

Casting spells, spinning tales: Literary giant comes to state

By Lisa Reisman
Special to ShoreView

According to celebrated author Salman Rushdie, storytelling is an ingrained trait in humans. We tell stories to understand ourselves, he told the audience of 300 at the Wallace Stevens Theater in Hartford Friday, June 6. We read stories — or listen to them — for the same purpose. Stories are at the heart of being.

Rushdie, who was born in India and divides his time between Bombay, London, and New York, is best known as a master of magical realism. His books include "Midnight's Children," for which he won the prestigious Booker Award, and "The Satanic Verses," which in 1989 led to violent protests from Muslims in several countries and the declaration of a fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of Iran at the time, for Rushdie's execution.

But the conversation in Hartford, at an event that marked the first stop on the national tour to promote his latest novel "The Enchantress of Florence," hardly touched on the death threats and the ensuing decade Rushdie spent largely underground. Sponsored by R.J. Julia Booksellers of Madison and the Connecticut Forum, and featuring a discussion between the author and WTIC radio host Diane Smith, the theme of "An Evening with Salman Rushdie" was, quite simply, the story — in short, how stories define, enlighten, and sustain us.

"Enchantress," in fact, is consumed with notions of storytelling. Characters find the will to keep going and even save their own lives by telling stories; they seduce and gain power and establish identities for themselves (both true and false) by spinning tales; one man even creates a woman in his mind who, made corporeal, becomes his lover and wife. The book itself is constructed as a series of stories within stories, narratives nesting like Russian dolls.

This kind of ornate, sometimes convoluted, narrative style (as well as a penchant for obscure literary references) is often fodder for critics, as one audience member pointed out. Rushdie has a different read. The same way one might enjoy a fantastic stew without knowing the name of each of its separate ingredients, he said, there's no requirement for understanding every detail in his work. Just consume the book as a whole, he exhorted.

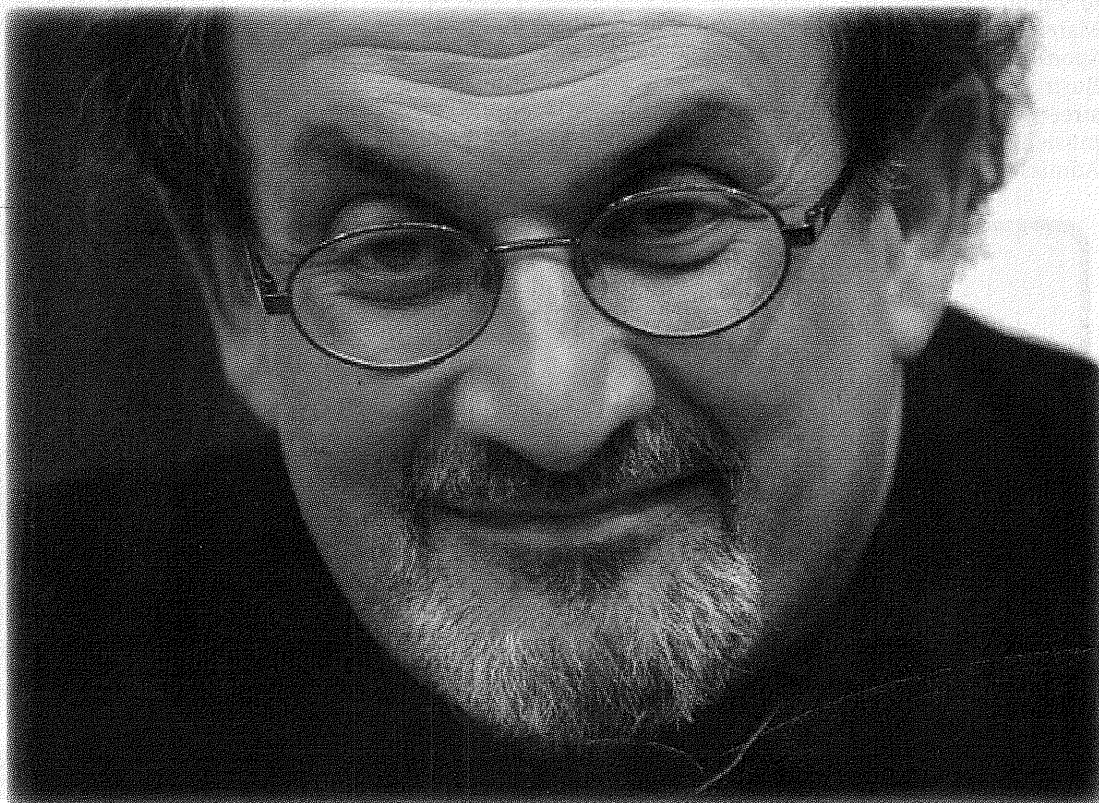
In person, the Cambridge-educated author is disarmingly frank, gracious, and charming. There is a certain self-effacing humility about the knighted British subject, who lampooned himself in the 2001 film "Bridget Jones's Diary" and recently appeared as a gynecologist in "Then She Found Me" with Helen Hunt. And this quality, as Roxanne Coady, owner of R.J. Julia, put it, seemingly cast a spell over the audience, alchemizing the event into a "casual and intimate" evening for the packed crowd.

Perhaps as magical as the book itself, "Enchantress" begins with the arrival of a fair-haired Western stranger in

the court of Akbar the Great, the Grand Mughal who ruled from 1556 to 1605. Over the course of many nights, the Florentine adventurer relates an improbable tale that he is the Emperor's uncle and his mother a lost princess and the youngest sister of Akbar's grandfather, the first Grand Mughal Babar. Stretching from East to West and back again, like Rushdie's own life story, "Enchantress" exhibits a rich array of historical personages. Vlad the Impaler, Machiavelli, Amerigo Vespucci, and assorted Medicis, all make cameo appearances.

The research for the book — a six-page bibliography is appended — took about seven years to compile. But the idea took root more than 50 years ago when the history of the six Grand Mughals was drilled into Rushdie, as it is into every Indian schoolchild. The real-life Akbar was a contradictory figure, an undefeated warrior who callously did away with enemies while building a so-called house of dispute where religious questions could be peacefully examined and debated.

Among the most eye-opening discoveries he made during his research, Rushdie said, was that fact is often stranger than fiction. People tend to assume the most fantastical material is magic realism, and those are the parts that actually happened. It's the banal that peo-



Salman Rushdie focused on the art of storytelling during an appearance at the Wallace Stevens Theater in Hartford.

ple suppose must be true when it is in fact what he wove out of whole cloth.

Which is not to say that "Enchantress," classified as fiction and covering primarily imagined events more than five centuries ago, is without contemporary relevance. While Rushdie disavowed

the notion that the novel is political — except insofar as it concerns public life and explores the struggle between republicanism and despotism in Renaissance Italy — he acknowledged that the work can be taken in part as a plea for tolerance in a world where dialogue is often dictated by

extremists, as well as a statement on the human compulsion to dominate and destroy.

After all, history teaches us about the here and now, he said. And what is history but, quite literally, the telling of stories?

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