

The Maybe Mob and the Rushdie Attack

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*He has survived death threats and attempts on his life since February 1989. But **Salman Rushdie**’s luck just about ran out at the Chautauqua Institution, southwest of Buffalo in New York State. On August 12, at a venue historically celebrated for bringing education to all, the writer was stabbed incessantly by a fanatic who felt little sense of guilt or remorse. Hadi Matar only had eyes for Rushdie’s neck and abdomen. As a result of the attack, the author is [likely](#) to lose sight of one eye and possibly the use of an arm.*

It was a chilling reminder that the fatwa condemning him to death never risked going stale, even if it might have been put into a form of archived cold storage. Declared by the Iran’s sickly spiritual ruler, **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini**, Rushdie’s remarkable crime was to have blasphemed against the Prophet Muhammad in the novel *The Satanic Verses*. The supreme leader, having hardly distinguished himself in a bloody war against Iraq, needed a supreme distraction.

The entire exercise was an example of how irony and humour have no place for dour, dogmatic priestliness. How dare an author, in a work of fiction, playfully and plausibly claim that the Prophet was not the sole editor of the message to Angel Gibreel (Gabriel), and that Satan had cheekily inserted his role into it? And that this was done using the medium of Gibreel Farishta’s hallucinations?

Dare Rushdie did, and this exhortation to state-sanctioned killing of an author and all those associated with translating and disseminating the book exposed the underbelly of cowardice that often accompanies attempts to defend literary freedoms. Rushdie’s translator Hitoshi Igarashi was, in fact, murdered, while his Norwegian publisher, William Nygaard, was

gravely wounded. The Turkish translator, Aziz Nesin, [escaped](#) a mob assault that led to 37 deaths in Silvas, Turkey.

It was one thing to find fanatics who had never read the book and wished to do away with the author in a fit of state subsidised zealotry. But then there was that camp: those who, in principle, opposed the fatwa but still wished to attack Rushdie as an act of cultural understanding and solidarity with his enemies. (Grahame Wood of *The Atlantic* [calls](#) them the “Team To Be Sure”, who rubbished the West’s free speech defence of Rushdie, claiming that mischief might have been averted if only he hadn’t been so inclined to offend.)

The events of 1989 cast a long shadow. There were those in holy orders, who thought that the Ayatollah had a point. There was Dr. Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury, who [called for a strengthening](#) of blasphemy laws to cover religions other than Christianity, though he was also careful to “condemn incitement to murder or any other violence from any source whatever.” Very Church of England.

And there was former US President Jimmy Carter, who [seemed to take issue](#) that an author’s rights were considered fundamental even in the face of insulting religions. What, came the insinuation, about the insulted? Where would their anger go? Rushdie’s First Amendment freedoms might be “important”, but there had been “little acknowledgment that this is a direct insult to those millions of Moslems whose sacred beliefs have been violated and are suffering in restrained silence”. Contemplated homicide against an author, in other words, was being excused, even if the “death sentence” was an “abhorrent response”.

It was even more galling to see fellow novelists mauling the underdog, showing how solidarity among scribes is rarer than you think. The Marxist author John Berger did not think much of Rushdie’s case, [hiding behind a sham argument](#) that producing threatening literature might well endanger “the lives of those who are innocent of either writing or reading the book.” Berger’s ingratiating note was an attempt to convince other Islamic leaders and statesmen to avoid “a unique 20th-century holy war, with its terrifying righteousness on both sides.”

Roald Dahl, man of dysfunctional virtue and author of disturbed children’s tales, [decided](#) in a letter to *The Times* that Rushdie was a “dangerous opportunist”, as if engaging in irony in such matters is to be avoided. He had to have been “aware of the deep and violent feelings his book would stir up among devout Muslims.” His suggestion: a modest dose of self-censorship. “In a civilized world we have a moral obligation to apply a modicum of censorship to our own work to reinforce this principle of free speech.” Censors from Moscow to Tehran would have approved.

Nor did John le Carré, consummate writer of espionage novels, disagree. “I don’t think it is given to any of us to be impertinent to great religions with impunity,” [he told](#) *The New York Times* in May 1989.

In November 1997, with le Carré complaining of being unfairly branded an anti-Semite, Rushdie [wrote](#) a pointed reminder it would have been easier “to sympathize with him had he not been so ready to join in an earlier campaign of vilification against a fellow writer.” It would have been gracious were “he to admit that he understands the nature of the Thought Police a little better now that, at last in his own opinion, he’s the one in the line of fire.”

Le Carré [sniped back](#) accordingly, taking the position he claimed to have had in 1989: “that there is no law in life or nature that says great religions may be insulted with impunity.” Little time was spent then, and now, on the malicious, sinister nature of religious totalitarianism that has been a monstrous burden on expression, critique and sober thought. Instead, the creator of Smiley and the Circus wished to strike a “less arrogant, less colonialist, and less self-righteous note than we were hearing from the safety of his admirers’ camp.”

As Wood [writes](#), the honourable response to the attack on Rushdie would have been to admit a failure to protect a brave author and declare “that we are all Rushdie now”. Read his work; throw his name in the faces of the regime’s apologists and their homicidal dolts. After all, while the Republic of Iran has claimed to have lost active interest in killing the author, it will not object to an independent enthusiast doing the same. The decision encouraging Rushdie’s murder, [stated](#) Khomeini’s successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, “is a bullet for which there is a target. It has been shot. It will one day sooner or later hit the target.”

This crippling germ of authorial assassination is incarnated in more current forms, without the lethal element: cancel culture, the desire to actively enact one’s offended disposition to liquidate, banish and extirpate the views of your opponent. They offend you because you, somehow, have answers beyond question. Assassination is simply one of the most extreme forms of censorship, an attempt to silence and kill off the vibrant chatter that makes an intellectual world live. Sadly, as Rushdie recovers, the maybe mob and their complicity should be noted, their names marked on walls high. The inner censoring assassin is everywhere.

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