



Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights: A Novel

By Salman Rushdie

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *The Washington Post* • *Los Angeles Times* • *San Francisco Chronicle* • *Harper's Bazaar* • *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* • *The Guardian* • *The Kansas City Star* • *National Post* • *BookPage* • *Kirkus Reviews*

From Salman Rushdie, one of the great writers of our time, comes a spellbinding work of fiction that blends history, mythology, and a timeless love story. A lush, richly layered novel in which our world has been plunged into an age of unreason, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* is a breathtaking achievement and an enduring testament to the power of storytelling.

In the near future, after a storm strikes New York City, the strangenesses begin. A down-to-earth gardener finds that his feet no longer touch the ground. A graphic novelist awakens in his bedroom to a mysterious entity that resembles his own sub-Stan Lee creation. Abandoned at the mayor's office, a baby identifies corruption with her mere presence, marking the guilty with blemishes and boils. A seductive gold digger is soon tapped to combat forces beyond imagining.

Unbeknownst to them, they are all descended from the whimsical, capricious, wanton creatures known as the jinn, who live in a world separated from ours by a veil. Centuries ago, Dunia, a princess of the jinn, fell in love with a mortal man of reason. Together they produced an astonishing number of children, unaware of their fantastical powers, who spread across generations in the human world.

Once the line between worlds is breached on a grand scale, Dunia's children and others will play a role in an epic war between light and dark spanning a thousand and one nights—or two years, eight months, and twenty-eight nights. It is a time of enormous upheaval, in which beliefs are challenged, words act like poison, silence is a disease, and a noise may contain a hidden curse.

Inspired by the traditional “wonder tales” of the East, Salman Rushdie's novel is a masterpiece about the age-old conflicts that remain in today's world. *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* is satirical and bawdy, full of cunning

and folly, rivalries and betrayals, kismet and karma, rapture and redemption.

Praise for *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*

“Rushdie is our Scheherazade. . . . This book is a fantasy, a fairytale—and a brilliant reflection of and serious meditation on the choices and agonies of our life in this world.”—**Ursula K. Le Guin**, *The Guardian*

“One of the major literary voices of our time . . . In reading this new book, one cannot escape the feeling that [Rushdie’s] years of writing and success have perhaps been preparation for this moment, for the creation of this tremendously inventive and timely novel.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“A wicked bit of satire . . . [Rushdie] riffs and expands on the tales of Scheherazade, another storyteller whose spinning of yarns was a matter of life and death.”—*USA Today*

“A swirling tale of genies and geniuses [that] translates the bloody upheavals of our last few decades into the comic-book antics of warring jinn wielding bolts of fire, mystical transmutations and rhyming battle spells.”—*The Washington Post*

“Great fun . . . The novel shines brightest in the panache of its unfolding, the electric grace and nimble eloquence and extraordinary range and layering of his voice.”—*The Boston Globe*

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Editorial Review

Review

“[Salman] Rushdie is our Scheherazade, inexhaustibly enfolding story within story and unfolding tale after tale with such irrepressible delight that it comes as a shock to remember that, like her, he has lived the life of a storyteller in immediate peril. . . . This book is a fantasy, a fairytale—and a brilliant reflection of and serious meditation on the choices and agonies of our life in this world. . . . I like to think how many readers are going to admire the courage of this book, revel in its fierce colors, its boisterousness, humor and tremendous pizzazz, and take delight in its generosity of spirit.”—**Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Guardian***

*“Incandescent . . . brilliant, ambitious . . . Before the arrival of his latest novel, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, Rushdie’s stature as one of the major literary voices of our time was already secure. And yet, in reading this new book, one cannot escape the feeling that all those years of writing and success have perhaps been preparation for this moment, for the creation of this tremendously inventive and timely novel.”*—**San Francisco Chronicle**

“A wicked bit of satire . . . [Rushdie] riffs and expands on the tales of Scheherazade, another storyteller whose spinning of yarns was a matter of life and death.”—**USA Today**

*“In these nested, swirling tales, Rushdie conjures up a whole universe of jinn slithering across time and space, meddling in human affairs and copulating like they’ve just been released from twenty years in a lamp. . . . *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* translates the bloody upheavals of our last few decades into the comic-book antics of warring jinn wielding bolts of fire, mystical transmutations and rhyming battle spells.”*—**The Washington Post**

