

MIND  
WINNING



ASSASSINS OF THE MIND  
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

At a dinner party that will forever be green in the memory of those who attended it, somebody was complaining not just about the epic badness of the novels of Robert Ludlum but also about the badness of their titles. (You know the sort of pretentiousness: *The Bourne Supremacy*, *The Aquitaine Progression*, *The Ludlum Impersonation*, and so forth.) Then it happily occurred to another guest to wonder aloud what a Shakespeare play might be called if named in the Ludlum manner. At which point Salman Rushdie perked up and started to sniff the air like a retriever. "O.K. then, Salman, what would \*Hamlet\*'s title be if submitted to the Ludlum treatment?" "The Elsinore Vacillation," he replied—and I find I must stress this—in no more time than I have given you. Think it was a fluke? *Macbeth*? "The Dunsinane Reforestation." To persist and to come up with *The Rialto Sanction* and *The Kerchief Implication* was the work of not too many more moments.

This is the way, when discussing Rushdie and his work, that I like to start. He is sublimely funny, and his humor is based on a relationship with language that is more like a musical than a literary one. (I here admit to my

own worst plagiarism: invited to write the introduction to *Vanity Fair*'s "Black & White Issue" some years ago, I took advantage of Salman's presence in my house to ask him to riff on the two keywords for a bit. He free-associated about everything from photogravure to the Taj Mahal, without a prompt, for about 30 minutes, and my piece was essentially done.) And this is a man whose first language was Urdu! Toward the end of the Second World War, George Orwell wrote to his friend Mulk Raj Anand to predict that one day there would be a whole category of English literature written by Indians. Today, no literate person has not absorbed a novel by Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy or R. K. Narayan or Rohinton Mistry, and for most European and North American readers the breakthrough moment came when Salman Rushdie published *Midnight's Children*, in 1981. Here was someone born as a British colonial subject who had annexed the proudest part of the Raj's dominion—the English language itself—and made it his own. The novel is still the only one to have won the Booker Prize twice, but really that's the least of it. His later novels have maintained the standard: I specially recommend *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which contains a

marvelous portrait of the city of Bombay before the religious sectarians changed its name to Mumbai. "Those who hated India," wrote Salman with awful prescience, "those who sought to ruin it, would need to ruin Bombay." His fictional genius to one side, Rushdie also chronicled the new age of migration and the contradictory synthesis of cultures.

How often have I been able to speak and write about my friend in this way? Not that often. For example, when he was staying in my house back at Thanksgiving of 1993, so were about a dozen heavily armed members of the United States' finest anti-terrorist forces. And you all know at least some of the backstory. On Valentine's Day 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran gave Salman's book *The Satanic Verses* the single worst review any novelist has ever had, calling in frenzied tones for his death and also for the killing of all those "involved in its publication." This was the first time that most people outside the Muslim world had heard the word *fatwa*, or religious edict. So if you have missed the humorous and ironic side of Mr. Rushdie, this could conceivably be the reason why. Just to re-state the situation before I go any farther: two decades ago the

theocratic head of a foreign state offered a large sum of money, in his own name, in public, to suborn the murder of a writer of fiction who was not himself an Iranian. In the event that some would-be assassin died in the attempt and failed to pick up the dough, an immediate passage to paradise was assured. (Again, this was the first time that many in the West found out about this now notorious Koranic promise.) I thought then, and I think now, that this was not just a warning of what was to come. It was the warning. The civil war in the Muslim world, between those who believed in jihad and Shari'a and those who did not, was coming to our streets and cities. Within a short time, Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, was stabbed to death on the campus where he taught literature, and the Italian translator Ettore Capriolo was knifed in his apartment in Milan. William Nygaard, the novel's Norwegian publisher, was shot three times in the back and left for dead outside his Oslo home. Several very serious bids, often backed by Iranian Embassies, were made on the life of Salman himself. And all this because the senile Khomeini, who had publicly promised that he would never make a deal with Saddam Hussein because god was on the Iranian

side, had had to swallow the poison (as he put it) of signing a treaty after all, and was urgently in need of a crowd-pleasing "issue" that would restore his purist religious credentials. Not everybody agreed with me about the nature of this confrontation. President George H. W. Bush, asked for a comment, said that no American interest was involved. I doubt he would have said this if the chairman of Texaco had been hit by a fatwa, but even if Salman's wife of the time (who had to go with him into hiding) had not been an American, it could be argued that the United States has an interest in opposing state-sponsored terrorism against novelists. Various intellectualoids, from John Berger on the left to Norman Podhoretz on the right, argued that Rushdie got what he deserved for insulting a great religion. (Like the Ayatollah Khomeini, they had not put themselves to the trouble of reading the novel, in which the only passage that can possibly be complained of occurs in the course of a nightmare suffered by a madman.) Some of this was a hasty bribe paid to the crude enforcer of fear: if Susan Sontag had not been the president of pen in 1989, there might have been many who joined Arthur Miller in his initial panicky refusal to sign a protest against the ayatollah's

