SALMAN RUSHDIE IN CONVERSATION WITH JEFFREY EUGENIDES:

*THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE*

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Celeste Bartos Forum

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**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the director of public programs at the New York Public Library. And for the very last time, I promise you, I'm retiring this motto of mine, my role here, my goal here at the New York Public Library with LIVE from the New York Public Library, is to make the lions roar. I promise I will not say that again. I'm looking for a new motto, so if anybody has a tagline for the New York Public Library, come up to me afterwards. As you know, another way I've said it is that I try to make this heavy institution, this beautiful institution, levitate.

I would like to thank a few people. First of all, a few organizations: *Metro*, they are our media sponsor, and they have been for the whole year. Thank you very much. I would also like to thank 192 Books, our independent bookstore, carrying books for our whole season, and you will be

able, after the event, to go and have Salman Rushdie sign his new book, *The Enchantress of Florence*. I would particularly like to thank Patrick Knisley, who is the owner of 192 Books and who has done a marvelous job.

At the end of this season, I would also like to thank all the people who have worked so much and so hard on LIVE from the New York Public Library, and in particular, in my office, Kimberly Irwin and Meg Stemmler, without whom I wouldn't be able to do what I do. I live my life somewhere between chaos and entropy, and they manage to keep it all together. So thank you, Kimberly, and thank you, Meg, and a round of applause for them, please. **(applause)**

I encourage you to join our email list so that you may be informed about our upcoming season. We will probably start the season with Bernard-Henri Lévy, or as he's known, BHL, in conversation with Slavoj Zizek, a conversation that I will try to moderate if I can—I'm not particularly moderate—probably instigate. It probably will be our opening season event, I'm not sure, that's why I encourage you to join our email list because I keep adding things. But that will be on September the 16th, so stay tuned.

We will also have Robert Badinter, who—I don't know how you say it in English—he was a *garde des sceaux*, the supreme court, supreme court justice of France and in 1981, under the first Mitterand regime, he single-handedly abolished capital punishment. I had the pleasure once of meeting Robert Badinter and told him how moved I had been by this act in 1981 when he abolished capital punishment, and he said to me, "Flattery will get you nowhere!" We will also have António Lobo Antunes, an extraordinary Portuguese writer, Paul Auster and Céline Curiol,

Ferran Adrià, one of the greatest chefs, Toni Morrison, and for Halloween, an evening with Dracula. And much more.

During the conversation we will be collecting, on both sides of this wonderful room, written questions which you may want to ask of our guests. I ask that they be real questions, if you know what I mean, rather than lengthy comments. And I ask you to write them legibly when possible, even to be succinct. I will choose a few to read out loud after the conversation. The conversation will probably last about as long as a psychoanalytical session. **(laughter)**

There's an essay by Salman Rushdie, which I really like a lot. It is simply entitled "Influence." I encourage you to read it. It is included in *A Step Across the Line*, one of Rushdie's fine collections of essays. Here he writes of influence that "the word itself suggests something fluid." He states that one of the most remarkable characteristics of literary influence is that "they can flow towards the writer from almost anywhere." Charles Dickens, for instance, strikes Rushdie as quintessentially an Indian novelist. "Dickensian London, that stenchy, rotting city full of sly conniving sheisters, that city in which goodness was under constant assault by duplicity, malice, and greed," seems to him to "hold up the mirror of **(inaudible)** cities of India." And of great value here tonight, nearly a key for us to embark on *The Enchantress of Florence*, is this paragraph at the end of Rushdie's 1999 aforementioned essay, "Influence":

"If I may make one more tentative step towards the unwritten future, I have for a long time been engaged and fascinated by Florence, of the high Renaissance in general and by the character of Niccolò Machiavelli in particular. The demonization of Machiavelli strikes me as one of the

most successful acts of slander in European history. As a fellow writer who has learned a thing or two about demonization, I feel it may soon be time to reevaluate the maligned Florentine."

And this reevaluation is perhaps what Sir Salman Rushdie has in part done in *The Enchantress of Florence*. To unpack the Machiavelli connection and much more, we have the pleasure of welcoming the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides. Please help warmly to welcome to this stage Jeffrey Eugenides and Sir Salman Rushdie.

**(applause)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I already enjoy basking in your applause, I have to tell you. I wanted to begin tonight by telling a little story that I think I might've told Salman once when we briefly met years ago. In 1981, I traveled the world—took a year off from college—and I ended up in India and bought what was then a new paperback of *Midnight's Children* and read it and fell in love with it. And traveled through India for about four or five months, and on my way back I ended up in London. And I wanted to be a writer, I was twenty years old and a little bit kooky, and I looked in the phone book to see if the author of this book might be listed. And at that point he was, actually. I saw "Salman Rushdie" and his address and I still don't know how I found my way to your neighborhood or where it was in London.

But I went out there and went up to the door and knocked on the door to say hello and pay my respects and tell him how much I liked his book. He was in Italy. **(laughter)** Sometimes when I

tell this story, I say I went to Salman Rushdie's house; he wasn't there. But your then-mother-in-law was there, and she let me into the house, and I left a note of praise and I left seven rupees that I still had from my trip to India. **(laughter)** And so I think about that moment, and here it is, twenty or so years later.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I lost them.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Oh, I was hoping with the value of the dollar that you might still be able to give them back. **(laughter)** But it's magical, something as magical as something in one of your books to find myself here on the stage with you.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Oh, it's so pleasurable to be here with you, and I did think the rupees were glass, and so I didn't keep them. Which is my fault. But no, it's an extraordinary—that book has done me such a service in my life, *Midnight's Children*, you know, because it just drew people towards me. It's a rare thing for a writer to have a book that is loved. You know, you can have books that are appreciated, and admired, and so on, you know, but to have a book that is loved is a very rare thing. And if you have it once in your life, you're very lucky.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Well, I'm going to get to that, but I want to begin not at the beginning but in the middle of your new book, *The Enchantress of Florence*. One page 161 you write about the *Rhetorica ad Herennium.* I was struck by that because I'm reading a book at the same time by Peter Dimock, called *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family*, I don't know if you know this book.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I don’t know this book, no.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** But it’s also obviously about rhetoric and references that book, and in very particular, the idea of a memory palace. And I was wondering if we could begin by your explaining to the audience, to those who might not know what a memory palace is.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** What a memory palace is—a memory palace is a memory trick whose history goes back into antiquity, and which you can use, and it will improve all your memories. So I’m able now to share this with you. What you do is you choose a building that you know very well. It doesn’t have to be a palace; it can be a humble building. But just a building that you know very well, and which you can walk around in your mind very easily. And as you walk around it in your mind, you attach memories to pieces of furniture and to places in the building. You just put the memories on that chair, in that closet, on that windowsill, etc. And then in the future, every time you walk around the building, those memories will be in those places, and it’s a way of remembering gigantic amounts of stuff. And it really—it’s a technique that really works. It was known to the Greeks, it was known to the Romans, it’s been known ever since.