“Great fun . . . The novel shines brightest in the panache of its unfolding, the electric grace and nimble eloquence and extraordinary range and layering of his voice.”—**The Boston Globe**

“Courageous and liberating . . . a breathless mash-up of wormholes, mythical creatures, current affairs and disquisitions on philosophy and theology.”—**The New York Times Book Review**

*“This is Rushdie’s first [novel] for adults since 2008, and he seems to be having fun with the adult content. He works in jokes about the sexual appetites of his jinn, brings alive dark corners of Manhattan, explores misplaced love, and creates a good-versus-evil battle that’s firmly grounded in philosophy. . . . *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* is erudite without flaunting it, an amusement park of a pulpy disaster novel that resists flying out of control by being grounded by religion, history, culture and love.”*—**Los Angeles Times**

*“[A] rambunctious, satirical, and bewitching metaphysical fable, perhaps his most thoroughly enjoyable to date. At once a scholar, rigorous observer, and lavishly imaginative novelist, Rushdie channels his well-informed despair over the brutality and absurdity of human life into works of fantasy. . . . Rushdie is having wickedly wise fun here. Every character has a keenly hilarious backstory, and the action (flying carpets and urns, gigantic attacking serpents, lightning strikes, to-the-death combat, sex) surges from drastic and pulse-raising to exuberantly madcap, magical, and genuinely emotional. . . . [A] fantastically inventive, spirited, astute, and delectable update of *One Thousand and One Nights*.”*—**Booklist (starred review)**

“A boisterous novel of ideas, a spirited manifesto for reason disguised as a tale of a jinn war lasting exactly two years, eight months and twenty-eight nights, or 1,001 nights . . . What results is hallmark Rushdie: a composite of magic realism, mythology, science fiction and straight-up fantasy. . . . Like the best Rushdie novels, *Two Years* is playful and inventive, and also intellectually bracing.”—**The Globe and Mail**

“One of his very best books, one whose governing metaphor can be about many terrible truths indeed . . . a sometimes archly elegant, sometimes slightly goofy fairy tale—with a character named Bento V. Elfenbein, how could it be entirely serious?—for grown-ups . . . Beguiling and astonishing, wonderful and wondrous. Rushdie at his best.”—**Kirkus Reviews (starred review)**

“A comic novel about Medieval Islamic philosophy, fairies and the near end of the world may sound difficult. Rushdie’s brilliance is in the balance between high art and pop culture. . . . This is a novel of both intellectual heft and sheer reading pleasure—a rare feat.”—**St. Louis Post-Dispatch**

“There are monsters who slip through wormholes, or slits between worlds; there are battles and set pieces, in Fairyland and on Earth; there are sometimes ridiculous, sometimes hilarious comic turns; stories within stories; riddles within tales within legends. And there is Salman Rushdie, manic Scheherazade, assuming all the voices, playing all the parts, making a mad kind of sense of it all.”—**Minneapolis Star Tribune**

“The title adds up to 1,001 nights, an allusion to the story of Scheherazade, and although there are not 1,001 strands of story here, there are many, and they are colourful and compelling. . . . Rushdie displays the wry humour that helped make *Midnight’s Children* such a masterpiece.”—**The Independent**

“*Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* is replete with fantastical creatures, scary monsters, very bad men (or rather, male jinns/genies) and one heroic woman. . . . While Rushdie has written hyped up sagas of worlds colliding before, and always espouses reason over fanaticism, there is something so loopy, so unleashed, about this tale as to make it particularly thrilling.”—**New York Daily News**

“In his latest novel, Rushdie invents his own cultural narrative—one that blends elements of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Homeric epics, and sci-fi and action/adventure comic books. . . . Referencing Henry James, Mel Brooks, Mickey Mouse, Gracian, Bravo TV, and Aristotle, among others, Rushdie provides readers with an intellectual treasure chest cleverly disguised as a comic pop-culture apocalyptic caprice.”—**Publishers Weekly (starred review)**

About the Author

Salman Rushdie is the author of eleven previous novels—*Grimus*, *Midnight’s Children* (for which he won the Booker Prize and the Best of the Booker), *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Fury*, *Shalimar the Clown*, *The Enchantress of Florence*, and *Luka and the Fire of Life*—and one collection of short stories: *East, West*. He has also published four works of nonfiction—*Joseph Anton*, *The Jaguar Smile*, *Imaginary Homelands*, and *Step Across This Line*—and co-edited two anthologies, *Mirrorwork* and *Best American Short Stories 2008*. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University. A former president of PEN American Center, Rushdie was knighted in 2007 for services to literature.

