



EMORY  
UNIVERSITY

## **Creativity Conversation**

Transcript from a conversation between  
Salman Rushdie and Rosemary Magee

*February 1, 2008*

Emory University  
Atlanta, GA

As part of an ambitious strategic plan, Emory University has developed a university-wide Creativity & Arts Initiative that seeks to integrate the arts across the educational spectrum, foster an environment of creativity, and contribute to the world of knowledge and culture. Emory is fully committed to a liberal arts education that forges both new connections and new ways of seeing.

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Luce: Good afternoon. Welcome to Emory University. I'm Rick Luce, Director of Libraries for Emory University, and I'd like to begin this conversation just by observing we've had a daylong meditation and symposium centered around the question of new covenants and special collections.

It really brings up the question in many people's mind, "What are special collections?" And what I want to just very quickly relay from the daylong conversation is they're much more than a set of old archives and books and papers and so forth on the shelves. They're really living, breathing, very much alive things. They're a place where we convene the University for conversation, stimulation, and inspiration.

I think we'll see very much that same sense of living in the conversation that we have today as we celebrate really a giant in terms of literary arts and the conversation around that. The library, however, would not be able to convene this kind of conversation at Emory nor anywhere else without a deep, creative, and very, very profound partnership between the library and Emory College of Arts and Sciences.

It's my pleasure to be able to introduce my partner, my colleague, someone I admire deeply. That is Dean Bobby Paul.

Paul: Thank you and thanks, Rick. It's a pleasure and an honor to be able to be, even say a few words at this. I know you didn't all come to hear me speak.

But Rick is absolutely right, first that a special collections archive is not something that's dusty and dead and it pertains only to the past. What we have here and what the college and the library were able to work out is a true living thing, living in the genuine sense that I think perhaps uniquely or if not uniquely certainly very unusually for an archive, Emory received not only the papers but actually the author himself, who is a living presence here and we're very proud to welcome him as a member of our community and of the Emory faculty as a distinguished artist in residence.

This, I think, is a real example of the fact that the library and the college are absolutely intertwined in their fates and their interests. The laboratory of the arts and sciences must be its archives and its libraries. And I'm proud to say also that it's living in the sense that we open our archives. These are not stored away in locked files never to be seen, but on the contrary, our philosophy is that these treasures and these research materials are to be shared, not only with scholars interested in the area but also with our students. I think that's a really unique feature of our approach to the archive, and I would also add in this particular case to Mr. Rushdie himself, who I think will find benefit in having his papers nicely catalogued and arranged and will be able to make use of them during this stay here and mine them for further literary and other sorts of creative ventures.

It makes us present at the creation, not simply the recipients of the remains of past creative work. I also want to say that Emory is very proud of the collections it's been able to bring to Emory. I won't try to list them all, but you know that they are really remarkable and place Emory in a rare company of the distinguished authors who are represented here.

And I want to say also one further word about that, which is that while we of course want great writers and Salman Rushdie is certainly a great writer, one of the greatest of our time, there are also certain values that lie behind this. We here at Emory value the benefits of open communication and the absence of any hindrance on free discourse and the exchange of often controversial ideas, and we think that the University is one of the few places where that kind of dialogue can occur. And nobody in the world really represents that both in his person and also in his very active championship of the freedom for writers and for freedom of speech and his advocacy on behalf of the literary world through his work in pen. No one exemplifies that more than Salman Rushdie.

So it's not simply that we are interested in people who are great writers, but there's a certain value and a certain ethic that lies behind this, and we hope that comes out, too.

This evening's event, which promises to be very stimulating and exciting, is a conversation between my colleague, Rosemary Magee, who is the Vice President and Secretary of Emory University, a longtime colleague of mine, and herself a writer of some distinction and director of Emory's Creativity and the Arts Initiative and, of course, with Salman Rushdie, who I believe needs no introduction.

Without further ado, I will turn the floor over.

Magee: Thank you, Bobby, for that great introduction and welcome back to Emory.

Rushdie: Thank you.

Magee: Since we last saw you, you've been appointed or made a knight as well?

Rushdie: Yes.

Magee: Has that come with any additional hat or suit or internal shift?

Rushdie: There's nothing I'm afraid. It theoretically gets you tables at restaurants and appointments at the hair dresser but that's not that important in this case.

Magee: Last year when you were at Emory and you gave your annual lecture, you used the words, "We're all dreaming creatures. To dream is to create." And I was wondering if you'd be willing to share with us something about your creative process, how it begins, what has influenced you as you've been working on a new work, or as you look back on your earlier works.

