

Q&amp;A | SALMAN RUSHDIE

# 'FREEDOMS ARE VERY EASILY LOST'

The acclaimed author talks about Iraq, Islam and threats to Western liberties

**FOR 10 YEARS**, acclaimed writer Salman Rushdie lived under a *fatwa*, a death sentence declared by Iran's Muslim clerics who deemed his novel *The Satanic Verses* to be blasphemous. The decree was lifted in 1998, and the next year the Bombay-born, much-travelled author moved from London to New York—to find his adopted home the target of terrorism. *Step Across This Line*, a new non-fiction anthology, offers his witty, opinionated take on topics from soccer and rock music to the roots of Islamic terrorism. Rushdie, 55, gave a reading last week at the Vancouver International Writers Festival. And he discussed rumours of war, and the New York state of mind, with Vancouver Bureau Chief Ken MacQueen.

**You were in Texas last Sept. 11 when New York—your new home—was attacked. What did you feel that day?**

I felt a kind of domestic violation, the way you would feel if somebody broke into your house and did something terrible to it. Apart from the things we all felt that day, shock, disturbance of the soul and so on, I realized how deeply New York had sunk into me. I surprised myself by the strength and depth of that feeling. Maybe after a lifetime of being unstuck and rattling around I'm finally getting stuck.

**You wrote of the attacks that the response will be judged on whether people feel safe again in their daily lives. Well?**

The fact is the city has regained a lot of its quality. People seem to have learned to live with the possibility of violence in their lives. They've repossessed their city in a way, saying, "You're not going to take that away from me."

**Lord knows you're an expert on living with the potential of unexpected violence. There must be costs to that.**

Yes, there are plenty. New York in many ways is still a city in a state of grief—it's just below the surface. Still, people have

regained their ability to get on with their lives and do stuff, and actually to be nasty again. New Yorkers don't say, "After you"; they say, "I'm walking here." The moment in which that came back I thought was a moment of hope.

**Was the *fatwa* you lived under an unheeded warning of the growth of what you call "paranoid Islam"?**

One of the things I tried to do in those years was talk about the extent to which such a fanatical project was beginning to distort the lives of many of these societies across the Muslim world. I've tried to say now for, what, at least 12 years that what happened to me is not just a blip. I tried to say, look there are writers all over the Muslim world who are being accused of blasphemy, who are being accused of apostasy. Many of them are being jailed, some of them are being killed. There were some people who felt what I was saying was kind of special pleading, that I was trying to draw attention to my own case by aggrandizing it. I guess I was just a little ahead of the curve.

**A year later, the U.S. and Britain are poised to strike at Saddam Hussein.**

I really hope not.

**What are the risks?**

I think he's a big problem. As evidence emerges it becomes clearer and clearer that he has been trying to regain his capacity to make some very nasty things. I don't have a pacifist position about this. I was totally in favour of what was done in Afghanistan and I still am. I think the defeat of the Taliban is a great gain for mankind. With Saddam, the question for me is not, oh dear, let's not go and fight. It's, what works? I think they have no idea what they would put in his place. We know the United States would win, it's a war with only one result. But the question is, then what? I also think even the United States can't afford to be globally isolated.