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Very little is known, though much has been written, about the true nature of the jinn, the creatures made of smokeless fire. Whether they are good or evil, devilish or benign, such questions are hotly disputed. These qualities are broadly accepted: that they are whimsical, capricious, wanton; that they can move at high speed, alter their size and form, and grant many of the wishes of mortal men and women should they so choose, or

if by coercion they are obliged to do so; and that their sense of time differs radically from that of human beings. They are not to be confused with angels, even though some of the old stories erroneously state that the Devil himself, the fallen angel Lucifer, son of the morning, was the greatest of the jinn. For a long time their dwelling places were also in dispute. Some ancient stories said, slanderously, that the jinn lived among us here on earth, the so-called "lower world," in ruined buildings and many insalubrious zones--garbage dumps, graveyards, outdoor latrines, sewers, and, wherever possible, in dunghills. According to these defamatory tales we would do well to wash ourselves thoroughly after any contact with a jinni. They are malodorous and carry disease. However, the most eminent commentators long asserted what we now know to be true: that the jinn live in their own world, separated from ours by a veil, and that this upper world, sometimes called Peristan or Fairyland, is very extensive, though its nature is concealed from us.

To say that the jinn are inhuman may seem to be stating the obvious, but human beings share some qualities at least with their fantastical counterparts. In the matter of faith, for example, there are adherents among the jinn of every belief system on earth, and there are jinn who do not believe, for whom the notion of gods and angels is strange in the same way as the jinn themselves are strange to human beings. And though many jinn are amoral, at least some of these powerful beings do know the difference between good and evil, between the right-hand and the left-hand path.

Some of the jinn can fly, but some slither on the ground in the form of snakes, or run about barking and baring their fangs in the shape of giant dogs. In the sea, and sometimes in the air as well, they assume the outward appearance of dragons. Some of the lesser jinn are unable, when on earth, to maintain their form for long periods. These amorphous creatures sometimes slide into human beings through the ears, nose or eyes, and occupy those bodies for a while, discarding them when they tire of them. The occupied human beings, regrettably, do not survive.

The female jinn, the jinnias or jiniri, are even more mysterious, even subtler and harder to grasp, being shadow-women made of fireless smoke. There are savage jiniri, and jiniri of love, but it may also be that these two different kind of jinnia are actually one and the same--that a savage spirit may be soothed by love, or a loving creature roused by maltreatment to a savagery beyond the comprehension of mortal men.

This is the story of a jinnia, a great princess of the jinn, known as the Lightning Princess on account of her mastery over the thunderbolt, who loved a mortal man long ago, in the twelfth century, as we would say, and of her many descendants, and of her return to the world, after a long absence, to fall in love again, at least for a moment, and then to go to war. It is also the tale of many other jinn, male and female, flying and slithering, good, bad, and uninterested in morality; and of the time of crisis, the time-out-of-joint which we call the time of the strangenesses, which lasted for two years, eight months and twenty-eight nights, which is to say, one thousand nights and one night more. And yes, we have lived another thousand years since those days, but we are all forever changed by that time. Whether for better or for worse, that is for our future to decide.

In the year 1195, the great philosopher Ibn Rushd, once the Qadi, or judge, of Seville and most recently the personal physician to the Caliph Abu Yusuf Yaqub in his hometown of Córdoba, was formally discredited and disgraced on account of his liberal ideas, which were unacceptable to the increasingly powerful Berber fanatics who were spreading like a pestilence across Arab Spain, and sent to live in internal exile in the small village of Lucena outside his native city, a village full of Jews who could no longer say they were Jews because the previous ruling dynasty of al-Andalus, the Almoravides, had forced them to convert to Islam. Ibn Rushd, a philosopher who was no longer permitted to expound his philosophy, all of whose writing had been banned and his books burned, felt instantly at home among the Jews who could not say they were Jews. He

had been the favorite of the Caliph of the present ruling dynasty, the Almohads, but favorites go out of fashion, and Abu Yusuf Yaqub allowed the fanatics to push the great commentator on Aristotle out of town.