Rushdie: The awful thing is that there is no consistent process. That's to say, each book seems to have its own way of showing up. But I think one of the things that I have noticed is that the books that I end up writing tend to be books that have been in my head for quite a long time. In fact, the fact that these ideas stick around in my head is one of the clues that I have that maybe I should pay attention to them. For instance, I've just finished this historical novel which takes place in the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and describes a couple of journeys back and forth between the Europe of the [High Renaissance] and India of the Mughal Empire. Although the particular story of the book is not something that I had in my head for a long time, the idea of wanting to write both about a kind of Machiavellian Florence and about the court of the Emperor Akbar in India were thoughts I'd had.

I know it never actually occurred to me they'd be in the same book, but those were things that have been lodging in my head. By training I'm not a literature person; I'm a history person. And that said, I never studied literature, thank goodness. What I mean by that is I think it has actually been very helpful to me in the kind of writer that I've become that I studied history because although I've forgotten almost all the history I ever learned, what lodges with you and is really helpful is this thing called historical method, how do you make sense of the past, how do you look at a kind of massive event and try and judge what's meaningful and what isn't. And that piece of learning about how you make sense of things is actually very useful for fiction writers as well as nonfiction writers.

Magee: In another place you refer to what's important is the fictionality of fiction. Can you help us understand what that means?

Rushdie: What it means is it's not true. I mean it's a very simple important factor about fiction that these things did not happen. And the kind of broad fixation on realism in fiction forgets this fact. It doesn't matter how realistic the novel is. It's still

untrue, and I think if you grew up as I did in a literary context in India, which is the context of what's called the wonder tale. That's not just the Arabian Knights stories because in a way the Arabian Knights compendium comes at the end of a journey of these stories from India. A lot of these stories began with Indian origins and then were translated into Persian and then there's a compendium of the Hezar Afsaneh, the thousand stories which is a Persian collection. Then you have the Arabian Knights becoming third stage.

But if you're surrounded by these kinds of stories, one of the first things you learn about stories is that they're obviously untrue. We all know that carpets don't fly and yet when in stories they do, it allows us to make a different kind of journey I suppose. And that early realization that fiction was fictional was a kind of liberation.

Magee: What about the relationship then between fiction and truth?

Rushdie: Well, every writer works that out for themselves. I wrote a first novel which was very much a kind of very fantastic novel. The book didn't do very well, but also I came to, in my mind, reject that approach and to feel that if work didn't have roots in something observable and real then it had no weight. And if anything can happen, then it doesn't matter that something does happen.

I think an example of this is if you look at Charles Dickens. There are elements in the work of Charles Dickens which you could quite clearly call surrealist. For instance, the Circumlocution Office is a government department that exists in order to do nothing. At least that's not a description of the present administration. Or in Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce in *Bleak\_House* you have this court case extended ad infinitum in a way that would not be out of place in a novel by Garcia Marquez, a lot of whose fantasy is also about exaggeration.

Magee: Or even Ebenezer Scrooge...

Rushdie: Yes, the ghosts and so on. I mean there's quite clearly fantasy elements in Dickens. Even an actually observable phenomenon which was the dust heaps that feature in *Our Mutual Friend*, which actually were there in North London at the time of Dickens. But to find then this symbol of culture being dwarfed by its own garbage was a thing that the surrealists might have done. But the thing about the Keynesian prose is that these characters are very exaggerated in that many of these characters are something larger than life and yet the context in which they are set is hyper-realistic.

There are famous stories about how Dickens would write a piece of dialogue between two characters who were walking down The Strand in London. He would go walk down The Strand in London to make sure that the dialogue would take as long as the walk. So there's a sense in which the books are obsessively realistic.

Magee: Embedded.

Rushdie: Yes, embedded in real, observed, everyday life. And when these flights of fancy, these giant characters and these surrealist things arise from that, they become not just believable, they become like intensifications of reality and that's how it works, and it seemed to me that that was how it should work.

Magee: But they also become mythic in a way because they become a part of our lives.

Rushdie: Yes, if you do it right. I mean, Dickens himself didn't always do it right. It's a very hard trick to pull off, and there are kind of huge elephant traps in it, but that's all right. It seemed to me like that was if you're going to use non-naturalistic elements in a novel they have to somehow grow out of some real vision of the world.

Magee: Related back to that then, the subject of history, one of your characters, Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, was born on the eve of Indian independence.

Rushdie: At the moment of...

Magee: Yes, right at the moment of it. And I think the phrase is, "I tumbled forth into the world." And he later comments that he is buffeted by too much history. You were actually born that same year.

Rushdie: Eight weeks earlier.

Magee: In June in Bombay. And your life has been accompanied by, and you've been in the midst of, major historical currents. I was wondering if you feel that way as well, that you've been buffeted by too much history.