And I was reminded of it by a very brilliant man that I know called Jaron Lanier. Do you know him?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** No.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** He's the man who invented the term virtual reality.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Oh, I haven't met him.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** So he knows something about this kind of thing. And he reminded me of this and I immediately thought, I can still that, **(laughter)** and put it in my book.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Well, there is a character in your book who's a living memory palace, it's a beautiful woman and her own memories have been removed or displaced, and they've been replaced by someone else's memories.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, I just pushed it one stage forward to a kind of brainwashing, where one person's brain was really replaced by the contents of another person's brain, and whether that's possible or not I don't know, but I don't care either. **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** What I thought we might do tonight, in order to talk a little bit about your life and about this book, was to create a memory palace of our own, the Salman Rushdie Memory Palace. And you say that—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Okay. I will if you will.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES: (laughs)** I hoped you'd be game. I know you've been on a book tour for a month and I thought you'd be easy prey at this point.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** At this stage I'd do anything. **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** And as I see this house, as I imagine it, I'm going to imagine it as an English Tudor, and we come in a lovely entryway, and it's…

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I see that. Yes, yes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** …it's pleasant, it's bright, and this is childhood in Bombay, the memories of childhood in Bombay, and I'd like you to speak a little bit about that. I know obviously you're born in 1947, and you're—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Eight weeks before the independence of India, yeah.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** And your original language was Urdu.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** But you spoke Hindustani?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, Hindustani is this wonderful language that everybody in India speaks which doesn't exist. I mean, there's actually no such language. There is—there's Hindi

and there’s Urdu. But what happens in ordinary speech is that these languages go together and form a language called Hindustani, which is what everybody uses. But there’s no such language.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Is that the language of Bollywood?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** It is. That’s what did it. It’s the language of the movies. And I say, and always annoy people in India when I do, that Hindustani is basically Urdu spoken with a Hindi accent. **(laughter)** I mean, I believe that to be true, actually. But this—it’s an extraordinary that the creation of a lingua franca from a blurring of two languages, a language that literally has no existence—you can’t buy a book about Hindustani—and yet it’s the language that everyone speaks. It’s a wonderful thing where ordinary usage takes over from formal linguistics and people decide, we want to talk like this, you know. And for me it gave me this idea from the beginning that languages kind of talk to each other and mingle with each other, and should not be seen as separate things, but as things which can inform each other. And my earliest desire was to create an English that didn’t sound like English, and that, I think, came out of that kind of blurring.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** And when you say earliest desire, what age are you talking about?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Oh, I mean serious literary desire—I guess I would have been in college by then. I mean, I don’t think I had managed to formulate these highly theoretical concepts in my teenage years.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I'm going to keep you in the front hall anyway. You're the eldest son—and you have sisters, is that—so, I'm trying to imagine what that was like in your family, a certain amount of preferment, a certain amount of pressure on you. I know your father—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, but we're a very noisy family, we're a very talkative family, and my sisters were no shrinking violets, you know. Nor were my cousins or my aunts. I had aunts, I have to tell you, that would make Bertie Wooster's aunts seem like, you know, children. **(laughter)** Aunt Dahlia, Aunt Agatha, they had nothing on my aunts. My aunts were terrifying **(laughter)** and powerful, and dangerous. **(laughter)** And I admired them, you know, I was scared out of my mind by them, but I did like them a lot. And I guess I just grew up in this world, very talkative world, where if you wanted to make a point you had to speak up and make it vociferously, and against all obstacles, which were many and mostly named by my sisters' names. But it was great training.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Wodehouse you would consider another Indian writer, is that—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Hm?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Would you consider Wodehouse another Indian writer? I know he was one of your favorites when you were a kid.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Absolutely. Wodehouse—the non-Indian writers most admired in India, without any argument, are Agatha Christie, P.G. Wodehouse, and little-known writer John

Masters. As well as Kipling. When John Masters, because mainly of his novel *Bhowani Junction*, which was about Anglo-Indians and was made into an Ava Gardner movie long ago. Kipling, because for all his late adult prejudice and bigotry, he understood India as no non-Indian writer ever did. And the India that he described is recognizable to Indians as India. And so you have to accept Kipling.

P.G. Wodehouse because I don't know, there's something about the humor of Wodehouse that is very, very sympathetic to the Indian funny bone. And, I mean, Hitchens and I have this, we can do *The Code of the Woosters* for quite a long time. I just think the idea of—and I think it actually to be the greatest anti-Nazi text in English literature—the moment at which Bertie Wooster takes on Sir Roderick Spode, the leader of the Black Shorts, and says to him that he probably thinks he's very smart, swanking about in footer bags, "But the truth is, Spode, that is where you make your mistake." **(laughter)** "The truth is, Spode, people don't like you very much." It's one of the most profound speeches in English literature. And all those people who mistakenly called Wodehouse a fellow-traveler of Nazism and so on, would only have to read *The Code of the Woosters*, which was written before the war, to understand how wrong that was.

Yeah, I mean, my grandfather, who lived in the university town Aligarh, which is near Delhi, used to take me to the university library, and I would clamber up these book stacks and bring down teetering piles of Agatha Christie and P.G. Wodehouse and he would sign them out for me and I would go and discover English literature in this way.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** How traditional was your family? I mean, you father, I know, was not religious at all.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Not really, I mean, none of my family is very traditional. No, each of my parents were not religious, and most of my family had a very occasional relationship with religion. My grandfather, however, was very devout—my mother's father—went on the pilgrimage to Mecca and said his prayers five times a day, and was a completely believing Muslim and yet was, and remains for me, really, a model of tolerance and openness and you know, how to be in the world. And very gentle and inquisitive mind, he had. Yes, it just goes to show that even religious people can be nice. **(laughter)** It's a lesson worth learning, I think.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Your father made you write essays about Shakespeare and things like this.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Oh, God, yes, you know too much about me.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Well, I spent a couple of days checking you out. But I mean, was that pressure on you as the eldest son or was that typical?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes. No, it was because I was the eldest and only male child. And so he wasn't satisfied with the amount of work I got to do at school, and the fact that I kept coming top of the class, this was not adequate. And so he would set me extra homework. Yes, I had to summarize Shakespeare and so on. And this is—it reminded me, you know, at the time of *Monty*

*Python's Flying Circus*, there's a great sketch in that which is called the "Summarizing Proust Competition," **(laughter)** where people have thirty seconds to summarize what the compare calls "Prowst," **(laughter)** and none of them get very far. When I saw those people summarizing "Prowst" I thought, that's me! That's what my father used to make me do. I had to summarize—there's the great speech in *Antony and Cleopatra* where he first sees her coming down the river on her barge and I had to do a précis of it. **(laughter)** And he disagreed, didn't like my précis so he made me do it again. This is why one loves one's parents.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I think that's really impressive—the hall of India here is a happy place. It was a happy childhood.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah. No, I had—when people talk about *Midnight's Children* as being autobiographical, I always say that the great difference is that I had a happy childhood, you know. I mean, my memory of my childhood is of being pretty uneventfully happy, and Saleem, the narrator of *Midnight's Children* has a very fraught and turbulent and difficult childhood. Quite, really the opposite of mine. And when I say—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Did you ever feel guilty for having a happy childhood, or ill prepared to be a writer? **(laughter)** Because I also had a happy childhood and for awhile I thought perhaps it was over for me because I hadn't suffered—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes, because you weren't a child in Auschwitz or something. Yeah, I know, it's true; it's a crippling thing that my parents did for me. **(laughter)** But I made up for it later. **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Yeah, which is a good moment for us to leave the front hall and go into a very dark and rather unpleasant place, which is the hallway of your first years in England, at the Rugby School. You left home at thirteen and a half, which amazes me, I can't imagine—I can hardly imagine going away to boarding school in the states where you'd be able to see your parents—but what was it like to leave home and to leave India?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, it was very odd because it was very far and I didn't know really anybody. My father came with me and—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Oh, he did?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, he brought me to England, but that really wasn't very helpful because he was in the throes of very serious alcoholism at that point and so his behavior was less than immaculate towards this child who was quite troubled. There's a picture of me that was taken on the day that I was left at the gate of the boarding school. And the boy in the picture looks very sad.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Yeah, I bet.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** And it would be easy to—and this boy in the stupid English public school outfit with a school cap and so on, looking glum. And it would be easy to believe that the boy in the picture was sad because he was going to boarding school. But actually, the boy in the picture couldn't wait to go to boarding school to get away from his father. That was the person taking the picture, **(laughter)** was the person making him sad at that time. So there are benefits to the English boarding school system. **(laughter)** They get you away from your parents.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Nevertheless, you had an awful time there, didn't you?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, I didn't have a great time there. It got better because I grew to my adult height relatively young. Let's say when I was fifteen I did this enormous spurt—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** That helped in sports.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** No, it helped in shutting people the fuck up. **(laughter)** You know, come over here and say that, you know, squirt. When I was fifteen I was bigger than most of my contemporaries and that shut them up. And then you know, they grew up and became taller than me but by then they'd become more civilized. **(laughter)** But the first year or two were, yeah, were horrible.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** This is an ignorant American question, but is Rugby the place they invented rugby?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes, Rugby is the place where balls with points were first used in sports.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Really.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes. Pointy balls is what rugby gave to the world. **(laughter)** There's in fact a stone set into what is known as the Doctor's Wall at Rugby School—which is named after Dr. Arnold, the famous headmaster, relative of Matthew Arnold, the famous poet—which says, "This is to commemorate the exploit"—see, I can still remember it—"This is to commemorate the exploit of William Webb Ellis, who, with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time, first picked up the ball and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive feature of the rugby game. AD 1823." It doesn't tell you that he was thrown out of school for doing it. **(laughter)** Because it was cheating, of course, to play with your hands rather than with your feet, but that's—rugby football came from that, yes, and so I had to play it three times a week on frozen pitches in the winter, and it was fun.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** We have Wrong Way Regal, in this country. Do you know Wrong Way Regal?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** He was the guy who picked up a pass and ran the wrong way and he ended up living across the street from my wife when she was growing up. Wrong Way Regal.

