Books of the Times

Into the Sea

By JOLINE SMITH

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Once upon a time there was a little girl who chased a rabbit into its hole. She grew up, she grew down, and then grew up again. And somewhere along the way realized something was wrong with the society she was living in: the class system in Britain was illogical and oppressive. The strict etiquette of pointless rituals like tea parties was no more than a farce. The monarchy was corrupt and did not deserve the power given to it. Without the strict age and class rules of London society to define her identity for her, Alice wondered, “But if I am not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’” She realized, and in the process made readers see, how absurd the social order was, and that without these irrational confines, people have the ability to shape their own identity. Children loved her stories because they were fanciful adventures. Adults loved her stories because they were a social criticism of British society. And so Alice became infamous.

Salman Rushdie

**HAROUN AND THE SEA OF STORIES**

By Salman Rushdie

224 pages. Penguin Group.

$15.00.

Years later, there was Haroun, a young boy, who like Alice, ventures into a fantasy land and unearths something about the flawed nature of today's society. Salman Rushdie's “Haroun and the Sea of Stories” opens with Haroun and his father on the campaign trail with a politician. Haroun’s father is a famous storyteller, and he is often employed by politicians who wish him to tell positive stories about them. Unfortunately, Haroun’s mother has just left the family, and as a result of her abandonment, Haroun’s father loses not only his wife but his voice as well. As Haroun lies in bed, he is awoken by a magical water genie from the Sea of Stories, the place where all tales come from. The genie explains to Haroun that he has come to turn off Haroun’s father's story tap—the magical fountain which is what allows Haroun’s father to tell stories— because due to his wife’s abandonment, Haroun’s father no longer has the ability to use the tap. The genie then explains that Haroun has seen behind the veil into a world he was never supposed to know about. Now, Haruon must return to the Sea of Stories with him so the rulers can decided what to do about Haruon’s discovery. So down the rabbit hole he goes to the magic land of Gup.

Haroun arrives at Gup just as the city is preparing for war with Chup, the neighboring land. Chup is ruled by the all-powerful Khattam-shud, the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech. He seeks to forever silence the voices of those in Gup and poison the Sea of Stories. The water in the Sea of Stories has the magical property of granting wishes, so in polluting the sea, Khattam-shud also wants to destroy hope. The Chupwalas want there to be no more stories, no more speech, only a dark dictatorship.

It is not just in fairy tales that silence is a dangerous force. It is no accident that freedom of speech was the first amendment added to the United States Constitution: censorship is a toxic enemy to freedom, and few know that better that Salam Rushdie. Anyone who has read a Salman Rushdie novel knows that there is a lot more going on beneath the surface of the tale. His popular novel, “The Satanic Verse,” about Muhammad, caused a radical Muslim group to issue his death warrant. *“*Haroun and the Sea of Stories” seems to be Rushdie's response to this threat. What is life without words? Who can survive without stories? Though Rushdie denies it, the entire book seems to be a pointed allegory attacking dictatorship, and in particular, the oppressive nature of censorship.

The portrayal of the city of Chup is Rushdie’s most pointed critique of censorship. Chup is described as a land where the sun never shines and the people mistrust one another because they are forbidden to speak to one another. The book's villain, Khattam-shud, ruler of Chup, does not want what is best for his people but instead craves ultimate power. Censorship is his weapon of oppression: he goes so far as to cut out his subjects tongues to keep their silence. Even his name is a literal translation meaning “completely finished”. Chup is a dictatorship at its worst. More of a cult than a government, this harsh depiction of Chup makes readers question the motives behind censorship and the methods employed by government to ensure it.

The city of Gup may be fighting on the side of the stories (the name of the general of the army, General Kitab, literally means General Book), but it does not escape persecution by Rushdie. He pokes fun at the government in Gup which forces its soldiers to wear uniforms bearing classic fairy tales; however, these fairy tales have been re-rewritten. Instead of a story featuring Prince Charming and Cinderella, its main characters are now the Prince of Gup and his beloved. Words and stories are great, but they are only a small step towards freedom if they are controlled mainly by the government.

Why is censorship dangerous? While witnessing the battle between Gup and Chup, Haroun notices, “Guppees love Stories, and Speech; Chupwalas, it seems, hate these things just as strongly….But it's not as simple as that… because the dance of the Shadow Warrior showed him that silence had its own grace and beauty (just as speech could be graceless and ugly); and that Action could be as noble as Words ‘If Guppees and Chupwalas didn't hate each other so," he thought, "they might actually find each other pretty interesting.’” Haroun is able to realize that when only one group is able to speak, in this case the government, people have no choice but to believe what is being said. There is no chance for questioning or discussion. A lack of discourse can lead to mindless hate and violence.