Rushdie: Too much history, yes. You've got to be careful what you wish for. I mean I was always a writer who had an interest in public affairs. Then I got an overdose of it. And I feel less politically interested these days than I can remember ever feeling, and it takes a lot to get me interested. I used to be leaping to various battlements in order to wave various kinds of flags and fists, and I don't seem to do that now or with much more reluctance. I just think there's a wonderful increasingly wise perception at the end of Voltaire's *Candide* when Pangloss the philosopher, having been beaten up dreadfully through the book, decides to withdraw, decides to cultivate his garden. I've never been *horticulturally* inclined myself, but as Dorothy Parker famously said, you can lead a *whore to culture*, but you cannot make it think. But I'm beginning to think about gardening.

Magee: We actually have some gardens here at Emory. We might put you to work.

Rushdie: There's a wonderful image of this in Bertolucci's movie, *The Last Emperor*, which is based on the life of the last emperor of China, P'u Yi. And it's an extraordinary fact about him, about the last emperor that when we was born as a child he was considered to be actually God, and he was brought up to be told by everyone that he was in fact God. And he went from that to the end of his life when he was working as a gardener in the Forbidden City, in the place in which he had previously been God and claiming to be happier, happier as a gardener than as the divinity. And it's an extraordinary life because you have to ask yourself, what do you call that extraordinary shift in a human life? Do you call that discovery or do you call it brainwashing? I mean how does somebody go from being one thing to the other?

Magee: Metamorphosis.

Rushdie: Yes. But sometimes I think that just the peace of quietly walking along the walls of the city trimming the weeds must have seemed to him to be preferable.

Magee: Well, talk about that then in terms of your presence here at a university, what that means to you, how you feel about what your experience has been with scholars and students.

Rushdie: Well, it's the first time. The last six or seven years I've been going around giving odd talks here and there at universities, but this is the first time I've ever had any kind of real extended relationship with a university. So far, so good.

Magee: We're glad to hear that.

Rushdie: I mean, last year when I was here, first of all I actually found the seminar that I was teaching very pleasurable because I thought the quality of the students was very high and based on one class this year, it seems they're just as lively this year as they were last. So that makes a big difference because then you get a lot back from it as well.

Magee: And you have graduate students in that class?

Rushdie: Yes, 16 or 17. And just stopping by other people's classes and meeting a sort of wider range of undergraduates as well as graduates, it was very interesting last year and I expect it to be so again this year. But the other thing that happened, which was the one thing I was most worried about, is that if shifting location for four weeks meant that I wouldn't be able to do any of my own work. That would start driving you crazy because any writer who is prevented from doing his own work starts going crazy rather quickly. And I discovered to my delight that actually the opposite was true, and that I found myself really able to work very well.

Magee: Is this book that you have coming out in April or this spring?

Rushdie: Well, April in England and June in America.

Magee: That is the book that you were working on when you were here last year?

Rushdie: Yes, I did a lot of it, worked very hard on it when I was here last year. So quite a sizeable chunk of it was done here and actually Rebecca, who's over there, was helping me out with . . . I can tell you what she did actually. I asked her to find out -- see, the thing you need to know when you're writing a historical novel is not the politics. You need to know about everyday life. So I asked her to find out all the rude words that people used and if people got angry with each other, what do they call each other? So all the swearing in the novel is due to her.

Magee: Yes, we won't ask you to tell us that right now.

Rushdie: You don't want to know.

Magee: We'll have to read the book. What will you be working on this year?

Rushdie: Well, the thing I'm starting, I mean, 18 years ago I wrote a children's book *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* for my son who was then 10, 11 and is now 28. And now I have another 10 year old who is going, "Where's my book?" And I mean he's read and is very fond of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, but he knows that it was written for his brother. And so it seemed only fair to come up with another one, and so I've been trying to do that and I think I've just about . . . at least I found a place to begin. I sort of think I know what I'm doing. I'm hoping in the next few weeks to be able to make a little headway on that.

Magee: Are you the kind of writer who has a vision of where it ends, of how it unfolds, or just where it starts?

Rushdie: Usually, the beginning is the crucial thing because the beginning is not just a matter of plot. It's also a matter of voice and manner, tone, pitch, all those things. If you get that right, the rest of it often follows. I mean Joseph Heller used to say that he often would have a sentence and that he would know that that sentence contained the next 200 or 300 sentences, and he often started that way. For instance, I think when he wrote *Catch-22* the opening two sentences were really what gave him the book, "It was love at first sight. The moment Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell in love with him." That in his mind gave him the open sesame, and I think actually when I wrote *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, it worked like that. I mean there was a particular day when I wrote what was the opening bit for the first couple of sentences of the book. And I immediately thought, "Oh, well, I see how it goes now. It goes like this." And then I could continue.

Magee: So the whole isn't there at the start.