The philosopher who could not speak his philosophy lived in a narrow unpaved street in a humble house with small windows and was terribly oppressed by the absence of light. He set up a medical practice in Lucena and his status as the ex-physician of the Caliph himself brought him patients; in addition he used what assets he had to enter modestly into the horse trade, and also financed the making of the large earthenware vessels, tinajas, in which the Jews who were no longer Jews stored and sold olive oil and wine. One day soon after the beginning of his exile a girl of perhaps sixteen summers appeared outside his door, smiling gently, not knocking or intruding on his thoughts in any other way, and simply stood there waiting patiently until he became aware of her presence and invited her in. She told him that she was newly orphaned; that she had no source of income, but preferred not to work in the whorehouse; and that her name was Dunia, which did not sound like a Jewish name because she was not allowed to speak her Jewish name and because she was illiterate she could not write it down. She told him a traveler had suggested the name and said it was from Greek and meant “the world” and she had liked that idea. Ibn Rushd the translator of Aristotle did not quibble with her, knowing that it meant “the world” in enough tongues to make pedantry unnecessary. “Why have you named yourself after the world?” he asked her, and she replied, looking him in the eye as she spoke, “Because a world will flow from me and those who flow from me will spread across the world.”

Being a man of reason, he did not guess that she was a supernatural creature, a jinnia, of the tribe of female jinn, the jiniri: a grand princess of that tribe, on an earthly adventure, pursuing her fascination with human men in general and brilliant ones in particular. He took her into his cottage as housekeeper and lover and in the muffled night she whispered her “true”--that is to say, false--Jewish name into his ear and that was their secret. Dunia the jinnia was as spectacularly fertile as her prophecy had implied. In the two years, eight months and twenty-eight days and nights that followed, she was pregnant three times and on each occasion brought forth a multiplicity of children, at least seven on each occasion, it would appear, and on one occasion eleven, or possibly nineteen, though the records are vague and inexact. All the children inherited her most distinctive feature: they had no earlobes.

If Ibn Rushd had been an adept of the occult arcana he would have realized then that his children were the offspring of a nonhuman mother, but he was too wrapped up in himself to work it out. (We sometimes think that it was fortunate for him, and for our entire history, that Dunia loved him for the brilliance of his mind, his nature being perhaps too selfish to inspire love by itself.) The philosopher who could not philosophize feared that his children would inherit, from him, the sad gifts which were his treasure and his curse. “To be thin-skinned, far-sighted, and loose-tongued,” he said, “is to feel too sharply, see too clearly, speak too freely. It is to be vulnerable to the world when the world believes itself invulnerable, to understand its mutability when it thinks itself immutable, to sense what’s coming before others sense it, to know that the barbarian future is tearing down the gates of the present while others cling to the decadent, hollow past. If our children are fortunate they will only inherit your ears, but regrettably, as they are undeniably mine, they will probably think too much too soon, and hear too much too early, including things that are not permitted to be thought or heard.”

“Tell me a story,” Dunia often demanded in bed in the early days of their cohabitation. He quickly discovered that in spite of her seeming youth she could be a demanding and opinionated individual, in bed and out of it. He was a big man and she was like a little bird or stick insect but he often felt she was the stronger one. She was the joy of his old age but demanded from him a level of energy that was hard for him to maintain. At his age sometimes all he wanted to do in bed was sleep, but Dunia saw his attempts to nod off as hostile acts. “If you stay up all night making love,” she said, “you actually feel better rested than if you

snore for hours like an ox. This is well known.” At his age it wasn’t always easy to enter into the required condition for the sexual act, especially on consecutive nights, but she saw his elderly difficulties with arousal as proofs of his unloving nature. “If you find a woman attractive there is never a problem,” she told him. “Doesn’t matter how many nights in a row. Me, I’m always horny, I can go on forever, I have no stopping point.”

