents with no particular logical arrangement. There is no way that a reader could guess, while reading the first half of the book, that Picture Singh would play an important role at the end or that someone such as Sonny Ibrihim, often mentioned in the early chapters, would disappear from the narrative altogether. While some plots weave events into a complicated situation that must be resolved for the plots to reach a conclusion, this novel's plot consists of dozens

of episodes that have little in common beyond the fact that they all happen within one individual's life.

Historical Context

Indian Independence

European interest in India as a source for materials and labor goes back to the 1490s, when Portugal won exclusive rights to the lucrative markets and continued through control gained by the Dutch East India Company, which broke the Portuguese monopoly in the beginning of the seventeenth century. The East India Company, an unofficial arm of the British government, impinged on the Dutch, fighting a series of battles for control of different areas of India, eventually consolidating control in the 1750s. The country was under British control for the next two centuries.

After the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, protests against British rule became increasingly common. Nationalistic parties were distracted, however, by the rise of ethnic and religious groups within the country, such as the Muslim League, formed in 1906. In-fighting between Muslims and Hindus diverted attention from the general protest against the British.

After World War I, Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), an Indian nationalist and spiritual leader who preached non-violent protest, launched a movement to resist Britain, based on non-cooperation and the refusal to buy British goods. The British jailed Gandhi from 1922 to 1924, but he went on to revive the independence movement, successfully leading the people of India in civil disobedience. He convinced Indians to refuse to pay British taxes, particularly the tax on salt, and, to call attention to the plight of his people, he fasted to near starvation.

Weakened by World War II Britain determined that it could no longer fight to control India and agreed to give up control. The British government arranged to relinquish all command over the area at midnight on August 15, 1947: the very moment that the narrator of *Midnight's Children* was born. At that time, the territory was partitioned between India to the west and a new country, Pakistan, to the east, with the region of Kashmir left open for dispute. Also freed from British rule at that time were Burma (later called Myanmar) and Ceylon (later called Sri Lanka).

Indo-Pakistani War

The partition of India and Pakistan was followed by massive riots in both countries, resulting in millions of deaths. The exact details concerning the countries defined by the British upon their departure were considered matters of dispute. On October 20, 1962, India was attacked along its long border with China in the Himalayas, losing the border territory in a battle that lasted roughly a month (the border territory remained in dispute into the early 2000s). Pakistani military leaders took this defeat as a sign that India was weak. They also believed that there was massive dissatisfaction in the Kashmir territory against Indian rule. On August 5, 1965, Pakistan sent an estimated 30,000 troops into

Kashmir, encouraging the Kashmiri people to rise up for independence from India. Indian forces of equal strength entered Kashmir August 15. In September, when Pakistani forces attacked the town of Ackhnur, India attacked directly against Pakistan, beginning a quick and bloody conflict, though no formal declaration of war was ever issued. By September 22, the United Nations arranged a cease-fire, which both sides signed.

Six years later, in 1971, the two countries were at war again. The conflict came about because Pakistan had been created in two distinct territories: East Pakistan, which was mixed ethnically and included Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, Balochis, Mohajirs, and more, and West Pakistan, which was mostly Bengali. In 1970, in the first general elections since Independence, a Bengali leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, led his party to victory in national elections; rather than give in to democratic rule the country leaders declared a state of emergency and jailed the sheikh. Months of bloody riots led to a plan to give the Bengalis a separate land in East Pakistan. Eight to ten million refugees fled over the border into India. Realizing a crisis, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917-84) declared war in December 1971.

Though the Pakistani military counted on a conflict with India ending in a stalemate as the 1965 conflict had, they were quickly and decisively defeated. The Indian Army chief, General Sam Maneckshaw, drove into Pakistan and secured the country in a matter of weeks. Sheikh Mujibar was established as prime minister of the new country, Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan.