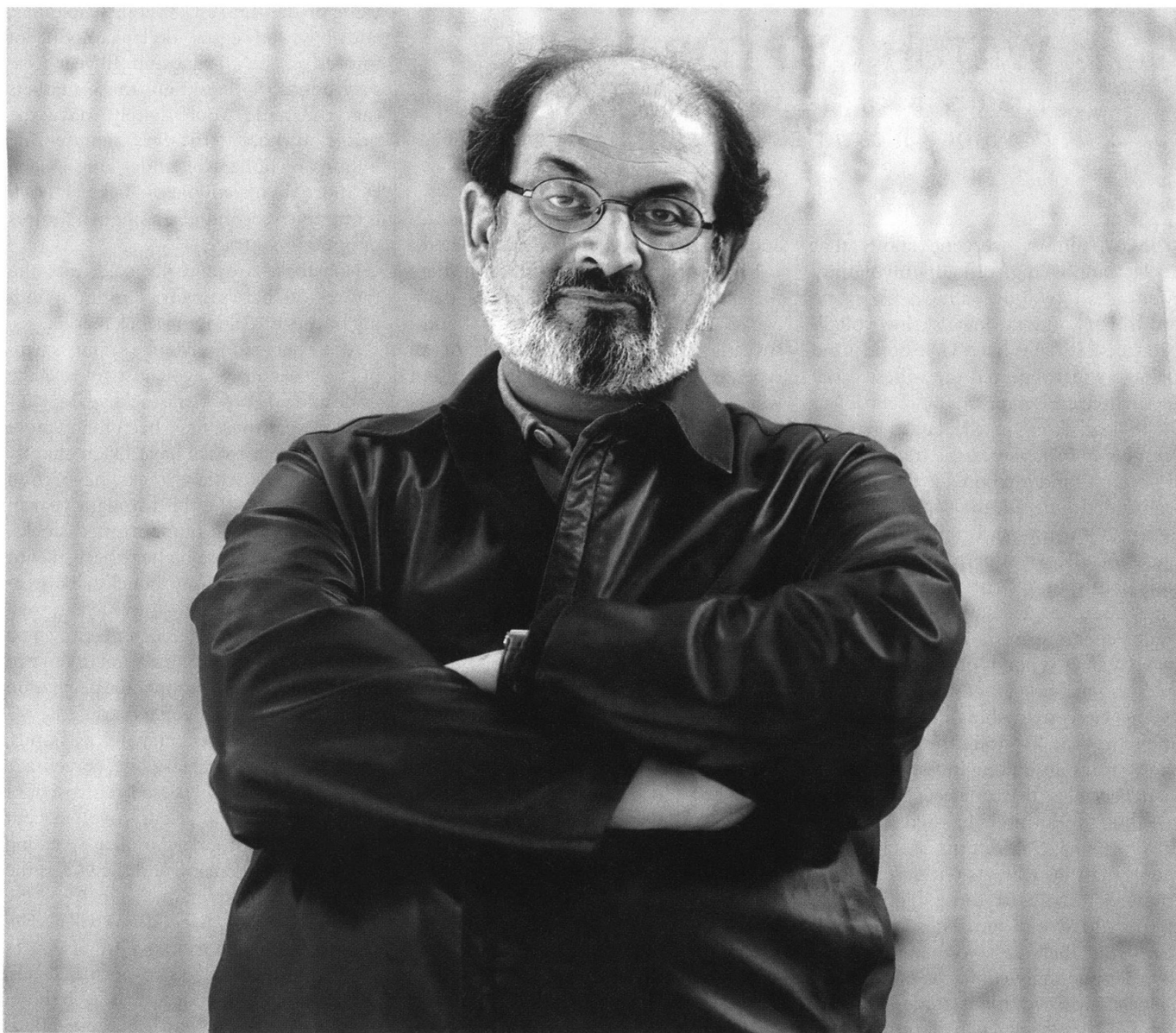
Having gone to the UN, and having got Saddam to make this climbdown [to allow weapons inspectors], I think you've got to see if it's a genuine offer or not.

**Could a U.S. attack trigger a united Islamic jihad?**

I feel a little less concerned about that than I did because the Saudis are now saying, after a great deal of arm-twisting, that they would allow American bases in Saudi Arabia to be used. The Iranians have said, in that wonderfully Iranian way, that they would not seek to exploit the situation. Reading between the lines, they're not prepared to come in on the Iraqi side. Frankly, a month ago a lot of people didn't think there was any real reason to believe that Saddam was making weapons of mass destruction. Now there is a lot more credibility to that claim. And that, even in the Muslim world, strengthens the American hand.

**Our prime minister is among those saying that global inequity and Western arrogance are at least a contributing factor to Sept. 11.**

I think they've only been a contributing factor in a propaganda sense. I don't think they're directly connected. That's to say, yes, the injustices of the world, the inequity in distribution of resources, the Palestinian issue—particularly the Palestinian issue—are a major recruiting cry for fanatics. However, I don't believe that the bin Laden group, or similar groups, are at all interested in decreasing the amount of injustice in the world, and certainly they themselves do not come from the world's oppressed. Bin Laden is a very wealthy man, and look at the people who hijacked those planes, they are all middle-class kids. Of course, there is a parallel track which has to do with the world's injustice. The one feeds off the other, it's true, but I do not go along at all with "America got what it deserved" arguments. These people are not trying to make a revolution which makes the world



a better place, they're simply trying to make a certain kind of grab for power.

**Would a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lower the risk?**

It would change the discourse completely. I think it would make possible an attack on the terrorists from inside Muslim countries, which currently people will not contemplate because of the degree of animus toward America, due to Palestine.

**Are you concerned that the enemies of freedoms you hold dear may be transforming "us" into "them"?**

I think it's something to be really worried about. Would it not be a dreadful irony if

we would do this to ourselves: in the defence of freedom we would give up our liberties? Suddenly you don't have to give people reasons why they are being swept off the street and held incommunicado, interrogated and deported. The ordinary rules of evidence don't apply and this or that kind of kangaroo court will deal with issues in a summary way. Freedoms are hard won and very easily lost. I worry that people in the U.S. and elsewhere—because there are similar problems developing in other Western states—aren't upset enough yet about this threat. In the absence of that debate, the people who are trying to pinch those freedoms are just going ahead and pinching them.

**Even the most serious essays in your new book are shot through with subversive humour. I can't tell if this makes you an optimist or a cynic?**

Humour doesn't have to be funny ha ha—it's a way of looking at the world. That's what I respond to in other people's writing and so it's what I hope I am able to preserve in my own. The world always surprises you. Futurology is the science of being wrong about the future, and both optimism and cynicism are ways of looking forward. I try to avoid them both, because, who knows? Meanwhile, we've got some problems, so let's deal with these and let the future take care of itself. **M**

# 'FREEDOMS ARE VERY EASILY LOST'

MACLEAN'S | OCTOBER 7 2002



Reprinted from the Maclean's Archive

<https://archive.macleans.ca/article/20021007034/print>



©2018 - MACLEAN'S ARCHIVE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.