And he would come out of his house and everyone would say, “There’s Wrong Way, there’s Wrong Way!” And he ended up committing suicide. I’m not kidding.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** William Webb Ellis had a better fate than that. **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Yeah, Wrong Way needed a plaque, at least.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Anyway, yeah, the Rugby—I mean, now I feel benign towards it. It just feels like it was so long ago. And I lived. But I did have an experience, which I will share with you. About a year ago or so I was sitting in a departure lounge at Heathrow Airport, and this guy comes and sits like where you’re sitting, and does this. And eventually I say, “Yes?” And he says, “I’m just waiting to see if you remember me.” And I say, “You know, I don’t remember you, so you’re going to have to tell me.” And he then tells me who he is, and it’s somebody I was at school with, and remember that I left school when I was eighteen, and this was when I was sixty. So you have to take away forty-two years from this man’s face. But actually, the moment he said his name, the forty-two years melted away from his face and I realized that it was the boy I had hated most at school, **(laughter)** and was therefore given a chance that doesn’t come to us often in life… **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Did you take it?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** …which was to tell him. Yeah. And I just said, “Look, excuse me, I’m going to get up and walk over there, because I didn’t like you forty-two years ago,” **(laugher)**

“and there is no reason for me to like you now.” **(laughter)** And it gave me such joy. **(laughter)** Such simple, low-grade pleasure, to get my own back after forty-two years.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Why did you hate him so much?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Because he was a little shit. **(laughter)** And he was a bully—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I’m looking for specifics, bully…

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** He was a bully, and he was—and I knew—I don’t have to go into this. **(laughter)** He’s gone now.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** After Rugby you went off to Cambridge, and something that you and I share is that my father would have loved it if I was an economist as well, but he knew I wasn’t going to be, he didn’t try. It sounds like your father tried.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Did your father try and make you be one?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** He wanted me at least to study, or take one course at least, in economics.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, well my father tried hard, yeah. In fact, I got into Cambridge to study history and in fact I had what’s called an exhibition, which is a minor scholarship. And I

arrived there with my father having ordered me not to study history because history was of course useless, and to study something useful like economics, and if I did not agree to change subject, he would not pay for me to be there. I mean, he had the ultimate financial sanction. So I arrived depressed, thinking, I've got a minor scholarship to study history at Cambridge and I can't do so because my dad won't pay the fees. So I went to see the man who saved my life, who was called John Broadbent, and who was the kind of director of studies at Cambridge, and I said, "I've got to change subjects," and he said, "What?" And I said, "Well, my father thinks I should study economics because it's more useful." And he said, "Well, what do you think?" And I said, "Well, I don't want to." And he said, "Leave it to me."

And he then wrote my father the most brilliant letter, which said, "Dear Mr. Rushdie," you know, "it's come to our attention, your son has informed us that you want him to blah blah," and he said, "in our opinion, it is the opinion of this college that your son is not qualified to study economics" **(laughter)** "at Cambridge. And if you therefore insist on this course of action, we can only ask you to remove him from the university and to make his place available to somebody who is qualified to study what they're here to study." My father never said a word, ever again. **(laughter)**

And I thought, you know, I really owe him, I still—I owe him an enormous debt, because in my life it was one of the first occasions, perhaps the first occasion, when somebody privileged what I thought over what my parents wanted. You know, what do you want? And I though, gosh, what do I want? What a concept. Well, I want the following thing—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Which was to be a writer, finally, and you—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Which was yeah, to be a writer finally, but I don't know about then, then I was just happy studying history. I loved the study of history and it was a subject to which I was very well suited and which I really, really enjoyed, and I think enormously helped me become the kind of writer I became. Because when I was at Cambridge, Leavis was still there. I mean, I can recall going to hear Leavis lecture and so on, and thought, thank God that bastard's not teaching me. **(laughter)**

And I didn't—the whole thing about Leavis is that I instinctively rebelled against everything he thought, the whole idea of the great tradition. I thought, well, okay, but who says that? You know? And why them and not other people? That the kind of dictatorial aspects of Leavisism—Leavism—Leavitisim—I don't know—Leavis's ideas—were so offensive to me, that you almost automatically wanted to dislike the writers he liked, just because he liked them. And I thought, thank God I'm not studying this stuff. I can just read books. I don't have to erect architectures of like and dislike and okay and not okay.

And what history did for me—I mean, one forget most of the history one learns, but what you remember, and what I think has served me very well, is what's called historical method. How do you look at the world in order to make sense of it? What is meaning, what is a fact? If you at events, what is important and what's not important? How do you shape those events into something that is coherent and adds up to something? And that's what historians do all the time.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Were you thinking of becoming a historian at that point, or not?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, I guess so, I was a little bit. I think by—you know, also, remember the year. This was 1965. I was at college from 1965 to 1968. This is—if one can mention these words—the time of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. It was a very, very good time to be a college student, **(laughter)** and there were things on one's mind which were not academic.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Yes.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Girls, and so on. And so by the time I'd been through the sixties, I didn't want to stay at college and study history, I wanted to—I wanted to leave. I mean, I loved Cambridge, and at the time I graduated I was absolutely ready to leave and find out what might be outside the dreaming spires.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** But—correct me if I'm wrong—I get the sense that your early years in London when you were beginning to be a writer were not the—you described yourself as a very nervous person in those days, and I can sympathize with that because there have been times in my life where I've been so worried about my work that I began to stutter, even though no one noticed it except for me, and that the nervousness almost took over my physical body. I wondered if you had years like that.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I didn't have that. I had the—the phenomenon I had was that I would get into fierce arguments about things that had no, I mean there was no reason to be in an argument.