Rushdie: I mean I do plan and I do kind of try and work out a sort of structure and arc for the book, but truthfully, page by page is how you discover it. And the business of just physically bringing things to life on a page sentence by sentence, making the sentences alive and making the people alive and making the story move, etcetera, that really is a sentence by sentence act of discovery and usually in the doing of it, it shifts all kinds of things. The characters become slightly different than what you thought they were going to be and so the way in which they react to each other becomes different and sometimes that requires the story to change. And then sometimes you have a better idea as you're going along, or the opposite, sometimes you discover what you thought was a good idea isn't very good and you've got to think of another way of solving how to get from A to C. You discover that B is no good, and you need another B. That happens all the time.

So, yes, I kind of fool myself that I know what I'm doing, and then I have to find out what I'm really doing by doing it.

Magee: Through the fictionality.

Rushdie: Yes . . . . It's impossible to over-emphasize how important it is to put the right sentence after the previous sentence. Anybody building a wall will tell you this. You've got to put the bricks down properly.

Magee: Brick by brick.

Rushdie: Otherwise, the wall doesn't stand up. And it's like that. You're just left foot/right foot. You're just going slowly down a journey, and you have to make sure that each footstep is on solid ground.

Magee: Last year you and Steve Ennis and I went on a road trip together to Milledgeville, Georgia, where we spent the day at Andalusia Farm, where Flannery O'Connor had written and lived most of her writing life. And then on the way back we stopped in Eatonton, Georgia, which is the home of Joel Chandler Harris and Alice Walker. All three of these writers are represented in our archives along with you. In fact, to prove that we actually have a picture of you.

Rushdie: I have a picture of me and Brer Rabbit, absolutely.

Magee: That's right. Courthouse Square. And actually you seemed very interested in Brer Rabbit.

Rushdie: Well, you know, like everybody else I read those stories. It's always interesting to find out where the briar patch is. I remember I was saying to you before, when I went to Oxford, Mississippi, a couple of years ago I was shown around by a

professor who was like the local Faulkner expert and he was able to say things like, "You see that picket fence? That's where the idiot child used to come." And to be able to -- if you have read *The Sound and the Fury*, to be able to have it made actual in that way is what was quite very moving. And the same way -- probably the cruelest short story in the English language is Flannery O'Connor's *Good Country People* and that is a terrible story. And to be able as we were when we walked around, to be shown the barn which was a setting in the story, again if you're a writer you're interested in that stuff.

Magee: The scene of the crime.

Rushdie: Yes, you're interested in that stuff, and I think it's a thing to talk about even though it's a real location and so on, the role it plays in the story is made up so you have to always be conscious of the relationship of reality of source material to a finished text. But still very interesting to see the source material.

Magee: We spent the day, many of us, at this conference on the archives, where again you along with Flannery O'Connor and Seamus Heaney and Yates and other great writers are represented. What is it about the Emory archives that drew your attention, or where you felt was a place for you to have your work?

Rushdie: Well, in the first instance it was the other writers who were there. It was just knowing that if it was good enough for Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. . .

Magee: -- Pretty good company.

Rushdie: -- It's probably good enough for me. So I mean it's always and I think in that sense any archive that begins to build up that kind of list, it becomes easier and easier because you can say to people who else is there. And just that, to be frank, that they expressed such a -- I mean you always look for passion, don't you? And you want people to be really interested in your work, and I felt that that was the case. And frankly I thought that my papers would probably be in better hands here than with me because in my case they were just languishing. I mean Steve will remember what bad condition the cardboard boxes were. They'd just been knocking around these papers and one of the real motives in my case was to find a safe home, to find a place where they actually could be -- I've been learning this language now -- stabilized.

Magee: That's good.

Rushdie: And so it's all those things.

Magee: Well, we use the term papers rather loosely because some of us, we're learning today a lot of your work is in a digital format.

Rushdie: Well, yes. There's a lot of both actually. I think we did pack 80 odd boxes of papers. So there's quite a lot of just straightforward old-fashioned paper. But I think, yes, it's obviously going to be the case more and more with archives of anyone that there will be a very substantial digital element.

Magee: Several different computers over time, different types of systems.

Rushdie: Yes. Again, a very nightmarish retrieval job because as we know computers outdate with very high speed and so does the software inside them, and so I was very impressed yesterday or the day before yesterday. I was given a little look at how the retrieval was going and just the fact that this information can be retrieved and has very largely been retrieved, that's impressive because I think Steve was saying that he wasn't optimistic. He saw these ancient machines kind of flowing around. But it seems as if there is stuff in there that can be got out.

And one of the things that is interesting to me about email is that it reinvents an old idea of correspondence. I was reading a biography a few years ago of the London group of the Godwins and the Shelleys and it was about how they used to write letters to each other all the time. If you got up in the morning in London at that time and wrote a letter at 7:00 in the morning, it would be delivered by half past 10. And if you then replied to it by 11:00, the reply would be received by lunch time, and you could then reply to that at 2:00 in the afternoon, and it would get to its destination by teatime, and you could reply to that, and it would get back the same day.

