

'ERRATA': OR, UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

According to Hindu tradition, the elephant-headed god Ganesha is very fond of literature; so fond that he agrees to sit at the feet of the bard Vyasa and take down the entire text of the *Mahabharata*, from start to finish, in an unparalleled act of stenographic love.

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai makes a reference, at one point, to this old tradition. But his version is a little different. According to Saleem, Ganesha sat at the feet of the poet Valmiki and took down the *Ramayana*. Saleem is wrong.

It is not his only mistake. During his account of the evolution of the city of Bombay, he tells us that the city's patron-goddess Mumbadevi has fallen out of favour with contemporary Bombayites: 'The calendar of festivals reveals her decline . . . Where is Mumbadevi's day?' As a matter of fact, the calendar of festivals includes a perfectly good Mumbadevi Day, or at least it does in all versions of India except Saleem's.

And how could Lata Mangeshkar have been heard singing on All-India Radio as early as 1946? And does Saleem not know that it was not General Sam Manekshaw who accepted the surrender of the Pakistan Army at the end of the Bangladesh War—the Indian officer who was Tiger Niazi's old chum being, of course, Jagjit Singh Arora? And why does Saleem allege that the brand of cigarettes, State Express 555, is manufactured by W. D. & H. O. Wills?

I could continue. Concrete tetrapods have never been used in Bombay as part of any land reclamation scheme, but only to shore up and protect the sea wall along the Marine Drive promenade. Nor could the train that brings Picture Singh and Saleem from Delhi to Bombay possibly have passed through Kurla, which is on a different line.

Etcetera. It is by now obvious, I hope, that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight's Children* is far

from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India.

But this isn't quite how unreliable narration usually works in novels. Conventionally unreliable narrators are often a little stupid, less able to work out what's going on around them than the reader. In such narratives, one deciphers the true meaning of events by 'seeing through' the narrator's faulty vision. However, the narrator of *Midnight's Children* is neither particularly stupid, nor particularly unaware of what's happening.

Why, then, all the errata? One answer could be that the author has been sloppy in his research. 'If you're going to use Hindu traditions in your story, Mr Rushdie,' I was asked by an irate and shiny-headed gentleman in Bangalore—he had spotted the Valmiki/Vyasa confusion—'don't you think you could take the trouble to look it up?' I have also received letters arguing about Bombay bus routes, and informing me that certain ranks used by the Pakistan Army in the text are not in fact used by the Pakistan Army in Pakistan. In these letters there is always an undertone of pleasure: the reader's delight at having 'caught the writer out'.

So let me confess that the novel does contain a few mistakes that are mine as well as Saleem's. One is to be found in the description of the Amritsar massacre, during which I have Saleem say that Dyer entered the Jallianwala Bagh compound followed by 'fifty white troops'. The truth is that there were fifty troops, but they weren't white. When I first found out my error I was upset and tried to have it corrected. Now I'm not so sure. The mistake feels more and more like Saleem's; its wrongness feels *right*.

Elsewhere, though, I went to some trouble to get things wrong. Originally error-free passages had the taint of inaccuracy introduced. Unintentional mistakes were, on being discovered, not expunged from the text but, rather, emphasized, given more prominence in the story. This odd behaviour requires an explanation.

When I began the novel (as I've written elsewhere) my purpose was somewhat Proustian. Time and migration had

placed a double filter between me and my subject, and I hoped that if I could only imagine vividly enough it might be possible to see beyond those filters, to write as if the years had not passed, as if I had never left India for the West. But as I worked I found that what interested me was the process of filtration itself. So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool. Saleem's greatest desire is for what he calls meaning, and near the end of his broken life he sets out to *write himself*, in the hope that by doing so he may achieve the significance that the events of his adulthood have drained from him. He is no dispassionate, disinterested chronicler. He wants so to shape his material that the reader will be forced to concede his central role. He is cutting up history to suit himself, just as he did when he cut up newspapers to compose his earlier text, the anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati. The small errors in the text can be read as clues, as indications that Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small. He is an interested party in the events he narrates.

He is also *remembering*, of course, and one of the simplest truths about any set of memories is that many of them will be false. I myself have a clear memory of having been in India during the China War. I 'remember' how frightened we all were, I 'recall' people making nervy little jokes about needing to buy themselves a Chinese phrase book or two, because the Chinese Army was not expected to stop until it reached Delhi. I also know that I could not possibly have been in India at that time. I was interested to find that *even after I found out that my memory was playing tricks* my brain simply refused to unscramble itself. It clung to the false memory, preferring it to mere literal happenstance. I thought that was an important lesson to learn.

Thereafter, as I wrote the novel, and whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favour the remembered version. This is why, even though Saleem admits that no tidal wave passed through the Sundarbans in the year of the Bangladesh War, he continues to be borne out

of the jungle on the crest of that fictional wave. His truth is too important to him to allow it to be unseated by a mere weather report. It is memory's truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own.

Saleem Sinai is not an oracle; he's only adopting a kind of oracular language. His story is not history, but it plays with historical shapes. Ironically, the book's success—its Booker Prize, etc—initially distorted the way in which it was read. Many readers wanted it to be the history, even the guide-book, which it was never meant to be; others resented it for its incompleteness, pointing out, among other things, that I had failed to mention the glories of Urdu poetry, or the plight of the Harijans, or untouchables, or what some people think of as the new imperialism of the Hindi language in South India. These variously disappointed readers were judging the book not as a novel, but as some sort of inadequate reference book or encyclopaedia.

The passage of time has smoothed out such wrinkles. I'd just like to clear up that mistake of Saleem's about the god Ganesha. It happens just after Saleem has been boasting about his own erudition. In spite of coming from a Muslim background, he tells us, he's well up on the Hindu stories. That he should instantly perpetrate a howler about the myth which is, after all, most central to himself (Ganesha's elephantine nose, and dubious parentage, prefigure his own) was, I thought, a way of deflating that narratorial pomposity; but it was also—along with Saleem's other blunder about the date of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination—a way of telling the reader to maintain a healthy distrust.

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be, I believed, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to 'read' the world.