invocation of Murder Incorporated. "I'm Jewish," said the author of *The Crucible*. "I'd only help them change the subject." But Susan would have none of that, and shamed many more pants wetters whose names I still cannot reveal. Others remarked darkly that Rushdie "knew what he was doing," as if that itself was something creepy or mercenary on its face. By the way, he certainly did know what he was doing. He had studied Islamic scripture at Cambridge University, and I will remember one evening, at the apartment of Professor Edward Said near Columbia, when the advance manuscript of *The Satanic Verses* was delivered to Edward by the Andrew Wylie agency. In a covering note, Salman asked America's best-known Palestinian for his learned advice, given the probability that the book might upset "the faithful." So, yes, he "knew" all right, but in a highly responsible way. In any case, it is not the job of writers and thinkers to appease the faithful. And the faithful, if in fact upset or offended, are quite able and entitled to explore all forms of protest. Short of violence.

Those last three words are not a proper sentence, but they summon to mind the various "sentences" that

have since been pronounced by the faithful in their periodic fits of rage. The Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, descendant of the painter, shot down and then ritually butchered on an Amsterdam street after making a short film about the maltreatment of Muslim women in Holland. His colleague Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an elected member of the Dutch parliament, forced into hiding and ultimately into exile by incessant threats of death. Another small (and unusually open and multicultural) European democracy, that of Denmark, its embassies burned and its exports boycotted and its citizens threatened, because of a few cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in a morning newspaper in Copenhagen. Daniel Pearl, of *The Wall Street Journal*, taunted on video for being a Jew and then foully beheaded. Riots and burnings and killings all across the Muslim world, some of them clearly incited by the authorities, in response to some ill-judged words about Islam from the Pope.

These are among the things that have happened, and have become depressingly taken for granted, since the fatwa of the ayatollah. We live now in a climate where every publisher and editor and politician has to weigh

in advance the possibility of violent Muslim reprisal. In consequence, there are a number of things that have not happened. Let me give a recent and trivial example that isn't altogether lacking in symbolic importance. Last October, Sony PlayStation abruptly delayed the release of its biggest video game in 2008, *LittleBigPlanet*, because an accompanying track by the Malian singer Toumani Diabaté included two expressions that, according to the Press Association report, "can be found in the Koran." Following the lead of the American press—which refused to show its readers the Danish cartoons and thus permit them to judge for themselves—the report did not care to say which "expressions" these were. It was a textbook instance of self-censorship or, if you prefer, of crying before you are hurt. There was one American magazine (the secular *Free Inquiry*, for which I write) that did print those Danish cartoons—Borders Books pulled that issue from the shelves.

But that you can be hurt, let nobody doubt. A few weeks before Sony PlayStation capitulated in advance, so to speak, a firebomb was thrown into a private home in North London that is also the office of a small publisher

named Gibson Square Books. The director, Martin Rynja, was chosen for this atrocity because he had decided to publish a romantic novel called *The Jewel of Medina*, by the American writer Sherry Jones, which told the tale of the prophet Muhammad's youngest and favorite wife, the nine-year-old Aisha (aged six at the time of her betrothal). The novel had originally been commissioned by Random House in New York. How did such a small London press acquire the honor of becoming its British publisher? Because Random House dumped the book on receiving a threat from a single reader that it might have another "Rushdie affair" on its hands. The date of the subsequent firebombing, 26 September last, was the 20th anniversary of the publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

So there is now a hidden partner in our cultural and academic and publishing and broadcasting world: a shadowy figure that has, uninvited, drawn up a chair to the table. He never speaks. He doesn't have to. But he is very well understood. The late playwright Simon Gray was alluding to him when he said that Nicholas Hytner, the head of London's National Theatre, might put on a play mocking Christianity but never one that questioned