One of the reasons why there are these extraordinary literary correspondences is because you could literally have a conversation. You could go back and forth three or four times in a day because of the mail service at that time. Now the mail service is not like that. But email offers similar possibilities. You can have that back and forth that it can feel like talking to people, and I think that's a thing which will be very interesting in the future, looking at people's email correspondence because it will possibly in some cases in a way reinvent that old tradition of letter writing.

Magee: Has your sense of your work as you've been working on it shifted now that your materials are here, your papers are here and available to researchers, scholars, and our archive is equally available?

Rushdie: No, it's kind of too scary to think about it. I mean fortunately you've only got the past. You haven't got what I'm doing now. I'll have to make another decision about that at some point in the future. But, no, it is quite alarming I think to look at material that -- I, until quite recently, was not very archivally minded. It really never occurred to me for a very long time that any of these bits of paper would ever been looked at by anyone other than me. And it's very odd now to have them publicly available. And in the same way as I find it kind of weird to read a lot of

the critical material written about my books. And in the same way, I'm not sure how much I can look at this stuff. The things that I did that are interesting which was being said earlier is that there is material there which might be useful at some point. I mean particularly if I ever get around to writing an autobiography, which I'm not very drawn to right now, but if I do then of course it's going to be incredibly helpful to have this material properly catalogued just to make it organized which will allow me to get at it properly. That's something which would never have happened except by giving it to a university.

Magee: As you have been giving these materials here and we've been going through it, are there materials that you had forgotten about?

Rushdie: Yes, lots. I mean certainly there were a number of short stories that we found in various places, sort of ancient stuff whose existence I completely forgot. In one case even when I looked at it I couldn't remember writing it.

Magee: Did you like it?

Rushdie: Well, I thought it wasn't bad. I thought it wasn't publishable as it stood, but I thought that it could be. I mean there were two or three things there which I think that if I could give them another draft or something might be something that could be published. There's also, we found an early manuscript of *Midnight's Children* which had quite a lot of deleted scenes in it. I mean the book was long enough but actually it was longer originally. And I remember just looking through this and thinking some of those deleted scenes weren't so bad. And so I don't know, maybe room for a director's cut.

Magee: Speaking of that, I know you're interested in film as well as fiction and can you talk a little bit about that?

Rushdie: Nobody's ever successfully brought one of my books to the screen. There have been projects but it's never happened for a number of reasons. One is that most movies don't get made. I mean it's just people get excited when they sell the rights to their book, but it doesn't mean a damn thing. So that's just generally true. In the case of my books, I think the problem is as any producer will tell you, the moment you say that these books happen in period, like 50 years ago even, that immediately means very expensive because to recreate the past is very expensive. You have to put the right cars on the street and all that, just the dressing of the scene is very pricey.

The other thing is that they are large cast films which take place over a period of time and, until recently, they haven't been books with big parts in them for American actors. And if you think the film is going to cost \$30 to \$40 million, the normal Hollywood way of thinking is that you get your money back by putting a big movie star in the middle of it. And when there isn't an obvious part for a big

movie star, it makes it much harder to get the project off the ground. So I think that's why. I wish it weren't so. I mean there are some possibilities around *Shalimar the Clown*, but as I would say, don't hold your breath.

Magee: In *Shalimar the Clown*, I think the narrator says everybody's story is a part of everyone else's, something along those lines.

Rushdie: Yes, that's kind of an author's message. Yes, that's true. There's very few bits in my books which actually have a neon sign above them saying this is what the author thinks.

Magee: That one is it?

Rushdie: That's one. I mean I just think that one of the things -- the way in which my life has turned out has shown me the truth of that. I have lived in quite a lot of countries in the world, and the world is very small now, and it used to be the case that the stories of individual countries or communities or even cities could be told really without reference to anywhere else. Dickensian London doesn't really need to take into account the rest of the country, let alone any other country. Jane Austin's characters likewise. They're just in this little microcosm and even though the Napoleonic wars are going on at the same time, public life impinges so little on private life that she doesn't need to bring that in. And the function of the British Army in the novels of Jane Austin is to look cute at parties in red uniforms, an important function, but defeating Napoleon Bonaparte not so much.

But that's the world as it was then. History was over there, and private life was over here, and they didn't much overlap. Now that's not so. And I've found it to be more and more a thing that I think of as my subject is to show how the world joins up and what are the implications and consequences of that.

This sounds like a post-9/11 thing, but it's not really. I was thinking that any way, but it is the case that on that day the history of New York was joined to the history of the Arab world -- you couldn't explain what happened in New York City without understanding what happened halfway around the planet. That's just a brutal demonstration of the way in which these stories are no longer separate, and you can't explain your neighborhood without talking about something that happened or things that have happened thousands of miles away.

