

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie

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- We will begin by reading the description of what happened to Aadam Aziz in 1915 (p. 4-5). Why did he feel “uncertain, unwary, comforted yet uneasy”?
  - Symbolizes that things in his nation and personal life are changing...the very ground beneath his feet is shaky
  - What else is transpiring in the world during 1915 (WWI)?
  - How did Aadam's world of Kashmir change at this time and throughout the novel? What about now?
- What does the fisherman Tai represent in this novel? Why was he so angry with Aadam?
- Aadam meets his future wife by viewing her piece by piece through the “perforated sheet.” Why did Rushdie use this technique and what else in the novel does this parallel?
  - Saleem's view of his mother from the basket
  - Amina learning to love her husband part by part
  - The peepshow
- What was Naseem's reaction to marriage and her husband on their honeymoon? Did Aadam push too hard too soon? What happened to his patience? p. 32.
- Who turned out to be the stronger of the two? In what way?
  - Naseem became “Reverend Mother”
  - Wouldn't give up her purdah
  - Defended her territory (p. 41 Don't come in my kitchen)
  - Refused to feed him (religious education of the children)
  - Refused to talk ( a man in the house with her daughters)
- The appearance of Nadir Khan introduces politics right into the Aziz home. What part does politics play in this novel?
  - Crucial element — novel mirrors the birth of modern day India and Pakistan
- Nadir and Mumtaz
- Mumtaz marries Ahmed, her sister, Alia's former suitor. How does this second marriage differ from the first?
  - Takes her away - read quote from train station (p.71)
  - Consummated – fruitful
  - She labors at loving Ahmed (p. 75) and eventually changes him visually into Nadir
- *Midnight's Children* is a dark and complex allegory of India's first thirty one years of nationhood. As depicted in the novel to what extent has the legacy of the British Empire contributed to the turbulent character of Indian life?
  - Paternalism
  - Classes
  - Britishisms
  - Retained cocktail hour



**Skokie Public Library**

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- What did Methwold represent? Why did he specify that nothing be changed in his houses?
  - Center parting – two sides of India
  - Represents “the Raj”
  - Has impregnated Vanita – left his seed (p. 113)
  - If he leaves everything as is, nothing has changed
  - He’s left it in “tiptop” shape and if it deteriorates it’s “Their” fault
- When Amina followed the peepshow man, it led her to a prophecy (p. 96). How accurate was it, and what was her reaction?
- At the very heart of *Midnight’s Children* is an act of deception. Why did Mary Pereira switch the babies?
  - Her own personal act of revolution p. 130
  - Thought she would get Joseph D’Costa back
- What does the spittoon represent?
  - A point of reference
  - A sort of repository of memories (old men spitting into it)
  - A calming effect (the act of chewing...something from his childhood)
- What kind of person is Saleem?
  - Snotnose, stainface, etc. (p. 131)
  - A paradox
  - An observer
  - Telepathic
- Why did he write this book?
  - To preserve memories (p. 36)
- Why did he include Padma?
  - To provide an anchor and represent the reader and their questions and confusion
- What did Saleem mean by the “crack” in his body?
- What is the role of the 1001 children?
  - The number 1001 represents night, magic, alternative realities
  - A number beloved of poets and detested by politicians for whom all alternative versions of the world are threats
  - The future of the nation
  - All phases of the culture, history, personalities, talents
  - Family
- There were many women who played significant roles in Saleem’s life. Which was the most memorable to you? Which was the most appealing? Mary Pereira, Naseem, Amina, Padma, Jamilia (The Brass Monkey — red gold thatch of hair darkened later) Parvati the Witch, Alia (the vengeful), Evelyn Lilith
- Medicine is an integral part of the events and personalities of this novel. In what ways? Can medicine cure India?
  - Aadam educated as a doctor
  - Aadam met Naseem through his practice
  - Because of a medical exam we learn that Nadir & Mumtaz never consummated their marriage
  - Saleem & Shiva are switched at birth
  - Saleem endures typhoid at the age of two—cured by snake venom
  - When he loses his finger, Saleem’s true parentage is discovered
- What is it with the oversized, over sensitive body parts? Knees, Noses, Ears
- Shiva and Saleem are only two of the 1001 children, but are probably the most important. Why?
  - Switched at birth
  - Saleem represents calmness, a coordinator, apt. of reference; Shiva=a threat, violence, sexual excess
  - their double birth mirrors India & Pakistan’s rebirth into independence; as adults they switch places again...Shiva becomes powerful and rich while Saleem becomes homeless. This is the ultimate revolution.

- What is the role of “Pickling” in this novel?
  - Preserves, stops time (p. 37). “ By day amongst the pickle vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory as well as fruit is being saved from the corruption of the clocks.”
- With the birth of Saleem’s giant-eared son, history seems about to repeat itself; but Saleem senses that this time around, things will be different. How have circumstances changed?
- In a nation separated by religion, what role does religion play in the lives of the characters in *Midnight’s Children*?
  - Most not actually religious
  - Reverend Mother
  - Mary — convent educated
  - Moslems herding cattle off to slaughter past the Hindu homes
- Many things are buried in this novel. What does that represent?
  - Placenta
  - Spittoon
  - Celebratory telegram from Nehru
  - Globe
- There are many incidents of humor in this work. Can you remember any?
  - Commander Sabarmati after killing his wife, wants to give up and instead ends up directing traffic with the smoking gun (p. 300).
  - Saleem has spent years thinking the number 555 was the sign of the devil because nasty Cyrus had told him that (p. 248).
  - Naseem defends her kitchen with a heavy pot (p. 41).
- Many passages evoke beautiful imagery. Which stand out for you?
  - The description in the train station (p. 71).
  - The meeting of Nadir and Amina in the restaurant and the play of their hands (p. 249).
  - The temple in the jungle with the mesmerizing women
- Why did the author give so many characters two names?
- The films of Bollywood represent fantasy, the stuff of dreams and provide the purest forms of distraction for the masses enabling them to escape the difficulties of life. Many of India’s cinema stars enjoy enormous celebrity which often translates into political power. What role did Bollywood play in this novel? Remember Hara was not successful once he tried to write realistic scripts.
- What is the message of the book?
  - revealing the wheel of human fortunes – the oppressor becomes the oppressed and vice versa
- In effect, then, the ancestors we as readers have spent so much time in absorbing are not Saleem’s actual relatives. Why spend so much time on these faux ancestors?
- What is the current state of India/Pakistan relations?
- Read the last paragraph of the book aloud.