Indira Gandhi

Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), the prime minister of India while this novel was being written in the 1970s, was not, as Rushdie mentions, related to the freedom leader Mohandas K. Gandhi. She was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, who had been a disciple of Gandhi and became the first prime minister when India gained its independence. She grew up in a household surrounded by the most powerful figures in Indian politics and married Feroze Gandhi, a politician who died in 1960. In 1964, Indira Gandhi was elected to Parliament, and in 1966, when the prime minister died suddenly of a heart attack, she was nominated as a candidate whom the power brokers could easily control. After her election, she became fiercely independent, ruling the country from 1966 to 1977, and again from 1980 to 1984.

Gandhi was immensely popular with the Indian people immediately following the 1971 victory over Pakistan, but social conditions soon changed that. By 1973 there were demonstrations across the country against India's terrible economic situation. In June 1975 India's high court found Gandhi guilty of campaign irregularities and ordered her to resign her position. Instead, Gandhi declared a state of emergency: the constitution was suspended, the press was suppressed, and political opponents were jailed. Confident that she had successfully suppressed the opposition, she called for elections in 1977, but her party ended up losing badly. In 1980, though, she was reelected. She was

assassinated in 1984 by her bodyguards, and her son, Rajiv Gandhi (1944-91), was sworn in as the new prime minister.

Critical Overview

Salman Rushdie's second novel after *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children* brought Rushdie international acclaim. It won Britain's prestigious Booker Prize and praise from practically every reviewer who wrote about it. Phyllis Birnbaum, for instance, noted in the March 1981 *Saturday Review* that □Rushdie pleases the senses and the heart.□ Charles R. Larson, in the May 23, 1981, issue of *The New Republic*, called the book □a dark and complex allegory□: □The narrative conveys vindictiveness and pathos,□ Larson wrote, □humor and pain, and Rushdie's language and imagery are brilliant.□

Almost as soon as it was published, reviewers began seeing in the book great significance, for India as well as for the author. *Midnight's Children* was examined with a close eye and appreciation for its achievement. For example, V. S. Pritchett, himself an acclaimed novelist, began a multi-page review in the *New Yorker* by noting that with this novel □India has produced a glittering novelist□one with startling imaginative and intellectual resources, a master of perpetual storytelling.□ Pritchett ended his review by noting that □as a tour de force, [Saleem Sinai's] fantasy is irresistible.□ Father David Toolan gave his perspective as a Jesuit reading about Rushdie's India, referring to it as a □Chaplinesque novel□ and commenting that □In remythologizing disenchanted Bombay□and so much else□without domesticating the energy there one whit, Rushdie somehow worked the same metamorphosis on my New York, and indeed on any Western city.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature in the Chicago area. In this essay, Kelly examines the ways in which the novel can be seen as too rich with possible symbolism to be understood, identifying the central symbolic structure.

Into his sprawling, dense novel *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie packs hundreds of ideas that do not serve any clear purpose in advancing the narrative. There are details that are not only unnecessary but are distracting, little loose ends that do not make any real sense. When a writer does that, it is an open invitation to readers and critics to inquire into the significance of what the author has included. Not all elements must serve the story, and no one even asks that all elements be connected logically, but they all must have some reason for existing. It could well be that the reason some things seem unconnected in *Midnight's Children* is precisely to keep the story unfocused: starting, as it does, at such a significant time as the very moment of India's independence, the life of the novel's narrator, Saleem Sinai, is bound to have some allegorical meaning, and the allegory just might be that free India has no focus. If this were the case, though, then any sort of nonsense could happen in the novel, to be justified with the excuse that any sort of nonsense could happen in India. Works have been written based on theories of chaos, but Rushdie's prose is just too precise, his characters too intricately connected, and his sense of the society too acute, for one to believe that he is going for nothing more than proof that life in postcolonial India was weird.

The novel does clearly want to walk a balance between sense and nonsense. The protagonist, for instance, is about as far from a dashing leading man as Rushdie could make him. Saleem is a thirty-one-year-old castrated employee in a pickle factory, ugly to the point of gruesome, with no companion except for a woman who cannot read the story that he is writing about his life and who mocks him, apparently finding him more ridiculous than he does himself, which is saying a lot. Much about his life is absurd, but not all of it, and as his story unravels readers are struck by just how much sense there actually is among all of the trivia. His life is not just capricious, but it follows a cyclical pattern, with Saleem's fortune going from good to bad, then good to bad, then bad, then good, *ad infinitum* (a process the book captures deliberately in its reference to the children's game Snakes and Ladders).