His discovery that her physical ardor could be quelled by narrative had provided some relief. “Tell me a story,” she said, curling up under his arm so that his hand rested on her head, and he thought, Good, I’m off the hook tonight; and gave her, little by little, the story of his mind. He used words many of his contemporaries found shocking, including “reason,” “logic” and “science,” which were the three pillars of his thought, the ideas that had led his books to be burned. Dunia was afraid of these words but her fear excited her and she snuggled in closer and said, “Hold my head when you’re filling it with your lies.”

There was a deep, sad wound in him, because he was a defeated man, had lost the great battle of his life to a dead Persian, Ghazali of Tus, an adversary who had been dead for eighty-five years. A hundred years ago Ghazali had written a book called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in which he attacked Greeks like Aristotle, the Neoplatonists, and their allies, Ibn Rushd’s great precursors Ibn Sina and al-Farabi. At one point Ghazali had suffered a crisis of belief but had returned to become the greatest scourge of philosophy in the history of the world. Philosophy, he jeered, was incapable of proving the existence of God, or even of proving the impossibility of there being two gods. Philosophy believed in the inevitability of causes and effects, which was a diminution of the power of God, who could easily intervene to alter effects and make causes ineffectual if he so chose.

“What happens,” Ibn Rushd asked Dunia when the night wrapped them in silence and they could speak of forbidden things, “when a lighted stick is brought into contact with a ball of cotton?”

“The cotton catches fire, of course,” she answered.

“And why does it catch fire?”

“Because that is the way of it,” she said, “the fire licks the cotton and the cotton becomes part of the fire, it’s how things are.”

“The law of nature,” he said, “causes have their effects,” and her head nodded beneath his caressing hand.

“He disagreed,” Ibn Rushd said, and she knew he meant the enemy, Ghazali, the one who had defeated him. “He said that the cotton caught fire because God made it do so, because in God’s universe the only law is what God wills.”

“So if God had wanted the cotton to put out the fire, if he wanted the fire to become part of the cotton, he could have done that?”

“Yes,” said Ibn Rushd. “According to Ghazali’s book, God could do that.”

She thought for a moment. “That’s stupid,” she said, finally. Even in the dark she could feel the resigned smile, the smile with cynicism in it as well as pain, spread crookedly across his bearded face. “He would say that it was the true faith,” he answered her, “and that to disagree with it would be .??. incoherent.”

“So anything can happen if God decides it’s okay,” she said. “A man’s feet might no longer touch the

ground, for example--he could start walking on air.”

“A miracle,” said Ibn Rushd, “is just God changing the rules by which he chooses to play, and if we don’t comprehend it, it is because God is ultimately ineffable, which is to say, beyond our comprehension.”

She was silent again. “Suppose I suppose,” she said at length, “that God may not exist. Suppose you make me suppose that ‘reason,’ ‘logic’ and ‘science’ possess a magic that makes God unnecessary. Can one even suppose that it would be possible to suppose such a thing?” She felt his body stiffen. Now he was afraid of her words, she thought, and it pleased her in an odd way. “No,” he said, too harshly. “That really would be a stupid supposition.”

He had written his own book, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, replying to Ghazali across a hundred years and a thousand miles, but in spite of its snappy title the dead Persian’s influence was undiminished and finally it was Ibn Rushd who was disgraced, whose book was set on fire, which consumed the pages because that was what God decided at that moment that the fire should be permitted to do. In all his writing he had tried to reconcile the words “reason,” “logic” and “science” with the words “God,” “faith” and “Qur’an,” and he had not succeeded, even though he used with great subtlety the argument from kindness, demonstrating by Qur’anic quotation that God must exist because of the garden of earthly delights he had provided for mankind, and do we not send down from the clouds pressing forth rain, water pouring down in abundance, that you may thereby produce corn, and herbs, and gardens planted thick with trees? He was a keen amateur gardener and the argument from kindness seemed to him to prove both God’s existence and his essentially kindly, liberal nature, but the proponents of a harsher God had beaten him. Now he lay, or so he believed, with a converted Jew whom he had saved from the whorehouse and who seemed capable of seeing into his dreams, where he argued with Ghazali in the language of irreconcilables, the language of wholeheartedness, of going all the way, which would have doomed him to the executioner if he had used it in waking life.

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