

An Unsurprising World of Magic? – Review of Salman Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life*

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February 2011

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Salman Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2010, hardback, 216 pp., ISBN 978-0-224-06162-9

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‘[He] was surprised by how unsurprising the *World of Magic* was starting to feel’ (133)

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Luka and the Fire of Life is billed as Salman Rushdie’s eleventh novel and his second book (ostensibly, primarily or mainly) “for children”. It is the immediate successor to the turgidly magic-realist *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), and, more to the point, a sequel, twenty years on, to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), which had the unrepeatability distinction of being his first post-fatwa work of fiction. For the second time, *Luka* features the storyteller Rashid Khalifa and his family: if in *Haroun* Rashid’s storytelling capacities risked drying out until his son Haroun paid a visit to the parallel world of magic, in the sequel it is Haroun’s younger brother, Luka, who enters a similar magic universe to rescue his father from an apparently fatal coma (if Haroun’s task is to restore the Ocean of the Sea of Stories, Luka’s is to steal the Fire of Life). One might say it is the same story over again: any relative evaluation of the two books is likely to rest on the nature of the telling.

It is hard to see how a “book for children” by a major adult novelist could be seen as just that and nothing more (Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, after all, also foregrounds major social issues), and this book is best seen, like *Haroun* before it, as a children’s/adults’ crossover fiction, indeed in the line of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books (interestingly enough, all seven came out in the years between *Haroun* and *Luka*, and Rushdie’s second stab at transgenerational fiction is, as we will see in this review, unlikely to be totally innocent of contamination from Rowling’s global best-selling series).

Any work by Rushdie will inevitably raise further generic interrogations. *Luka*, like *Haroun*, is, given its target audience, logically positioned closer to the fantasy edge of the realist/fantastic continuum than the majority of his adult novels, and this despite his celebrated cultivation of magic realism. Of those novels, those closest generically to *Luka* are the science-fictional *Grimus* (1975), the part-SF *Fury* (2001) and *The Enchantress of Florence* – of which none is usually considered as exactly among their author’s best, though that in itself should be not prejudice the new book as children’s writing. It is worth noting, too, that in his adult fiction Rushdie’s eclectic intertextual references have included allusions to works generally considered as mainly for children, such as *Pinocchio* in *Midnight’s Children* or *The Jungle Book* in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, and that he has devoted a whole monograph to the film version of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*.

Rushdie’s established critics will no doubt also want to ask where the new book positions itself in relation to Indian Writing in English and postcolonial fiction, two genres of which the author of *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983) is considered in academic circles to have been a key avatar. The answer is, for better or worse, that if *Haroun*, set as far as its terrestrial/realist elements were concerned in a place obviously resembling Kashmir, still had something to do with India, its nominal sequel, despite beginning and ending in the same

family house, has very little connection with any Indian or postcolonial reality (Rushdie had, it is true, also moved his residence from the UK to the US between the two books). It is, rather, the product and reflection of a cosmopolitan and globalised reality.

The intertextuality in *Luka* pours thick and fast. Its predecessor already linked to *The Thousand and One Nights* through its onomastic evocations of the Caliph Haroun-al-Rashid; now, though, the reader is assailed by direct or indirect allusions to countless mythologies and unending literary texts, both adults' and children's. The theft of the Fire of Life is consciously linked, as if in a comparative anthropology textbook, to Prometheus and the Native American myth of Coyote. The character Nobodaddy, a magic-world simulacrum of Luka's comatose progenitor, takes his name from William Blake. Shelley's Ozymandias and Yeats' 'rough beast' from 'The Second Coming' (129) make their intertextual bow, as does Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (92). The *Thousand and One Nights* return, here too, in namechecks for Aladdin (47) and Sinbad (147). Lewis Carroll, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis all suddenly appear naked and undisguised in a direct reference by Luka to 'other Magic Worlds dreamed up by other people, Wonderlands and Narnias and Middle-earths and whatnot' (180; earlier, a white rabbit straight out of Carroll runs across the page – 61). Rushdie's own work, too receives a knowing nod or two, as when the legendary Mountain of Qâf (which featured in *Grimus* as Calf Mountain) reappears (31), or when Luka, like Ormus Cama, feels 'the ground beneath his feet ... begin to shake' (167); and if the flying carpet which bears the boy and his companions aloft is said to have belonged to King Solomon (92), that detail may actually be a self-conscious signature, since Salman is a variant of Solomon!