But I would get into kind of life-changing arguments about a movie. Arguments where I would never talk to that man again, ever, because he didn't like the movie I liked. I would fight.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** And that was out of the difficulty of writing.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** That was out of not knowing who I was, yeah. It was out of trying to find out who I was, and getting angry about things, as radical Islam proves, is a good way of finding out who you are. You know, if possible, be offended. **(laughter)** And if nothing offends you, who are you? You're nobody, you know, what are your values? You've got none. Nothing offends you; you're nothing. So I got offended more easily in those days.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** So at the end of that period we come out of this room of England and we're going to go into the living room of *Midnight's Children* with a side parlor of *Shame*.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** And I think in the books I've written what's happened for me is that I write for awhile and usually I end up with a paragraph that seems to contain the DNA for the entire book.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** This paragraph will tell me not only—suggest to me what the plot is going to be, but the tone of the book and the kinds of narrative techniques I might use. I wondered if that was your experience, and in particular, I know that with *Midnight's Children*, you are one of those writers where you had an incredible moment of that book coming to you.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah. Well, I did. It was difficult, *Midnight's Children*, because it was such a large object to try to wrestle to the ground and I spent a lot of time not knowing how to write it. You know, knowing that there was something there but not knowing how to write it. And as you know, what you do is you get it wrong for a long time until you get it write. And the earlier phases of *Midnight's Children*, I was not writing the book in the first person, I was trying to write a third person narration and it just somehow was inert.

And then there was a moment where I thought, okay, let me see what happens if I let him tell the story. And there was a day when—which I've always remembered as the day that I became a writer—when this thing came out of me which is essentially what is now the first page of *Midnight's Children*, and it was clear to me that I had managed to write something which had a force and a voice that was just light-years ahead of anything I'd ever managed to make happen on a page before.

And I thought, where did that come from? And looked at it, over and over, typed it out two or three time to make sure, you know, and then I thought, okay, well whatever it is, you should do more of this, and it became clear to me that all I had to now, having found this voice for this

character, was to just let him run with it, and just if possible, hold onto his coattails and go along for the ride. And off he went.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** It sounds like that was a response to Leavis in a way, you were moving away from all of those ideas that you just mentioned.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, I mean I wasn't conscious of Leavis at the time, but I was conscious of a kind of idea about literature which had become very prevalent even in India in the aftermath of E.M. Forster in *A Passage to India*. And I have to say that I enormously admired E.M. Forster and *A Passage to India* and was lucky enough even to know him a little bit at Cambridge, where he was elderly and I was an undergraduate, and we did meet a couple of times and he was always very kind and generous to me and so on. But, I think that whole—the Forsterian tradition of very classicist, cool prose caught on in a generation earlier than me in India, and writers, I mean, very fine writers, like Narayan and **(inaudible)** and so on were in a way heirs to that tradition.

And the thing that I felt was that if there's one thing wrong with that, is that this was very poised, cool writing. And I thought, if there's one thing that the India that I know is not, it's not poised and cool, you know, it's hot and crowded and noisy and kind of excessive, and in a way the opposite of this kind of language. And so the question was how to make a language and a sentence, a paragraph, that was noisy and crowded and hot, like the place that I wanted to write about, you know. And Saleem's voice in *Midnight's Children* kind of answered that question for me and set me on my road, I guess.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Now with *The Satanic Verses*, you came to the opening of that book, which is a wonderful opening, where the plane explodes and the people fall through the sky. That took you a long time to find the opening there, right?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I found it very late, yeah, I had written hundreds of pages of the novel and then I wrote this scene and remember thinking, you know, what is this scene doing here on page 300, it doesn't seem to belong here at all.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Did you throw the rest away, or were they used?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** No, no, at the moment when I realized that was the beginning of the book I went and put it back at the beginning. I did have to rewrite everything else, I had to go back and reshape everything else to start from that, so yes, that was a very, very late discovery, that beginning, yeah.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** If it's all right with you, I'm going to—in this house we're building, I'm going to put the fatwa in the basement…

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Please.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** …if you don't mind, and I don't think we need to go down there.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** No, no. Tedious.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I think so.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I mean, you know, what is there to say about it, you know?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Maybe in the questions later.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Should you kill people for writing books? My view is no. **(laughter/applause)** Even Dan Brown must live. **(laughter/applause)** And I suppose write.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** It is.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** No, I support his just cause. Yes, you were saying.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I, you know, I had this idea in the taxi over here and I'm sticking with it. We're going to go upstairs now in this house, and there's a lot of nicely appointed bedrooms up there.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Are there?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *Shalimar the Clown*, we don't have time to go in all these bedrooms tonight.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Are we talking about sex now? **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I'm sorry?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Are we talking about sex now?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** No, no, we're getting there.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** All right. Okay.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** But it leads me to a question about mid-career. At this point in your life, in my own writing I feel that my work has progressed from sentence to plot to character. I spent most of my formative years, ten or fifteen years, just thinking about the sentence: how to write a sentence, what kind of a sentence seemed to express my own view of the world. And then little by little I learned to make stories and come up with plots, and as I'm moving now I'm actually becoming more realistic and more interested in character and kind of psychological depth. What is your sense of the progression of your career?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Of movement?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Movement and development.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I think—it's a great and complicated question, that. Because I think—well, one way of answering it is to say that I've moved—like the point of view from which I'm doing things, you know—has moved from—to put this simply, from the point of the view of the writer to the point of view of the reader. That's to say I'm becoming more and more and more interested in how people read. And what one can do to play with that, you know. I mean, how you can get away with things if you understand how people read things.

You know, if you think of, for example—let me use a film analogy—if you think about the films of Almodóvar, like *Talk to Her*, for example, it's a film which is incredibly complicated. The timeline of the film is very complicated, there's flashbacks, forwards, Chinese boxes, it appears to be—it's a very technically complex structure, and yet, watching the film, it feels effortless. It seems to flow. And the reason is, I think, that he knows exactly what the viewer wishes to know about a character at any given moment, you know. When do you want the back story of that character? Now. Here it is. You know?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Right.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** And I think, more or less, you could apply that to prose fiction. That there is a perfect way to tell a story, which is not necessarily chronological, not necessarily linear, but which corresponds to what the reader needs to know about a given character or plot moment at any given time, and if you can tell people the right thing at the right time—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** How do you know what the reader wants, or do you have a sense that the reader's expectations are—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** You become—you have to be the reader, it's the only way you can do it, is you have to think, does this work, you know? And then of course when you finish the book you have to ask other people if they agree. And I mean, with this book I certainly—one of the problems with *The Enchantress of Florence*, which I knew to be a technical problem in the book, is that it takes place, well, primarily takes place in two countries half a world apart from each other, and at two moments in time which are half a century apart, you know, and it has to go back and forth, both in place and time, all the way. And I knew that if I got that wrong it could be irritating and annoying, and just not even that off-putting, it could break concentration, you know. You could immerse your reader for thirty pages in something, and then boing, they're suddenly on the other half of the world fifty years earlier, and they're thinking, why am I here now? You know? And so the problem was how to achieve that, how to do that Almodóvar thing about having this complicated framework which should feel effortless.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I was wondering how did that—when you started writing *The Enchantress of Florence*, did it begin with one city or you always knew it was going to be two cities?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** No, it began—I mean I had this idea of this lost princess making her way through various adventures across the world and ending up in Renaissance Europe—sorry, Renaissance Europe. I have to remind myself to speak American sometimes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Quite.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Renaissance. Renaissance Europe. And I tried to write it like that, and I just found, I felt there was something missing, it felt thin in some way. And then at a much later point I had this idea of the way the book now begins—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** You mean it used to begin just with her, her story?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Just with her, yeah, just with her story. Nothing, no Akbar, no Fatehpur Sikri, no India, none of that. Just this journey west. And an encounter with the high Renaissance in Florence. It just felt like not enough, and then at a much later point in the development of the book I had this idea of starting half a century later with this alleged descendent of hers coming to see the emperor Akbar in India and trying to sell him the story, and say you know, "I am your uncle," he says, even though he's younger than him. And he has to persuade the emperor that his story is true.