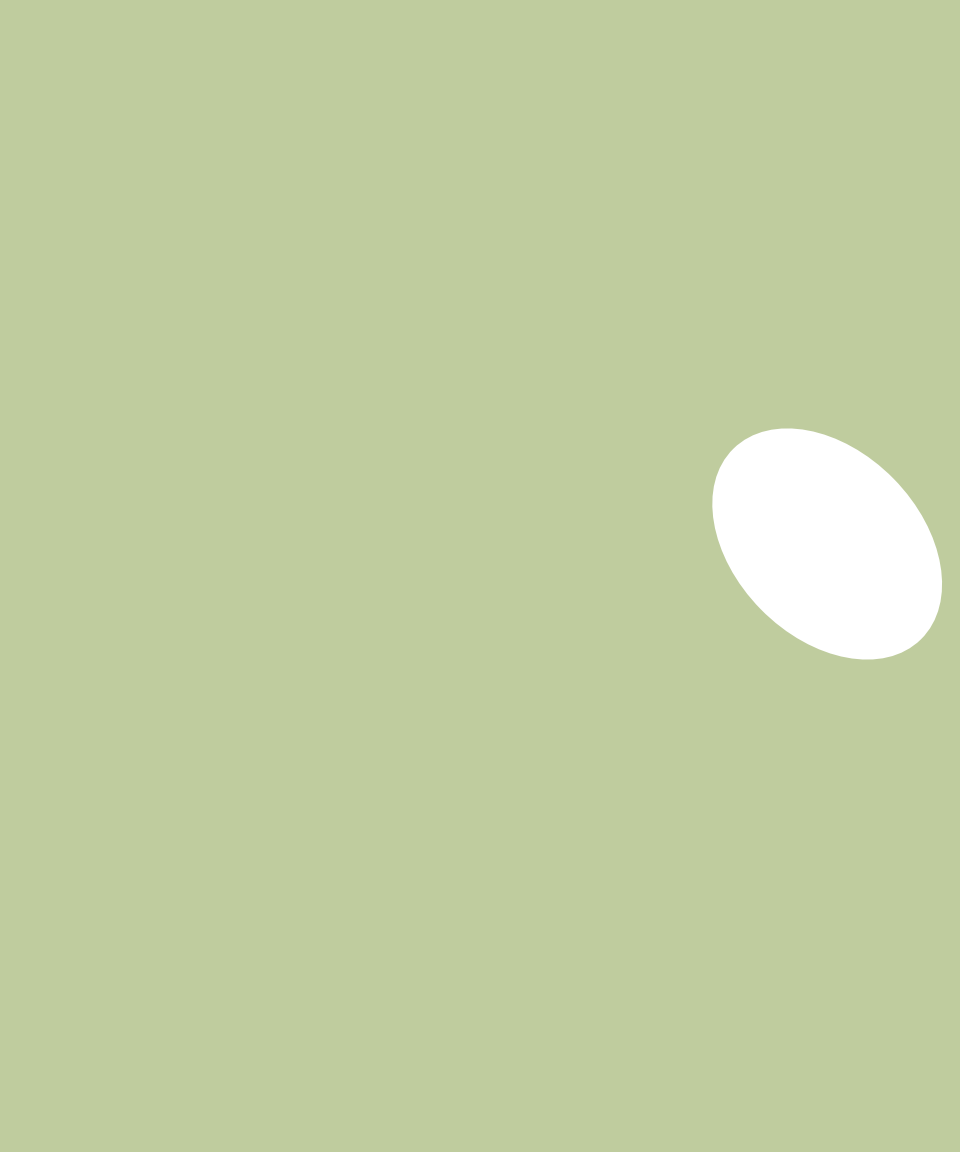
Islam. I brushed up against the unacknowledged censor myself when I went on CNN to defend the Danish cartoons and found that, though the network would show the relevant page of the newspaper, it had pixelated the cartoons themselves. And this in an age when the image is everything. The lady anchor did not blush to tell me that the network was obliterating its very stock-in-trade (newsworthy pictures) out of sheer fear.

Sometimes this fear—and this blackmail—comes dressed up in the guise of good manners and multiculturalism. One must not wound the religious feelings of others, many of whom are poor immigrants in our own societies. To this I would respond by pointing to a book published in 1994. It is entitled *For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech*. Among its contributors is almost every writer worthy of the name in the Arab and Muslim world, ranging from the Syrian poet Adonis to the Syrian-Kurdish author Salim Barakat, to the late national bard of the Palestinians, Mahmoud Darwish, to the celebrated Turkish writers Murat Belge and Orhan Pamuk. Especially impressive and courageous was the list of 127 Iranian writers, artists, and intellectuals who,

from the prison house that is the Islamic Republic, signed their names to a letter which said: “We underline the intolerable character of the decree of death that the Fatwah is, and we insist on the fact that aesthetic criteria are the only proper ones for judging works of art.... To the extent that the systematic denial of the rights of man in Iran is tolerated, this can only further encourage the export outside the Islamic Republic of its terrorist methods which destroy freedom.” In other words, the situation is the exact reverse of what the condescending multiculturalists say it is. To indulge the idea of religious censorship by the threat of violence is to insult and undermine precisely those in the Muslim world who are its intellectual cream, and who want to testify for their own liberty—and for ours. It is also to make the patronizing assumption that the leaders of mobs and the inciters of goons are the authentic representatives of Muslim opinion. What could be more “offensive” than that?

In the hot days immediately after the fatwa, with Salman himself on the run and the TV screens filled with images of burning books and writhing mustaches, I was stopped by a female Muslim interviewer and her

camera crew and asked an ancient question: "Is nothing sacred?" I can't remember quite what I answered then, but I know what I would say now. "No, nothing is sacred. And even if there were to be something called sacred, we mere primates wouldn't be able to decide which book or which idol or which city was the truly holy one. Thus, the only thing that should be upheld at all costs and without qualification is the right of free expression, because if that goes, then so do all other claims of right as well." I also think that human life has its sacrosanct aspect, and though I can think of many circumstances in which I would take a life, the crime of writing a work of fiction is not a justification (even in the case of Ludlum) that I could ever entertain. Two decades on, Salman himself is thriving mightily and living again like a free man. But the culture that sustains him, and that he helps sustain, has twisted itself into a posture of prior restraint and self-censorship in which the grim, mad edict of a dead theocrat still exerts its chilling force. And, by the way, the next time that Khomeini's lovely children want to make themselves felt, they will be armed not just with fatwas but with nuclear weapons.



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