Luka's parallel Magic World has obvious analogies in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and P.L. Travers' *Mary Poppins*; to the latter, Rushdie may owe, besides, more than a detail in his motif of circus animals rebelling against their human owners (in Travers it is zoo animals). Above all, there are themes and passages which would be at home in the pages of another creator of parallel worlds, none other than J.K. Rowling: a dragon called Nuthog, an aerial fight resembling a Quidditch game, 'fat, blind, whitish Worms' (60) recalling Rowling's Flobberworms, 'hooded figures' with invisible faces (197) which look like doubles of her Dementors, and a plant called Slackerweed ('This rapidly spreading weed, previously unknown in the Magic World, had ... choked and destroyed all other plant life' – 163), which seems out of the same garden as Potterland's Whomping Willow.

Luka's obsessive intertextuality is at its most plethoric in the passages where the hero is aided by a hypereclectic bevy of 'ex-gods' (135), an agglomeration of figures from the pantheons of the world's abandoned polytheisms ('the gods in whom nobody believed in any longer, except as stories that people once liked to tell' – 127). These are gods and goddesses from an encyclopaedic collection of traditions including the Greco-Roman, Egyptian, Sumerian, Norse, Celtic, Chinese, Japanese, Aztec, Inca, Maya, Caribbean, African, Polynesian and Native American – albeit and saving a stray rakshasa escaped from the *Ramayana* (201), excluding any divinities or demigods from the world's major surviving polytheism, namely the Hinduism which nonetheless proffered Rushdie fecund themes for *Midnight's Children* – a exclusion no doubt necessitated by his schema, but nonetheless tearing a strange and gaping hole in what might otherwise seem one-man-Wikipedia pretensions.

Rushdie's resort to polytheism as a plot element may, indeed, point to a major problem with this book. There is a sleight-of-hand going on at repeated moments in *Luka* where Rushdie – rather less subtly than in *Haroun*, which had the immediate weight of the still-recent fatwa to justify such tactics – appears to be using the apparently innocent children's-book format to

smuggle in issues of belief from the adult world which – whether one agrees with his positions or not – might arguably be more appropriately raised in essay or journalistic mode. A large part of the book concerns the conflict between Rats and Otters, the Rats hailing from somewhere called the Respectorate of I and the Otters from the rival territory of OTT (Over The Top). The Rats and their Respectorate rather too obviously allegorise the political mindset of Rushdie's detractors over *The Satanic Verses* – in this case, not so much his Islamic opponents as the postmodernist anti-Rushdie faction on the Western left, the proponents of cultural relativism, identity politics and 'respect for religion'. At the border of the Respectorate, a signboard warns: 'YOU ARE AT THE FRONTIER OF THE RESPECTORATE OF I. MIND YOUR MANNERS' (69); the 'I', it is explained, stands for 'I-identity', and 'many of its present occupants take Offence very sharply indeed' (70). By contrast, the liberal-minded, anarchic Otters, led by their queen the 'Insult-ana', represent 'over-the-top' excess perceived as a positive value (77). The Otters defeat, indeed eliminate the Rats, in an episode which looks a shade too much like Rushdie reordering the Magic World as he would like to see the real world reconfigure itself. Similarly, the plethoric swarm of 'Badly Behaved Gods' (127) may ultimately be there not simply to represent polytheism, or even polytheism in contrast to the three great monotheisms (none of which has given the post-*Satanic Verses* Rushdie an easy ride) - but, behind that, ideological pluralism as opposed to monolithic belief-systems. Even the apparently innocent detail of Luka taking the left-hand path up the Mountain of Knowledge ('Right-thinking people can never really understand what it is to be on the Left ... *the left way round is the right way*' - 162) could be read as standing in for Rushdie himself making a political statement, affirming that despite those who now brand him a neo-con, he remains and as always a man of the left. Ingenious all this may be, but it is an open question whether this kind of schematic allegorisation makes for good literary writing, still less a good children's book.

Posterity may, in the end, find *Luka* to be a worthy successor of *Haroun*, and a valid symbolic revisiting by its author of his post-fatwa writer's environment, more than two decades on from that fatal Valentine's Day. Some of this book's readers, though, may, at least for the present, conclude that its magic indeed contains few surprises thanks to an over-the-top intertextuality – and that, worse, it falls between two stools: neither entirely a children's nor an adult's book, split between both genres rather than creatively fusing them as the likes of Carroll, Baum or Rowling have done. Luka succeeds in stealing the Fire of Life, but the jury is out on whether Salman Rushdie has succeeded, this time round, in stealing the hearts of his readers, young or old.