And at the point at which I thought, okay, I'm not just telling you a story, I'm telling you a story about somebody telling you a story, I kind of understood how to write it. And also, it then allowed that whole Indian world to rush into the book. And I felt then that the book was in equilibrium, that it wasn't just a book about a journey west, it was a book in which an Eastern world and a Western world were in a kind of balance with each other, and then I thought okay, this works a lot better. And then it allowed me to do something I'd wanted to do for a long time,

which is to write about the emperor Akbar, who is one of the most attractive figures in world history, I think.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Tell me if this makes sense to you. You're saying that as a writer, in a way your narrative manner is getting more complex as you get older and you're changing the way you're writing stories. It seems to me that some of your earlier novels are more European in a sense. If you think of—we learned in graduate school, I don't know if they did this at Cambridge, that English novels come out of two sources. There's the line from *Tristram Shandy*, and then there's the line from Richardson's *Clarissa*, right?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, this is Kundera's famous essay.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Is it from—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, it's Milan Kundera wrote this essay about the novel has two fathers—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I think he must have gone to Stanford graduate school.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Do you think he stole it—do you think he stole it from someone?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I don't know, he might've.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Eh, it was his—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Anyway, I know which side of the divide you are on that…

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes, yes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** …but I feel that in some of the earlier novels there are characters presented in a way, a kind of rounded psychological way, that in the new book you don't seem to be interested in doing as much. You're much more interested in doing what you're describing as a kind of constant narrative movement and change.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, this book is written—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** And it seems more Eastern to me, it's more like an *Arabian Nights* constant story spinning.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, I think that's fair enough. I mean I think it's certainly the case that if you come out of that tradition of the wonder tale, you know, not just the *Arabian Nights* but the other anthologies of that sort, the Hazar Afsana, the **(inaudible),** the many different compendiums of fantastic tales that there are of these, I mean, it's a wonderful gift as a writer to have that as your heritage because it allows you to start from the position that stories are not true, you know. This is a simple thing we all forget all the time. These people did not exist, these things never happened, everything I'm telling you is a lie—wonderful starting point for a book.

Instead of having to persuade everybody of the opposite of that, when you are in fact doing something called fiction. That's a kind of insanity, but this felt sanity, to know that stories were fabrications. And when you look at the fifteenth, sixteenth century literature of Europe, it's not at all dissimilar to that.

If you look at the great romantic narrative poems written in the Renaissance, the you know, Boiardo's poem *Orlando inamorato*, Orlando in love, and followed by Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, these are poems which are full of ogres and witches and you know, fabulous elements, and it was what the European reader of the fifteenth and sixteenth century wanted as much as his or her Indian counterpart, you know. So I thought that I would take that as a starting point, the kind of book that people in the fifteenth and sixteenth century would have enjoyed reading, and then give that kind of a modern take, you know, because I can't avoid the fact that I'm writing from now, rather than from then.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Right. I'm going to read something that pertains to what you're talking about. I mean, I'm being reductive by saying the words East and West at all, but here's something from the early part of *The Enchantress of Florence*:

"Ideas were like the tides of the sea or the faces of the moon. They came into being, rose, and grew in their proper time, and then ebbed, darkened, and vanished when the great wheel turned. They were temporary dwellings, like tents."

What you're saying, and what I felt from reading the book was that you were trying to get at an idea that everything, including the Enlightenment, is not permanent, and that we pass these ideas back and forth between cultures.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** At the time of this book, Akbar is much more enlightened and the scientific knowledge of his culture is greater than Europe's, and there's that sense of the fragility of reason.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, that's true. I mean, I think that's true. But the other thing I wanted the book to have a sense of was plenitude, you know, fullness, the idea that life could be many things at once. You didn't have to choose whether it was realistic or visionary. You didn't have to decide between the waking condition and the dreaming condition, you know, that there should be a fullness about life. Which I think the literature of that period—which, remember, these people we're talking about are the contemporaries of Shakespeare. These are the contemporaries of Cervantes that we're talking about, we're talking about a moment in which the literature of the world burst into its greatest, perhaps the greatest fullness it's ever possessed, you know. Everything at once.

You know, I think the great gift of Shakespeare to the English language, apart from genius, is his demonstration that a work of art can be everything at the same time, you know. I mean, if you look at *Hamlet*, you know, *Hamlet* Act One, Scene One: ghost story. *Hamlet* Act One, Scene

Two: intrigues at court. *Hamlet* Act One, Scene Three: love story. *Hamlet* Act One, Scene Four: ghost story again. And in there somewhere there's comic elements, and so on. You've got four or five different kinds of play, you know, which are all in the same play. And what he shows you is, that's fine. You don't have to write something which is either a political sage or a love story or a ghost story. It can be all those things at the same time.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** What do you mean that you're trying to make it modern then? What's the need for modernity if these things are…

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I don't know, I just think I don't have a sixteenth century sensibility, and when I look at it, I look at it as an outsider, and so there's a kind of ironizing thing. I mean, it is true, for instance, that in the Italian Renaissance there was such an enormous interest in the myths of antiquity that they began to look at sorceress myths, you know, Circe and so on. And the theme of the enchantress, of the beautiful woman as witch, became very prevalent in the artistic imagination of Italy in this period, and they returned to it time and time again, the artists: the theme of the enchantress, of the witch as beautiful woman.

And looking at it from where I'm sitting, I'm thinking, what a strange linkage that is. The idea that the linkage of the erotic power of women with occult power, you know, with desirability linked with the actual power of physical magic-doing, enchantment, putting a spell on you. Literally putting a spell on you. And it made me think of many things.

My friend, the British writer Marina Warner, a long time ago wrote a brilliant piece about the idea of the witch, in which she said if you look at the identifying marks of the witch, they would be found in every woman's kitchen. You know, the pointed hat: it's what women wore. The broomstick: it's in the corner of every kitchen. The familiar animal: there's a cat in every house. Even the idea of the final identifying mark, the witch's tit, the third nipple, in a time when many bodies had warts and moles and blemishes of that kind, you would find such a mark on any women's body. So essentially the only thing that remained was to point a finger and say, "Witch." The moment you did that, you could prove it, because the proof was there. So in that sense every woman was potentially a witch.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I usually do go by the third nipple.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah. **(laughter)** Well, we'll discuss that. **(laughter)** I'll show you mine if you show me yours. **(laughter)**

But so it began to strike me how this idea of beauty begin linked in the Renaissance imagination with witchcraft was a very dangerous thing for women. And that on the one hand it might make them seem more alluring, more desirable, more magical, you know, but the next minute they could be rounded upon. And the same people who were adoring you one minute, you know, if there's a change in the weather would be coming round to burn you at the stake the next day. And to walk that tightrope, that was not easy, and so I wanted to write a story about a woman to whom that happens, you know, who's put on that knife edge. And that's what happens to her in the book.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** And she ends up being partially imaginary, as do many of the characters in the book. There's Jodha, if I'm pronouncing it properly…

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes, yes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** …and there's the artist Dashwanth, who paints so furiously that he actually becomes part of his canvas, so—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, I think that boundary between the real world and the imaginary world is perhaps not as fixed as we think.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I felt you were quite serious about that as an intellectual point, it wasn't mere playfulness.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, you see, if you think about things moving from the imagined world into the real world, that happens all the time. I mean, that's to say, that's what we call inventions, you know. People imagine a light bulb before they invent it. People invention, you know, the hyperlink, before they find out how it works. We are constantly imagining into being the world in which we live. So for things to cross the boundary from imagination into reality is commonplace. I just had this notion that you might be able to go the other way too. It might be slightly more difficult, that you could start as real and end up as imaginary, but you know, why not? We just haven't worked out the technology yet. **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** You make allusions to God in the same way—what about, do some creations escape and become—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, this is a repeated theme in the book, about the created object or person or idea escaping the control of the person who creates that idea or person or object. And this is the thing I think which any of us who write are familiar with, that you're not entirely—once you've set up your characters in a certain way, you're no longer their master, you know, you have to serve the people you've created. You have to allow them to be them, rather than to be the person you want them to be, because you've already had your God-like moment in creating them, but after that, they're them, they're not you.