As with many novels, *Midnight's Children* presents its readers with differing degrees of significance. What makes this a particularly difficult book to understand is that there are so many specifics mentioned that readers are constantly trying to find where each detail fits in the larger scheme of things. Is a detail mentioned for local color and mood, such as the ghost of Joseph D'Costa, haunting his old girlfriend, Saleem's nanny, with no apparent connection to the plot? Is it told for emotional significance, a personal sort of symbolism, such as the spittoon that Saleem carries around with him for years after the destruction of his family? Or maybe, as in the case of his sister Jamila's popular singing career in Pakistan, it could be social satire. Most of the details of the novel can fit into

one of these categories, or they can be connected to the book's main stream of symbolism, the duality between Saleem and his archrival, Shiva.

It would be difficult to argue that the relationship between Saleem and Shiva lacks symbolic significance. They are both the true Children of Midnight, born at the same exact time on August 15, 1947: the other 999 referred to as Midnight's Children in the novel are actually born in the minutes and hours following the stroke of twelve. The novel seems built around this conceit, making it both the story of a boy, Saleem, whose destiny is the destiny of free India, but also the story of two children whose lives are forever, inexorably linked, having had their fates inverted, a device with literary echoes of *The Prince and the Pauper* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. However, the parallel between Saleem and Shiva is obscured by the fact that Shiva hardly appears in the book. He is a vague presence during childhood; he appears as a menacing presence in Saleem's psychic connection to the other survivors who constitute Saleem's Midnight's Children's Conference when they are all nine; and then he is gone from the story for another twenty years, only coming face-to-face with Saleem at the end of the book.

Putting Shiva in the background does not erase his symbolic significance, but it does make it harder for readers to consider this book as a story of two people. It is the story of one, with the other existing only to highlight his personality. Shiva, in fact, might not even truly exist: his exploits are so unreal, so shadowy, that it is easy to read him as a figment of Saleem's imagination. Of course, the same could be said about most of the fantastic journey that Saleem dictates to Padma throughout this novel, but many other characters and incidents have enough details to make them plausible, even if they rely on magic or coincidence or other supernatural factors. Shiva, by contrast, shows up only when Saleem's psyche seems to need him.

□Nose and knees□ is one of the book's refrains, characterizing the relationship between Saleem and Shiva as if it covers the whole world. And so it does, if one looks at the two elements simplistically. If Saleem's nose is meant to signify intellect and Shiva's knees are meant to be violent force□interpretations that not only fit their personalities, but also work crudely with one's understanding of the Indian and Pakistani natural characteristics□then, yes, all of nature might be fitted into one category or the other. But these two basic meanings do not capture it all.

For one thing, Shiva's knees are a weak symbol at best. They are supposed to represent physical strength and military prowess: Rushdie relates several times, particularly in the meeting between the two main characters on the battlefield, how Shiva's mighty knees make him something to be feared. Knees, though, are not really effective military weapons. The act of crushing one's opponent in the knees, which is supposed to make Shiva fearsome in this book, is actually more awkward than intimidating. Readers are left to imagine how one would become a world-class slayer with powerful knees, but it only takes a little imagination to see that the conceit is stretched mighty thin. On the other hand, even if the knees are not as powerful as Saleem says in his narration, they do carry with them a lingering hint of defeat: knees are more often associated with supplication, with kneeling in surrender or with paying homage, than they are with destruction.

The nose is just as imperfect a symbol, but the novel at least puts more effort into making it work, starting with the nose of Saleem's grandfather, which, in the first chapter, spews gems, and carrying on through several different meanings attached to Saleem's own nose. For the first years of his life, it is just plain ugly, a large and runny feature in the middle of a face that is marred with birthmarks, and then when he is a schoolboy, he is further disfigured by premature baldness. Rushdie seems determined to make his protagonist almost painfully hideous: this could be fit into the □Saleem-as-India□ symbolism scheme, but it could also be a way of marking the book's protagonist as outstanding, unique.