So it's become very important to me to really find a way of picturing that world. And it's very difficult in a novel because I think there's something in the novel that wants to be parochial. The novel wants to be about a woman living in provincial France who's bored with her husband and decides to have an affair. It wants to be about that. It doesn't want to be about the whole damn planet. And it resists it. And yet we live in a world in which our neighborhood is the whole damn planet. How do you incorporate or how do you reshape the form to make

that credible and to make the story still engaging and involving and people relevant to the reader and so on?

I think every age brings its own set of creative challenges, and I think this may be ours.

Magee: This is the challenge of our time. You have a collection of essays called *Imaginary Homeland*, and I take it from that, when that was collected, that you were primarily referring to India at that time.

Rushdie: Yes, but not only. I'll just say that I was talking about the now quite well-known phenomenon of the diaspora writer. Diaspora writers fall more or less generationally into different categories where there's a first generation just like me which grew up in one place and settled in another and then there's a second generation like Hanif Kureishi. He doesn't come from Pakistan -- he comes from South London because that's where he grew up and his relation to Pakistan is as a place where his parents came from. Whereas my relation to India is the place where I came from. So that's just a generation shift.

But I think what I was writing about in that essay is what it's like to write about the place you've left and to what extent are you making it up, to what extent is it a real place and to what extent is it an imaginary one. But I think actually even if you live there, you're making it up. So in that sense we all live in imaginary homelands.

Magee: You have lived in India and then in England and now in New York and other places.

Rushdie: Bits of time in Pakistan.

Magee: And so, do you consider India still today to be your homeland?

Rushdie: I think India is where I come from. I mean India is just straightforwardly India is where I'm from and I think that just doesn't change. That's biological and historical fact and whenever I go back to India -- I was there in January -- I have that feeling of thinking, "This is where I'm from," because I am. And I have that feeling particularly in Bombay because that's where I grew up, and I think the place where you grow up has a particular and profound meaning for you, which it retains even if you spend a lot of your life somewhere else. And I mean anybody who's read my stuff knows how much it goes back to that well to drink. I mean I think that'll just always be the case.

Having said that, I think if I were to describe myself as a writer, I would say that I was a writer of the big city. And I think if you see yourself as an urban writer, you can easily inhabit a number of big cities. It's not so hard to move from Bombay to

London to New York. I've sometimes thought that the journey from a small Midwestern town to New York City might be a bigger journey than the journey from Bombay.

Just as an analogy, I'll share an interesting connection between Bombay and New York -- the figure of Queen Catherine of Braganza. Catherine of Braganza was a Portuguese princess who was married to Charles II of England and she was famously ugly, and Charles II was famously fond of good-looking girls, orange sellers, and so on. They did the deal because in her dowry, they insisted, would come Bombay Harbor, which the Portuguese controlled at that time and where there was basically nothing except a fishing village, but the British could see that it was a really good place to put the British Navy. And so they did.

Bombay came into the possession of the British because of the marriage of Catherine of Braganza to Charles II, and they immediately put their Navy there and built a town and that was the beginning of the empire and then the city of Bombay grew from that.

Meanwhile, in America, New York is beginning to spill off Manhattan Island and they lay out at this same period, during the reign of Charles II, two large boroughs which were in those days called the Kings Borough and the Queens Borough. The Kings Borough became Brooklyn and the Queens Borough became Queens. And so Bombay and New York had the same queen.

Magee: So you are at home in New York.

Rushdie: Yes. I have to tell you a very sad, funny story about the afterlife of Catherine of Braganza in New York. Literally in the time I've been living there this happened. A project was initiated...

Magee: And you've been there how long?

Rushdie: Eight or nine years now, coming up on nine years. Somebody had the idea of recognizing Catherine of Braganza as the person after whom Queens was named. And so they commissioned a sculpture, a bust of her. And they got a woman sculptor, who I guess had to look at a few pictures of Catherine of Braganza and saw the nature of the problem. And so she decided that instead of making a true life representation, she would make a multiethnic figure, which was a celebration of the multiethnicity of the Borough of Queens.

And so she made this extraordinary figure with African American lips and Chinese eyes, I mean just a bizarre abortion of a sculpture. But there it was and just as it was about to be put up in the place of honor at the Borough, somebody else worked out that the King of Portugal, her father, had been involved in the slave trade and immediately said, "How was it possible that we could put up a

statue in New York to a slaver?", ignoring the fact that the president of America had been involved in the slave trade and lots of people and there's no evidence that Catherine of Braganza herself had ever been involved in slavery of any kind.

Anyway, so pressure grew and they stopped the statue from being put up in Queens, and then some rich person in Queens said he had a big garden and they could put the statue in there. So that's where she is. It's a really sad fate for a woman who brought to birth two great cities.