And there's a moment in the book when this idea is applied to divinity, because it's the view of—well, it's the hypothesis of one of the characters in the book that is may be that gods are created by men and not the other way around. And that is that's so, if you can imagine into being an omnipotent being, does it then become so omnipotent that you can't control it anymore, because you've created something that is too powerful for you to control? So it may be that this is our problem with gods, that we create them, and then they become too powerful for us to un-create. And that's, anyway, one of them things. He may or may not be right.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** To bring this around full circle, the character who is the memory palace—and I'd like to talk a little bit, or like to have you talk a little bit about Machiavelli—she is woken up from her state of her trance by Machiavelli, you can explain how he does it. And

what was your interest in Machiavelli? Was he a particular hero of yours? I mean, he’s becoming rehabilitated, it’s almost—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes. I like him a lot. I’ve always liked him a lot and felt that he’s been unfairly treated by history. He was not really in the least Machiavellian as a person, you know, he was kind of the opposite of that in many ways. And we’ve come to think of him as this kind of byword for cynicism and cold-blooded power politics and so on. Whereas actually, this is not who he was, he was somebody who in fact was a committed republican and served the Florentine Republic in the period when they threw out the Medici dukes and when the Medicis returned they didn’t like him. They tried very hard to get rid of him, in fact tortured him seriously, and eventually didn’t execute him, but exiled him.

This was a man with no reason to love princes, you know, a man who saw around him and experienced himself the incredible ruthlessness of the Medicis and the Borgias and so on, and wrote it down. Wrote it down. I mean, he wrote down what he saw. And it always seemed to me a classic case of blaming the messenger. He didn’t make this stuff up. He just noticed it. And you could only imagine the pain with which he wrote that book in the years after his torture, after his exile, after his banishment from the city that he loved by this prince, you know, the Medici duke. He writes this book and then, because he’s so desperate for preferment and for being allowed back into town, he sends the book as a present to the very man who’s tortured him and exiled him, hoping that it will serve him well. I mean, it’s the most clear-sighted book, least likely to be liked by the kind of person it’s written about. He says, you know, “Can I dedicate this to you?” There’s no evidence in fact that Giuliano de' Medici ever read the book, or indeed ever opened it.

And so great was Machiavelli's disappointment that he didn't publish it in his lifetime, and simply rotted out in the countryside until he died.

And yet he was this very sort of cheerful, outgoing, he was somebody who liked to go out drinking and gambling, and he would play at cards every night at the local inn with the local yokels. And there's a wonderful letter that survived from his Agostino Vespucci, who is also a character in the novel, and who was a fellow public servant when Machiavelli was in the service of the city. This letter is when Machiavelli is away on government business somewhere, I think Rome, and the letter says, "I wish you'd come back soon because when you're not here, there's nobody to organize the fun." **(laughter)**

You know, and it's quite clear that that's what he was like. There's a moment when he gets very angry with the same friend, Agostino Vespucci, who has a dinner party, and at the end of the dinner party he presents all the guests with a bill for their share of the food, and Machiavelli is very, very indignant about this and won't pay for awhile, but is always reminded by his friend how he owes him—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Three soldi.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Three soldi. All of this, I have to say as a complete parenthesis, that the character of Agostino Vespucci, who is a distant cousin of Amerigo Vespucci—the Vespucci family is very big in Florence—but Agostino Vespucci actually did exist and was a pal, a drinking buddy of Machiavelli's. And recently he's had the most fantastic comeback. I don't

know if any of you read a couple of months ago in the newspapers that they identified, finally identified categorically the woman in the *Mona Lisa*? There was this newspaper article in which it said people had always suspected it was this woman Mona Lisa del Giocondo, but nobody was sure. And then recently they found this ancient document in the vaults of the city of Florence, in which a monk—not a monk—a clark of the period had written in the margins of a letter identifying that it was in fact Mona Lisa del Giocondo and so it's now…and the clark who wrote it was Agostino Vespucci! **(laughter)**

So I feel so proud, it's like feeling like I brought this person out of obscurity, blinking into the light of day, and then what does he do, he identifies the *Mona Lisa*! **(laughter)** This is what your fictional characters can do, you know, if you treat them right. **(laughter)**

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I think if you have nothing more to say about that character of the memory palace and her, you know—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Oh, no, no, no, well, in the novel what happens is this woman who is clearly been a European woman, possibly French, in fact French, has been captured by the Ottomans and made into a slave and then she has gone through this curious process of brainwashing, where her memories have been replaced by what turn out to be Machiavelli's boyhood friend, the soldier of fortune eventually falls in love with the enchantress, etc. So she becomes suddenly, unexpectedly she turns up in Florence having been sold out of slavery into this courtesan's whorehouse, such thing. And she begins, she starts talking about people that he knows, I mean, his boyhood friend.

And he’s horrified at what has been done to her mind, and so he decides that he will unbrainwash her, if you like, and so he spends night after night with her and whispers in her ear that this is the last time you will tell the story. This time, when you tell the story you can let if go. So he’s basically trying to unbuild the memory palace, to remove the mind of the brainwashing. And what happens is in fact it succeeds and gradually she begins to remember herself instead of the memories that have been placed in her mind, and when she does so, what returns is a memory of horror. She remembers her father is dead, her brothers have been killed, she herself has been sexually violated a thousand and one times, and she’s had this appalling time and when she remembers herself she can’t stand it and she commits suicide. And so he, thinking that he has freed her, has actually destroyed her.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Does he only whisper to her? I thought it went considerably further.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** No, there’s sex involved too.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** That’s what I thought. Okay, just making sure. **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I was, you know, it’s a family audience. **(laughter)** Is it? There’s, there’s kind of—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** We can take some questions—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I was just—you're the architect of this so I was just wondering where you would put this in the memory palace. What room.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** What room?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** It's got everything but the kitchen sink in it, but I'm not sure.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I don't know, I think I'd have to—I don't know. Right now it's in the front room, but that's always the case with your most recent book. Where it ends up, I don't know, probably on some distant shelf somewhere. I don't know, I find it very difficult to say anything in terms of how I place my own books.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I don't mean rating it, I just mean how does it feel in terms of the kind of book it is.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I felt—all I can say is when I finished it, I felt I had done something I hadn't done before. And that's a kind of good feeling, you know, to think that this is not just revisiting things I knew how to do already, you know, but that it's gone somewhere else. Now, beyond that, I think it's for other people to say. I mean, all I know is it's satisfying to find another room, if you like, a room to go into that you've not been in before.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I think you said that it was twenty years of discipline that you got you through the writing of this book.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, even thirty years, yeah, I've been doing it a long time, you know. And yes, in many ways it was a difficult period for me, writing it. But yea, I think, you know, if you form as most novel writers form very strong habits of work, because otherwise the book never gets finished. I mean, a novel is a very long object and I know friends of mine who write plays and screenplays who often say that it actually helps to go away somewhere and write them in a very short concentrated burst of a couple of weeks, or something, and you can actually do that with a play or a screenplay. You cannot do that with a novel, there's no way.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** We were talking about *zitzfleysh* earlier, that's the novelist—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes, you were talking about *zitzfleysh*. I was asking…

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** You were learning about *zitzfleysh*.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** …I was asking what it meant. That's because of my—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** All right, Paul, do you have the questions on cards?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I have about eighty questions.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Eighty!

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But I have not chosen eighty questions but I've added about ten so we have ninety.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Ninety questions. Yes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: (inaudible)** And another asks, in what language do you read?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, you know, here's—the latter question, it's very interesting, because when I go back to India for any length of time, there's always a moment when my dreams change language, usually after I've been there for a week or so, and I've always like that moment. It's a kind of moment of coming home when you wake up and discover that you've dreamed in Urdu or Hindi.