When Saleem is nine, however, his nose becomes the source of his own super power, a match to Shiva's strong knees. It is somehow connected to his telepathic powers, which appear when he has a pajama tie that he has shoved into it yanked out abruptly and disappear after his sinuses have been drained. The connection is never made clear□the narrator accepts this as just one of those things that is bound to happen□leaving readers to determine whether the book is trying to say something symbolically. The situation is rich with possibilities, from Freudian psychology (the telepathy kicks in just after he sees his mother naked; it ends with an operation as feared as Saleem's later forced castration) to political intrigue (while it is working, his nose makes it possible for him and Shiva to vie for control of an army of talented, neglected children).

In the end, though, it is just a segment of Saleem's life, giving way to a different exaggerated power: an ability to smell things well beyond the power of ordinary noses. For the rest of the Saleem's life, he is said to be able to smell, not just people's particular scents, but moods and attitudes as well. When this ability develops, the parallel between Saleem and Shiva is broken. They cease to be two near-twins with matching powers; Saleem's power is still related to his nose, but it is not the power invested in him as a child of midnight. His ability to sniff things out certainly does make him a suitable protagonist for an epic, symbolizing the ability of a good observer to know the story behind what he sees, but it is not the interlocking power that was once the compliment to Shiva's knees.

Midnight's Children is a story that takes its own time, sprawling across the Indian sub-continent, over decades. For the most part, Rushdie makes it difficult for readers to tell what facts, among the thousands related by Saleem, are important: which result from the author's imagination running rampant, and which result from an over-imaginative narrator. The only sure thing is that he has taken special care to force the central relationship, between the two boys born at midnight, to be meaningful, even when it might not be obviously so. Readers who find themselves lost need to bear in mind that, whether it is intrinsically important to the story or not, anything to do with knees or noses will be connected to the world of the novel in a way that gives it power. A hundred years from now, literary critics will still look for signs in this book: Rushdie starts the hunt out by confirming only two.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *Midnight's Children*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Midnight's Children was adapted for the London stage in 2003. Based on a five-hour script that Rushdie wrote for the BBC which was never filmed, the West End production was staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company, with financial assistance from the University of Michigan and Columbia University. After its London run, it played in Ann Arbor, Michigan, then at Harlem's Apollo Theater in New York for twelve performances in 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Saleem Sinai's life is influenced by the fact that he was born at the date and hour of Indian independence. Find out the most significant fact concerning the date on which you were born, and make a chart of events from your life that could possibly have been influenced by it.

When Saleem's sister becomes a pop music icon in Pakistan, her fans do not know her true identity. Choose another country, and determine what your persona would be if you were to become a pop singer there.

This novel starts in Kashmir, a region that in the early 2000s was still involved in territorial disputes between India, Pakistan, and China. Research the history of the Kashmir valley and propose what you think would be a fair solution to the political uncertainty of the region.

Near the end of his story, Saleem Sinai befriends Picture Singh, a famous snake charmer. Give a report to your class on the science and the superstition of snake charming.

How many different ways are there to make pickles? What are the variables? What changes in the formula will create what changes in the outcome? Examine some recipes or, if you can, talk to someone at a pickle factory to find out how challenging Saleem's work is.

Watch one of India's famous musical films and discuss which elements of the film style resemble techniques that Rushdie used in writing *Midnight's Children*.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Newly freed from colonial rule, India has a poor but promising economy. Indian businessmen, taking control of their own country, pattern their methods after those of the Europeans.

1980s: After decades of misgovernment, India's economy is considered weak, making a country of 683 million people one of the world's poorest nations.

Today: The Indian economy is growing at an impressive rate, as globalization makes it possible for jobs from anywhere in the world to be outsourced to workers in India.

1950s: Tensions are high between the Hindu majority of India and the Muslim majority of Pakistan, leading to a succession of treaties that finally gives way to all-out war in 1965.