Magee: Major cities. You have mentioned a few of your literary influences, and we talked earlier and you mentioned in passing also Faulkner, who would be a good example of somebody being displaced from a place like Oxford to New York that would be a very dramatic change.

Rushdie: Huge, yes.

Magee: But who are other writers who've had an influence on you and helped shape your imagination?

Rushdie: There's too many of them really so you could only just randomly pick.

Magee: That'd be good.

Rushdie: Well, here's -- it may seem extremely tedious to say Shakespeare, but what I mean is this, that if you look at what Shakespeare does technically in his plays, he shows you that a play doesn't have to be one thing. It can be a comedy and a tragedy and a history and a love story and...

Magee: -- A poem.

Rushdie: -- All at the same time. I mean if you look for instance at Hamlet: Act 1, Scene 1 - ghost story; Act 1, Scene 2 -- intrigues at court, politics; Act 1, Scene 3 -- Hamlet and Ophelia love story. Somewhere in there is Yorick and then the ghost story again. You've got at least four different kinds of plays all at the same time and the scenes are just jumbled like that and it kind of works. Hamlet sort of works.

Magee: So they say....

Rushdie: And for anybody who works in the shadow of the body of work of Shakespeare, it feels like an incredible act of permission to say, "You can do this." If you look at the equivalent in, let's say, the French classical tradition, that permission doesn't exist. If you look at Racine and Corneille and so on, this is much more classical. The epic is epic, the comic is comic, etcetera, and you don't shuffle the pack. What Shakespeare -- and not just Shakespeare -- what Elizabethan theatre and to

an extent restoration comedy after it lets you do is to just throw it all up in the air, and if you do it right it works. And for me that was really inspirational to think that you could be everything at once -- that it could be history and fantasy and tragedy and macabre and farce all at once, and you didn't have to choose because it seemed to me if you could do that right it would feel like life. I mean I think that's the great genius of Shakespeare is that it feels like the whole of life. And I think the reason it feels like that is because all those different manners are in there.

Magee: There is a quotation from you, I think that it's in our archives, that refers to after *The Satanic Verses*, something to the effect, that you said you felt like you were naming the parts of yourself and now you would be writing about the whole of life.

Rushdie: Did I say that?

Magee: Yes, you did.

Rushdie: What did I mean?

Magee: That's what I was going to ask you.

Rushdie: You see, the worst bit of the archive is as stuff gets fished out that you have no memory of ever having said, and you really don't know what you meant. What could I have possibly meant?

Magee: Somebody is writing a doctoral dissertation on it even as we speak.

Rushdie: Well, I think what I might have meant is I think if you look at those early novels, *Midnight's Children* is broadly speaking about India even though a chunk of it happens in Pakistan and *Shame* is broadly speaking about Pakistan even though a chunk of it happens in India. And I thought when I had finished those two books that I needed to write a book that did the thing that I had done, which is to say, it migrated and so I wanted to write a novel about the migrant experience, which was after all not only mine. It was all around us. And that really is the genesis of *The Satanic Verses*. I wanted it to be a novel about migrants, but migration as an idea and as a very central idea in our world. We live at a moment in which more people have moved across the face of the earth than have ever done so in human history, and it's partly just because the means to do so exists and we have planes now. We didn't have them before.

And whether it's for economic improvement or as political refugees or for whatever reason, this is an age of mass migration everywhere you look on the planet. Of course, in this country this is, if you like, an old story because it's a country created by migration. But this has now become a global thing. And it

struck me that looking specifically at the migrations from the Indian subcontinent, from South Asia to England, the thing that happens to migrants is that they lose many of what I would describe to myself as the roots of the self. That is to say, if you look at what the self is rooted in, a lot of the roots are external. Let's say they're to do with a place you know, they're to do with the language you speak, the community you live amongst.

Magee: Your family.

Rushdie: All these things, you root yourself in those things and your individual self flowers or flourishes or doesn't flourish in that context. The decontextualization of migration is therefore very traumatic that you find yourself amongst strangers, often not speaking the language you speak. You don't know your way around, the place is unfamiliar and its customs, its culture, its expectations, its ethics, its belief systems are different. And so, suddenly, you have to find a new way of being a self and that's true of migrant individuals and of migrant communities. And that involves a kind of very radical internal inquiry about how to do that, about what do you hang onto, what do you jettison, what do you absorb from the place to which you've come, what do you preserve of the place from which you came, how do you change, how do you not change, how do you make the negotiation with your children who are growing up rather different because they grow up in this different world: will they continue to speak the language you spoke or will they lose the language, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Every migrant community has to go through this.

That's what the novel is about. And it struck me that if what I was telling myself was that this act of radical questioning was going to take place, I thought, well, then the novel itself must be that act -- the novel must be the place where everything is put into question, everything in the lives of the characters. Nothing can be taken for granted. Everything has to be reexamined and questioned and that includes of course belief systems. And that's where the problem came from.