The other thing that happens to me when I'm writing a book, when I'm deeply engaged in writing a book, my dreams become unbelievably tedious. You know, my dreams are: I got up and read the newspaper. **(laughter)** You know? My dreams are: I went for a walk. You know? Because I think what it is is that I'm just using up all that stuff in the daily life in the daily life of doing the writing, and when I go to sleep there's nothing left so I have these incredibly banal

dreams. **(laughter)** And then when I finish writing a book my dreams become more fun, sometimes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Is it the same for you?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I don't have interesting dreams whether I'm writing, not writing, not really, no.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Ah. That's sad. **(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I could talk about my dreams, but—

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Plus the fifty minutes are over.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Eighty-nine questions to go.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Session's over.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I'm giving you a double session. In that vein, I suppose, what is home to you, and what led you to the story of Akbar?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I don't know, I mean, I have—like many people who've traveled between countries—I have a complicated idea of home, and I feel at home in a number of

different places, and when I'm in Bombay I still feel the sense of home that you always feel about the place you were born and brought up. I think that's a thing that doesn't go away. And I feel at home in London, I feel at home here in New York. I don't think it's complicated to have any more—many of us have led these lives where we feel that the idea of home connects to more than one place, and that's how it is for me.

Akbar, well, first of all, if you grow up and go to school in India, you're taught about the six great Mughals, of home Akbar was the greatest. You get taught that, you know, you get force-fed it really, and in many ways you have to recover from it. And yet I did always take away from the story of Akbar what a remarkable and ahead of his time man he was. On the one had, he was a despotic absolute monarch, but on the other—and he was the descendent after all of a very bloodthirsty man, he was descended of Genghis Khan and Temülen and so on.

And yet his great ambition was peace, his dream was of what he called complete peace, and he wanted to create a country that would live together on the basis of peace rather than warfare. And it's such an extraordinary change in consciousness from—and this was, remember, a young boy who was as a child abandoned on a battlefield by his fleeing father and brought up by hostile relatives, and rescued by his father when he was twelve, thirteen, came to the throne a year later, at the age of fourteen was illiterate, and yet became one of the most sophisticated political thinkers and philosophers of the age—and just a remarkable entity in the world at that time. Very little known about outside India. India wasn't that well known to the West, there's some evidence that Philip II of Spain knew about Akbar; Elizabeth of England probably was just

aware of his existence, but there’s no evidence that they ever really communicated with each other.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** The part where he sends her a letter in the—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I made this up.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** You made that up?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I made this up. There is fiction in this novel. **(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Which brings me to the question of history—you studied history, you read history. You read history, and was there a lot of research that went into this book? You have a bibliography at the end, and I’m reminded of the wonderful line of Carlo Ginzburg, who when he starts studying a period he talks about a moment he experiences, which he calls the “euphoria of ignorance.”

**SALMAN RUSHDIE: (laughs)** Yes, well, there’s also another euphoria, though, and it’s certainly one that I felt. There was a moment, quite a clear moment, when I realized I didn’t need to do the research anymore. I actually had gone to India, I was in the remains, this beautiful, haunted ruin of Fatehpur Sikri, the capital city of Akbar, which he built—red sandstone city—which he built. It’s now—if you go to India and you go to see the Taj Mahal, almost nobody goes the one hour drive outside Agra to see what in my view is the most extraordinary ruin in the

country, which is the remnants of Fatehpur Sikri, a place where—this abandoned city sitting in the middle of nowhere. And you can very easily see the ghosts of the past and so on.

And I went there to—and I've been there many times in my life, but I had never been there after doing the research. And I went there having done all this work, and it was as if I had never been there. It was as if the place just opened up to me, and I could reconstruct it and imagine the lives of the people in it very vividly and after spending a couple of days there with a friend, there was just this moment when I thought, okay, got it now. I have it. Click. And I remember saying to my friend that, you know, "If you want to stay, we'll stay, because it's a beautiful place and we can hang out, but as far as I'm concerned I don't know need it anymore, I'm done."

And it was a very good feeling and the moment where I felt, okay, I've got the book now. I know it now. Because there is a moment, I think, where you do have to put the research to one side. Otherwise it's like carrying heavy suitcases around when you're trying to run lightly through a field, you know, it holds you down. And I remember very clearly reaching that moment and at that point—I mean, yes, I did go back to the research material every so often to check a date, or to check a fact, but essentially I didn't. Essentially I just wrote the book from that.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** If not, it would end up being like an academic dissertation. I remember an advisor once said, "There are two kinds of dissertations: brilliant dissertations and finished dissertations." **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, it certainly was true—it was clear to me at one point that if I wanted to, this book could be a thousand pages long, because the whole world of the past, it's so rich, that there is so much that one could say about it, that it would be effortless to make the book a gigantic book. And yet, I knew very clearly from the beginning that I did not want to do that, and I really wanted the book not to be massive, not much over three hundred pages if I could possibly help it. Because I felt I had a story to tell which was a good story and which needed not to be encumbered by other things, so I had to use to myself this guideline which said, if it serves the story, it's in, but only if it serves the story; otherwise, no matter how interesting it is, it's not in. And that was helpful.

I mean I've said it a lot, but I should say again that the great help to me was the essays of Italo Calvino right at the end of his life, when he was supposed to be delivering the Norton lectures at Harvard but he actually died before he was able to deliver them. And there's this little book called *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, in which each of the lectures that he was going to give talks about one literary virtue.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Which one was the one you liked best?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, lightness, swiftness, visibility. Those were, of the six, the three that I liked best, were those. Visibility: it should make pictures in your mind, you know. Lightness: not heaviness. And swiftness, meaning don't hang about; get on with it. And I thought if I can do that, if it can be light and swift and visible, then that's what it should be.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** He loved the notion of *festina lente*: take haste slowly.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, well, you know, I'm not a writer like Calvino. Calvino was a very cerebral writer, a very intellectually disciplined writer, and given the antic wildness of his imagination, he's quite a linguistically spare writer. So in many ways this is not like Calvino at all, but it took inspiration from Calvino.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I thought of *Invisible Cities* now and then.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, well, I mean there's, particularly in the kind of imaginary dialogue that almost happens in the novel between Akbar and Machiavelli there's clearly a conscious echoing of the conversation between Marco Polo and Kubla Khan in *Invisible Cities.*

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** There are a few questions here which are precisely about the notion of influence, which you've written about so brilliantly. You mentioned Kipling, Wodehouse, and Christie as non-Indians who captured and captivated India. What were some of the Indian or Muslim writers who inspired you, for example, *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* or Rumi? And then one other question, I'll link them together. Was *Paradise Lost* an influence on *Satanic Verses*, and what do you think of questions like this? **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I think it's a great question, and so are all questions like it. It's true that *Paradise Lost*, I mean, amongst the books that was very helpful when I wrote *The Satanic Verses*, yes, *Paradise Lost* and perhaps even more than that, Bulgakov's novel *The Master and*

*Margarita*, were very helpful books when I was writing that book. What was the other bit of the question? About the Hamza, yes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** About the writers, the non—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes, Eastern. Yeah, yeah. Well, it's true that the so-called *Adventures of Amir Hamza*, which is another collection of sort of heroic, fabulous tales, which also lead to the creation of this extraordinary sequence of paintings in the court of Akbar, the so-called Hamzanama paintings, which are the kind of pinnacle of Mughal art. These are wonderful tales, I mean, Amir Hamza, there was a historical figure called Hamza who was the uncle of the prophet Muhammad, and was a great warrior and who died in a battle during the time of the battle between the Muslims and the Makkans.

But it's not clear entirely whether the Amir Hamza is entirely the same, or intended to be entirely the same as the historical figure of the prophet's uncle, because it's much more fabulated than that. The character in the stories has a pink, three-eyed winged horse, which was not common in Arabia at the time. **(laughter)** And he also wanders between his love for an earthly princess and a queen of the fairies. And indeed at one moment he rather ungallantly goes off to live with the queen of the fairies for fourteen years, and then comes back to his earthly princess as if nothing had happened.

