Activity 1 – Autobiographical Openings

The first paragraph of *Midnight's Children* proclaims its place in a long tradition of fictional autobiographies. Rushdie's narrative voice is swiftly established; before we hear his name, Saleem Sinai has asserted himself as a particular kind of narrator, a particular personality with whom, over the next six hundred pages, we are to become intimately acquainted (and by whom, along the way, we are likely to be amused, saddened, bewildered, infuriated, shocked…).

> I was born in the city of Bombay … once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more … On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside my window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape.

Saleem's conviction that the history of post-independence India is somehow all his fault is critical to the novel's progress and to its power. Getting the reader to accept this fact on the book's very first page is therefore vital; for Saleem's autobiography to work simultaneously as the biography of his identical twin, the nation of India, we must take his word for the magical connection between them. So how does Rushdie pull it off? One particularly striking characteristic of this opening paragraph is the sense of a speaking voice: *Midnight's Children* plays with the traditions of oral storytelling which are international but also characteristically Indian. The way the speaking voice trails off ('No, it's important to be more…'), tries out clichéd phrases ('once upon a time') but rejects them as inadequate ('No, that won't do'), and implies an invisible listener, ready with prompt questions ('And the time? The time matters, too') all contribute to a sense that the words on the page record a moment of live interpersonal communication. This is a *speaking* rather than a *writing* voice. As we read on, we meet Padma, Saleem's interlocutor, a figure who stands in for the reader in the world of the story, asking the questions we want to ask (sometimes, at least), rebuking Saleem for his digressive and meandering style, but continually forcing the reader to believe in a second layer of narrative fiction – not only the historical account of his childhood and his country's progress over the thirty years after independence, but the 'present moment' account of Saleem's story-telling.

In the narrator's apparent reluctance to 'spell it out, spell it out', we see Rushdie playing with the tradition of the autobiographical bildungsroman. (*Bildungsroman*: a novel that deals with the formative years of its main character.) Let's look briefly at some of the other key texts in that tradition. The next extract comes from Charles Dickens's 1850 novel *David Copperfield* – a fictional autobiography which, like *Midnight's Children*, actually owes a lot to its author's real-life experiences:

> Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and

believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.

David Copperfield's uncertainty about who might 'turn out to be the hero' of the story he is about to tell places his narrative in an explicitly literary context. 'Hero' is an ambiguous word, of course. In literature it often refers simply to the protagonist, the main character; in this sense, everybody is naturally the hero of his or her own life. But 'hero' has other connotations too, and by beginning his novel with this question, Dickens asks us to consider the way that we think of ourselves and of other people. Does the 'hero' of a book, or a life, have to be 'heroic'? What if they're not? It's a question that troubles Saleem Sinai repeatedly.

You might notice some other similarities between the openings of these two novels. Did you spot the way that both births are accompanied by prophecies and superstitions? There are hundreds of myths attending childbirth from probably every corner of the globe and from every age of the human race. It's a fact which a much earlier writer of a fictional autobiography plays with in the opening of his novel:

> I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost;—Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that in which the reader is likely to see me.—Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it;—you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c. &c.—and a great deal to that purpose:—

Tristram Shandy, written by a clergyman named Laurence Sterne in 1759, takes the question of the forces that shape a person's destiny to ludicrous and hilarious lengths. The book opens with Tristram's lament: all his bad luck and misfortune can be attributed, Tristram believes, to the fact that his parents became distracted in the act of procreation; at the critical moment, Tristram tells us, his mother asked his father if he had remembered to wind up the clock, and as a result, the 'animal spirits' which should have accompanied the 'homunculus…to the place destined for his reception' were diverted. ('Homunculus' means little man – it was believed that a microscopic but fully formed human being was transferred from the man's genitals to the woman's womb at the moment of ejaculation.) While Saleem Sinai insists that the moment of his birth contained the clue that was to shape the rest of his life, and the women attending David Copperfield's birth make their own prophecies, Tristram Shandy points out the absurdity of such superstitions. Or does he? His long-winded narrative is constantly veering off on tangents, and Tristram repeatedly blames the accident that

accompanied his conception for his inability to tell his story in a straight line. Tristram himself doesn't actually get born until volume IV, and much of the narrative is taken up with events and people from before the fictional author's life. Tristram acknowledges the problem for an autobiography in volume III:

> I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my third volume…—and no farther than to my first day's life—'tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it—on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back… as at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write—It must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write—and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.

In *Tristram Shandy* the effect is undoubtedly comic, but at the same time Sterne is raising a vital question about how far literature can really encompass even a single life. Rushdie uses the character of Padma to raise precisely this question in *Midnight's Children*:

> …here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next: "At this rate," Padma complains, "you'll be two hundred years old before you manage to tell about your birth".

And yet what Saleem and Tristram both intuit is surely right: you can't understand a single life without understanding where that life comes from. Here's Saleem again:

> I no longer want to be anything except what who I am. Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.

Talking points

- In what ways does Rushdie establish Saleem Sinai as a trustworthy narrator?
- What does his insistence that we 'have to swallow a world' before we can understand a single human life mean for the (fictional) autobiographer?
- One of the brilliant paradoxes of Rushdie's novel is the way that it insists on the hopelessness of linear narrative at the same time as it proves the allure of linearity – it shows the reader that we *want* logical, chronological progression even as it forces us to face up to the fact that such narratives are inevitably distorting. Character and subcontinent are so firmly intertwined in *Midnight's Children* that the fictional is always also the political. But the challenge presented by this demand that 'you'll have to swallow a world' is serious. Saleem repeatedly reminds us of how hard it is to communicate the unutterable complexity of interconnected human existence. What does this mean for the way we talk about history, or politics?