

## Notes on Interview with Salman Rushdie: *The Eleventh Hour*

Salman Rushdie was interviewed about his new book, *The Eleventh Hour: A Quintet of Stories*, by Daniel Kehlmann on November 20, 2025 at the 92nd St Y in New York City. The interview (available on [YouTube](#)) revealed Rushdie's delightful sense of humor and gave background information on what inspired the writing of each story. This book is Rushdie's return to fiction after the attack on his life in the summer of 2022, which left him blind in one eye. I enjoyed the interview, and thought writing about it would enhance the experience of others who are reading this book—as well as those interested in the creative process.

Rushdie considers the first and last story in the book to be “short stories”, while the three stories in between are novellas (70-75pages). Rushdie had never tried writing a novella before and “really liked it”. He said, “It's long enough to get deeply into something, into a character. And then it's over—which is also good.”

The first story he thought about in the collection was *Late*. He hadn't meant it to be a ghost story, but rather a friendship between a young student and an academic. He said, “Almost without knowing it I typed this sentence: ‘When he woke up that morning he was dead.’ And I looked at it and thought, ‘What?’ I had no idea I was going to say that. And I just walked away from my desk and left it sitting there for a day, and went back and looked at it, and thought, ‘Okay!’”

*Late* is based on the lives of writer E.M. Foster and the WWII British codebreaker Alan Turing. Both were “horribly treated” because of their homosexuality. Rushdie “squashed them into one character”. This is my first time reading Rushdie. His breadth of knowledge—historical and cultural—is impressive to me, and invited me as a reader to learn about the references Rushdie mentions in his stories. I looked up Alan Turing and E.M.Foster and learned about a part of history of which I was not aware. (Turing chose “chemical castration” with DES over jail and subsequently committed suicide.)

Next discussed in the interview was the novella *Oklahoma*. Rushdie said, “The weirdest story is *Oklahoma*. I hope people will think it's good weird, but it's definitely weird-weird.” Rushdie was inspired by going to the Morgan library (with the interviewer, Kehlmann) to see Kafka's manuscripts. There was an unfinished manuscript of Kafka's first novel. Rushdie thought, “Everyone who's alive is an unfinished story. The unfinished story in a way is the greatest metaphor of human life. None of us knows the end of our story. None of us will be there at the end of the story. The unfinished story becomes a beautiful way of saying what human life is like.” When Rushdie came home from the Kafka exhibit he began writing the story.

There is a story within a story as part of *Oklahoma* and in it Rushdie writes about Francisco Goya and the black Goya paintings he saw at the Prado Museum in Spain. In Rushdie's opinion “the greatest room of any museum in the world is the room with the black Goyas”. (Of course, I looked up the black Goyas on the internet.) Goya felt the need to resign as a court painter because of the “illiberal, authoritarian” Fernando VII, who was nicknamed “El Rey Felón” (the criminal king). Rushdie said, “Who does that? That reminds me of somebody. He was quite reminiscent, let me say, of contemporary figures. So it became a way of saying something modern while apparently writing about the past. I kind of enjoyed that.”

In *The Musician of Kahani* Rushdie said there is “an unnamed narrator—which is quite clearly me”. Part of the story takes place in the Bombay house Rushdie grew up in, which for him remains a “magic space”. He thought it would be interesting to have an artist with supernatural powers that could be used for good or evil. He niece is a gifted musician and that was part of the inspiration for centering the story around a musician. His other inspiration was the folk tale, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. The Pied Piper plays his magic flute to rid a town of its rats, but when he is not paid, he uses his flute to lead away the town's children.

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*The Musician of Kahani* also has the theme of reconciliation. Rushdie said, “You can lose something that’s very, very important in your life—and then you find a way to repair it. There’s something very beautiful about that.”

*In the South*, the first story in the book, is about “two old men who live next door to each other and spend their whole lives arguing with each other...What they know but they are unable to express is their abuse is a kind of love—that actually they can’t live without each other.”

When Rushdie was in Madras he met “a cranky old gent” who was “fantastically cantankerous” —but “very enjoyable”. So Rushdie decided to “double him, to have two of him and have them arguing with each other, complaining at each other instead of with people like me”. Rushdie wrote this story about twenty years ago, writing about old age when he was not old himself. He said he was proud of it: “I got these old geezers right.”

Kehlmann asked Rushdie if it was easy to get back to writing fiction after writing *Knife*—Rushdie’s memoir after the stabbing attack. “Really easy”, Rushdie said. “Because it’s my real job. The reason I got into this game was because I wanted to make things up. It never occurred to me to write about myself... Writing about me? Most boring subject on earth. But then, as the Chinese would say, I acquired an interesting life.”

*The Old Man in the Piazza*, the final story in *The Eleventh Hour*, was written before the stabbing attack on Rushdie. The story was inspired by the “weird” short stories of Donald Barthelme, as well as *The Pink Panther* movie with Peter Sellers (1963). In that movie there is a crazy car chase which an old gentleman watches calmly. Rushdie thought, “I like you old gentleman—so I’m going to steal you. And so I put him in my little town.” The man is an observer watching the world go by, and then he gets dragged into the action.

Rushdie had not set out to put these five stories together in *The Eleventh Hour*; the book grew gradually. He said, “There’s a sense in which these five stories talk to each other”—and he hopes readers will experience it that way. For him “the stories have a kind of unity—of concern, interest and theme”.

*The Old Man in the Piazza* is “an allegory about freedom”. In a free society people can disagree. In an unfree society “that discussion is shut down”. To Rushdie’s “great surprise” Language became a character in the story. “She walked into the piazza and sat down and I thought, ‘Oh, I wasn’t expecting her.’” The last sentence in the story—“Our words fail us.”—Rushdie said, “is me offering a warning. If we reach a point in our society where we can’t talk to each other any more then we’re in very, very bad trouble. And I think we’re in very, very bad trouble. So the story ends on that note and it’s the last sentence in the book. So there you are. Think about that.”

In the brief question and answer period at the end of the interview Rushdie was asked what book he would recommend to an eleven-year-old boy. He said, *Through the Looking Glass* (by Lewis Carroll)—and proceeded to recite The Jabberwocky poem contained in the book by heart! Rushdie said, “Who could not love a book that contains that?” And indeed, who could not love writer who could recite that. I read that book so long ago that I went out and bought a copy.

One of Rushdie’s final comments in the interview was “If there’s a way you can *not* be a writer, choose that route.” For Rushdie, obviously, there wasn’t a way to *not* be a writer—and I’m grateful for that!

—Lynn Tobin Nadel, 2/7/2026