In addition to censorship, the book also makes a statement against the societal roles of females in the Middle East. While visiting the land of Gup, Haroun quickly befriends Blabbermouth, a tenacious, outspoken soldier in the Gup army. He is shocked, however, when he realizes she is a girl. She makes him promise not to tell, explaining, “You think it's *easy* for a girl to get a job like this? Don't you know girls have to *fool* *people* every *day* of their *lives* if they want to get *anywhere*?” In many societies, it is relatively accepted that women and men have very different roles. Some jobs are men's jobs, such as being a soldier, while other jobs are woman's jobs, like being a nurse or mother. Rushdie breaks the social convention for gender roles, making Blabbermouth one of the bravest and strongest soldiers. He encourages equality for men and woman, something still lacking from many cultures today.

This novel is one that both children and adults will enjoy, an ideal tale to read as a bedtime story. The prose is simple and lends itself to a young audience. The events are exciting and fantastical. The ending is happy. It seems like your typical fairytale, but beneath the surface, a darker topic looms. Every word provides a clue to this puzzle. The job of the reader is to pieces these together to achieve a whole new understanding of the intricate tale.

Rushdie's writing placed him in mortal danger, and so, he interweaves his political and social agenda into this new novel. He, like so many masters before him, has used the guise of a children’s tale to speak out against injustice and society. His main character asks, “What if the stories aren't even true?” Well, Hauron, it doesn't mean the message behind them isn't important. “Haroun and the Sea of Stories” has the merit to join the likes of “Alice in Wonderland”, “Gulliver’s Travels”, and “The Wizard of Oz”: the story itself is entertaining, and the message behind it is enduring and universal. Adult readers shouldn’t turn their noses up to “Haroun and the Sea of Stories” as mere child’s play, this novel is far more than that.

Joline Smith

Professor Silver

Writing 200

19 October 2011

Into the Sea: An Annotated Bibliography

Carroll, Lewis, and Lewis Carroll. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland ; And, Through the Looking Glass*. [New York]: New American Library, 1960. Print.

This was a fundamental component of my original piece. Here, it is used to set up an introduction to the book that I am talking about in my review

Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. New York: Granta in Association with Penguin, 1991. Print.

This is the novel I am reviewing.

Sky-McIlvain, Elizabeth. "Haroun and the Sea of Stories - A Study Guide." *Least Tern*. 30 Dec.

06. Web. 20 Oct. 2011. <http://www.leasttern.com/Haroun/haroun.htm>.

This website provided me with tons of info on Rushdie’s life and history. It also discusses many of the names found in the book, and it talks about the illusions included in the text.

Makman, Lisa. “Detectives, Dreamers, and Demons.” English 298 Class. Dennison, Ann Arbor.

Fall 2010. Lecture.

Some of my info on Salam Rushdie’s past came from my English 298 lecture, the class which I wrote my original paper for.

Maslin, Janet. "Racial Insults and Quiet Bravery in 1960s Mississippi." *NY Times*. The New York

Times, 18 Feb. 2009. Web. 20 Oct. 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/19/books/19masl.html>.

I used this particular review as a model because it talks about the author’s life, social issues, as well as plot and prose. In my review, I wanted to discuss the book thoroughly, but I also wanted to talk a lot about the author and the social climate in which he wrote this book. Knowing the history of Rushdie is essential to understanding this book. I feel similarly that knowing the social context of *The Help* is essential to its understanding. This review seemed like the perfect one to use as a model for my piece.

Triska, Zoe. "Zoe Triska: 'The Night Circus' Review: The Next 'Harry Potter'?" *Breaking News and Opinion on The Huffington Post*. Huffington Post, 13 Sept. 2011. Web. 20 Oct. 2011. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zoe-triska/next-harry-potter\_b\_958521.html>.

I had a difficult time figuring out how to incorporate *Alice in Wonderland*, so I used this article as a model of how I could include *Alice* in this piece since it was such a large part of my original paper. The article introduces this new book, *The Night Circus*, by comparing it to *Harry Potter* in the first paragraph. I did something similar in my review.

Various other book reviews from the New York Times.

I also consulted various other book reviews from the New York Times before settling on my model piece.