But anyway, yes, they are wonderful tales, the stories of Amir Hamza. And the reason they affected this book is that it was Akbar, the emperor Akbar who commissioned his art studio to

make the sequence of paintings based on those stories, which as I say, were the kind of pinnacle were sixteenth century Indian painting, the Hamzanama paintings. And actually in the novel there's a chapter about some of the artists who painted them, one in particular, one of the artists who painted the Hamzanama paintings. So, yes, that was very useful, influential, helpful. Yes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Your editor at Random House, Will Murphy, indeed he's sitting somewhere there, loves one sentence in particular in this book. He likes many, but his one in particular he's mentioned to me many times, and it reads like this:

"This may be the curse of human kind; not that we are so different, but that we are everywhere the same."

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah. Well, as the cowardly lion would say, ain't it the truth. **(laughter)** I mean, I think it's just one of the simple discoveries of writing this book, is that having set out to write a book about what I thought was a collision between two very, very different worlds, the world of sixteenth century India and the world of the European high Renaissance, that I found more and more similarities and echoes and forms of behavior, patterns of thought, all kinds of things that mirrored each other, in a way that I really hadn't expected. And certainly it's a very strange thing to have set out to write a book about difference and to end up writing a book about similarity.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** There are many questions, I can't read them all, but in a sense they are wondering why do we kill each other, if we—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Why do we kill each other?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yeah, if we are the same, is that one of the reasons we do, and this question, for instance—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** We don't like each other. **(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We don't like each other?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I'm afraid this may be our problem. We don't like each other much. And sometimes we express it in this extreme way.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** This question, what characteristics do you think fundamentalists such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and others share in common?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Oh, that's an easy question. Bigotry, idiocy, arrogance, stupidity, all the great human qualities. **(laughter/applause)** Thanks. And certainty, which is—certainty, which makes all the other things worse.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I'm surprised you don't say lack of humor.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, that's true, it is true that fanatics tend to be humorless. Never been a joke made by a religious fanatic. **(laughter)** I think it's—I think I'm right in saying that. I mean, I'd like somebody to disprove it.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** You said something—I think they've turned—you said something nice about religion at the beginning of the program, which is why I didn't ask this question, but you've said in an interview that, "Look what happens—you don't go to priests to find out the meaning of existence, look what happens when you do that. Khomeini happens, the Taliban happens, the Inquisition happens." And I wonder why you're so anti-religious. I mean, also, Quakerism happens, passivism happens.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** That's true.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Tim Russert happened, you know. **(inaudible)** a saint. And, but you sort of answered that at the beginning, that you thought of your grandfather as a religious person who was—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, I have no, this may be a point at which Hitchens and I don't agree, although we broadly speaking do agree on this subject, on the atheism subject. But I have no particular problem with religion as a private matter. You know, I mean, if you are religious and it brings you joy, comfort, solace, whatever it may do, that's essentially no business of mine.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Except you think I'm an idiot if I do, right? **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, but everybody thinks everybody is an idiot. That doesn't matter. **(laughter)** What I'm saying it it's not essentially for me to say whether you should live your life in that idiotic way or not. **(laughter)** But when that becomes a public matter, you seek to impose your religion and its consequences on other people, than it is for me to start arguing.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** What if you agree with how it's being imposed, anti-war sentiment that you might agree with, then should they be—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I don't know, I'm not in favor of imposing on the whole. I don't like people who seek to impose. No, I mean, I think religion is bad for people. And I think that there's a moment in the novel where the emperor Akbar has a thought which he may not have had, which may have been more mine than his, where I say that one of the—he says, that one of the worst aspects of religion is that if you believe in a supreme being from whom morality and goodness flows, it infantilizes you. It means you can't make up your own mind about how to lead an ethical life, because you have to receive it from some kind of holy father. And I prefer not to be a child. You know, and I think religion does make us children, and not grown up. And I think I prefer adulthood. **(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In a forthcoming book by Julian Barnes, a kind of memoir, the first line is, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, well, yes, so there are easy paradoxes, you know, Buñuel always said that he wanted his epitaph to read, "Thank God I died an atheist." **(laughter)** And then when his communist friends hear this they were horrified and he had to explain to them that it was a joke. **(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yet again, the notion of lack of humor.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Exactly.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** How did living under the threat of death affect your ability to concentrate and work?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I don't know. I mean, quite a lot, I think. **(laughter)** but I, I don't know, I managed somehow. I did manage to work during those years, and I'm proud of that. I just decided—I think writers I stubborn creatures, I just discovered resources of obstinacy in me that I had not suspected.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you have a question for Jeffrey Eugenides?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah! I thought you'd never ask.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I was hoping you wouldn't.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I wanted to—it's one of the nicest things that I ever saw you say was that in some way *Midnight's Children* and so on had been helpful to you as a writer and I'm just wondering how. **(laughter)** I mean, given that it's half a world apart and so on, but what, exactly.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** In two major ways. When I read, as a young person, it gave me the ambition someday to write a exuberant comic novel about a place—I grew up in Detroit and I always wanted to write a book about it, and your portrait of Bombay gave me a sense of how to go about that.

And secondly, more technically, when I was talking about my progression as a writer and learning how to tell stories and plot, it was extremely helpful to read and reread that book, because the narrative felicity in that book is so amazing, and the way you begin a story and start another one and have them link up and divide and then come back together was just something that I was reverse engineering all the time with the book, looking at it, seeing how you did it. And that's what I do with all novels that I like, is read them and try to take them apart and figure out what can I use that would work in my own work.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** But did you feel—I mean, the thing that I felt when I finished it was that I didn't want to do it again, you know what I mean.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** That's for sure, especially if it was about a hermaphrodite, you can imagine how you feel, I mean. **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yes, maybe there's only one great…

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Yeah, there's only—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** …one great hermaphrodite novel.

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** People ask me about the sequel. I say I'm not interested.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Yeah, no, I used to get asked that a lot, about why aren't you writing *Midnight's Children* anymore, where's the rest of the story? I don't know the rest of the story. But also, not just in terms of story but I felt that the kind of, the literary linguistic project of the book, I thought was, you know, done. Do something else now. I mean, do you feel that you've swung in some very different way?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** Absolutely. I mean, I've only written two books, but each time you finish one, your impulse is to do something absolutely different, because—

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Now, where is it?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** I've been writing some short stories that are quite different in tone and in subject matter—more grown up, grumpier, middle-aged people in trouble. And I'm

working on a novel that deals with college age and those people are slowly working my way toward adulthood in my fiction.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Well, I mean one of the great transformations in my sense of my own writing was at the moment at which I realized that having spent a lot of my life writing from the child's position upwards, towards the adult world, that I was suddenly no longer able to do that. That I was actually writing from the grown up's position downwards, and that was an aging moment. **(laughter)** But it's—that's one of the reasons why I think I couldn't write anything like that now, because to see as a child I think is something, no longer something I can do. I don't know what you feel, do you feel that your characters are getting older?

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES:** They're getting slowly, slowly older. I think by the time I die I might write about a thirty-five year old. I have about a twenty year lag in my ability.

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** I managed to keep up more. They're almost all the same age as me.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And as we slowly wind our evening to a close, several people wanted to know what it felt like for you to be knighted and to see the queen. **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Thrilling. **(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And in conclusion— **(laughter)**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Don't you say? **(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER**: And in conclusion, what position did you play in rugby?

**SALMAN RUSHDIE:** Oh, well I was never a fast runner, so I couldn't play in the three quarters, so I usually played in the scrum, mostly, at prop forward.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Jeffrey Eugenides, Salman Rushdie, thank you very much.

**(applause)**