1980s: Having tested a nuclear device in 1974, India is a member of the small group of global nuclear powers. Pakistan proposes a non-nuclear treaty with India but is later found to be conducting research into building nuclear bombs.

Today: As recently as 2002, India and Pakistan have come to the verge of nuclear war.

1950s: The Indian film industry, in business since the turn of the century, gains international attention as prestigious directors such as Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak present their works at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival.

1980s: Concentrated in Bombay, the film industry, nicknamed □Bollywood,□ becomes a commercial powerhouse.

Today: Bollywood films are viewed worldwide. India produces more films than any other country.

1950s: Begging in the streets of a large city like Bombay or New Delhi is a full-time profession for thousands if not millions.

1980s: The hoards of beggars that descend on tourists in India are legendary and are a standard part of travel books.

Today: Laws are enacted to curtail begging in the streets.

What Do I Read Next?

The fantastic elements of this novel remind many critics of Günter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum*, published in 1959, which tells the story of the build up to the Nazi era in Germany through the eyes of a little boy who wills himself to never grow up.

Midnight's Children is frequently compared to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* published by Columbian novelist Gabriel García Márquez in 1967. Márquez spins incredible tales into the history of a fictional South American town, Macondo, in what is considered the finest example of the □magical realism□ category into which many critics fit Rushdie's novel.

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian author, wrote *A Fine Balance* (1995), which is set in the India of Indira Gandhi during the declared state of emergency of 1974 and 1975 and covers crackdowns on journalists and political opponents, forced sterilization, and many other subjects touched on in Rushdie's novel. It is available from Vintage International.

The works of Sadaat Hasan Manto, a respected Urdu writer, often focus on the partition of India on August 15, 1947. His story □A Question of Honor□ is representative of his work and his worldview. It is available in *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, published in 1987 by Verso Press.

Taslima Nasreen wrote the novel *Homecoming Phera*, about a woman who is forced to emigrate from her homeland of Mymensingha at the time of the partition and returns, years later, to find many changes in her country. It was published in 2005 by Srishti.

Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* concerns a U.S. counterterrorism expert who is assassinated by his chauffer. Random House published the novel in 2005.

Further Study

Barnaby, Edward, □Airbrushed History: Photography, Realism, and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*,□ in *Mosaic*, March 2005, pp. 1-16.

The author makes the point that this novel, rather than being a work of □magical realism,□ is actually based on a series of imaginary photographs.

Booker, M. Keith, □Salman Rushdie: The Development of a Literary Reputation,□ in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, edited by M. Keith Booker, G. K. Hall, 1999, pp. 1-15.

Booker takes a close look at this novel's critical role in making Rushdie the literary giant he was at the end of the twentieth century.

Goonetilleke, D. C. R. A., *Salman Rushdie*, St. Martin's Press, 1998.

In the *Midnight's Children* chapter of this installment of St. Martin's *Modern Writers* series, Goonetilleke examines how Rushdie, already a good writer, blossomed by turning to his homeland as his subject matter.

Hassumani, Sabrina, □*Midnight's Children*,□ in *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002, pp. 31-46.

As the title of Hassumani's book implies, this interpretation uses postmodernism to give some understanding to the novel, even though some critics find such a style of interpretation incomplete.

Heffernan, Teresa, □Apocalyptic Narratives: The Nation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*,□ in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Winter 2000, pp. 470-91.

Heffernan argues against the idea that this novel is nationalistic, instead making the point that it does just the opposite, that Rushdie rejects the idea of the modern nation.

Kortenaar, Neil Ten, □Women,□ in *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children,* McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, pp. 109-27.

A subject too frequently overlooked is the ways that Rushdie uses women in this novel, from Indira Gandhi to Parvati to Evie Burns to Padma. Kortenaar considers them as a group.

□□□, □Salman Rushdie's Magic Realism and Return of Inescapable Romance,□ in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Summer 2002, pp. 765-85.

This article examines the concept of magical realism in this novel and the various interpretations of it that apply.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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