But the desire was to make a portrait not just of the external reality of migrating from one country to another but also the internal psychological reality of being put into this position of where nothing can be taken for granted, where everything has to be rethought.

Magee: There's a kind of profound irony about if that's what the book was about – and that led to circumstances in which that became manifested in your life itself.

Rushdie: Yes. I mean it did suggest to me that it showed that I wasn't wrong, that it was very deep at the core of the self and people responded like that. So here we are.

Magee: You have a lecture coming up a week from Sunday on the autobiography and the novel, and many of the things that we've talked about today relate to both

autobiography and the novel. I'm wondering if there's any kind of glimpse that we can have ahead of what you're thinking?

Rushdie: It's only this that very simply . . .

Magee: -- Just the trailer.

Rushdie: -- That it used to be the case that a writer's life story and life circumstances were irrelevant to how you looked at the work. I mean if we're talking about Shakespeare, for example, who cares about Shakespeare's life? We don't feel we need to know about Shakespeare's life in order to experience those extraordinary pieces of work.

Magee: Although there are a lot of books written about his life.

Rushdie: But frankly, who cares? There went your whole English department out the window. I mean it's interesting as gossip, but does it really help us to understand Hamlet that we know what did Shakespeare mean about leaving his wife his second-best bed? It's true it's a kind of weird remark as the opening sentence of a will, "To my wife, Ann, I leave my second best bed." But does it tell us much about the plays? It may tell us something about him.

What I'm saying is that until relatively recently, writers were less important than their work. The work was interpreted in itself, and we've gone from that, if you like, that end of the pendulum to the other swing of the pendulum where we now seem to believe that the only way to understand a text is by understanding the writer's life. And this kind of biographical obsession that has grown up now is, as I said, I'm not saying it's not interesting -- it's interesting, but there's something wrong with it I think. And so I'm going to talk about that.

Magee: When you talk to your students about reading a novel and they go about reading a novel, what to you is the most important thing for them to consider, look for, observe, respond to?

Rushdie: Well, basically it's abandon all theory. That's my view. I think, again, it's a difficult thing to say at a university, but the growth of the importance of theory as a way of studying literature has -- I'm not saying it has no uses, but I'm saying it frequently gets in the way of text, and this is like so many things clearly the fault of the French.

And so my view is to get beyond that. I think there is -- I can see the value of deconstruction theory and I can understand that semiotics is not rubbish, etcetera. I mean I know all that. But actually what it seems to me is that students get taught these theories almost like templates, and then you have to sort of push that onto the work and see if the work pops up through the right holes and if it does then it's

good and if it doesn't then it's bad. And it's just a dreadful way to read because the reason people do it is that it's supposed to be pleasurable. And so I would just try to reinvent reading for pleasure and responding to it. It seems to me the best way ever found of reading is the thing called close reading where you just sit there, you actually read the damn sentences, and tell people what your reaction to it is.

I've always wrote that years ago, over 10 years ago, a bunch of us British-based writers were invited to a British Council Seminar in Germany, which the British Council has every year with a bunch of very eminent German academics and critics, both newspaper and university-based critics. And in the final session, the critics I remember asked us -- and when I say asked, I mean me, Ian McEwan, James Fenton, Caryl Phillips, a few other people I can't remember. We were asked what did we think about critical inquiry and to what extent did we think it valuable as a resource? And all of us said, "Well, not at all really." And then we were accused of being defensive and blah...blah...blah.

I really think, genuinely think, we weren't being defensive because my view is that I don't want too much theory in my head. I don't. When I'm writing I do not think very theoretically. I'm not trying to think about some overarching thing. I'm trying, as I was saying earlier, to think about what sentence to put after the last one. And I don't have a kind of overarching theoretical concern when I'm writing. And so I don't want too much of that noise in my head. And I can see that it has its place, but it's not in my head.

And that's, I think, a view shared by quite a lot of writers who I know, good writers. I mean many of them are writers who know a lot about theory. If you -- when I was teaching Angela Carter this week and Angela Carter is certainly a writer who knew a lot about Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin and was interested in all that. But I think it's not the best way to read. That's to say, whether the theory is technical or ideological, there have been periods in history when it was Marxist theory, sometimes when it's feminist theory, and sometimes it's various kinds of ethnic politics that become involved and sometimes it's this French stuff. And it just seems if you could just take all that away and just be there with the page and allow yourself as a human being to respond as fully as possible to the thing on the page, that's the best way to read and that's what I've been trying to get them to do.

Magee: On that note, on behalf of my colleagues and friends and students and faculty here at Emory University as well as all of our friends, I really want to express my gratitude for your willingness to share your insights and your stories, and most importantly, your presence here among us.

Rushdie: I'm having a really good time so thank you all.

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