**Our Stories Can Be Our Liberation**

“There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name” (1). Salman Rushdie uses the language and cadence of a children’s fairytale to begin his novel Haroun and the Sea of Stories, luring readers to enter an imaginative world and encounter a villain determined to destroy creativity and control the world. This novel not only entertains readers; it invites the readers to consider the real value of storytelling and the influence stories have on the choices that we make.

Inside these pages, readers explore the sad city and discover that not only is this city sad but just north of the city and lies the cause of sadness that seeps through everything, everybody, everywhere: sadness factories. Inside these factories, we discover that “sadness was actually manufactured, packaged, and sent all over the world, which never seemed to get enough of it. Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news” (1). Here sadness is construed as a tangible object that can be mass-produced and sold and the demand for more is great, always greater than the amount supplied. Nobody specifically is demanding more sadness—it is “the world.” The use of figurative language invites the reader to make comparisons between the country of Alifbay and the real-world: the United States, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran—wherever there is conflict that we hear about in the media. We need to see that it is incumbent upon us to combat the complacency and apathy and “sadness” we often feel as consumers of media.

We meet Haroun, the protagonist and hero of this fairytale, and we become his companions on a quest to restore his father’s storytelling powers. “He’s got his head stuck in the air and his feet off the ground,” Mr. Sengupta says about Haroun’s father, the legendary Ocean of Notions. “What are all these stories? Life is not a storybook or joke shop. All this fun will come to no good. What’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?” (20) Haroun spits these words at his father Rashid Khalifa, angry that his mother has left them and run off with the sensible Mr. Sengupta. It is ironic that Haroun loses his mother to the very man who criticizes his father for being insensible, unaware of the real world and real people’s needs, “head stuck in the air” and ungrounded. With his description of Rashid and the word “stuck,” Sengupta insinuates that Rashid has chosen to rise above reality, prefers to have his head in the clouds and in non-reality, and now he could not come down to earth even if he tried. Sengupta’s single story about stories is that they have no purpose, and he “mis-identifies” Rashid when he negates his gifts as a storyteller. If stories are not necessary for life, if they distract people from paying attention to more important matters, if stories are actually harmful, then Rashid’s vocation as a storyteller has no purpose, no value, and he does not deserve his devoted wife. Through his portrayal of Mr. Sengupta, the one who hates stories, Rushdie invites us to consider people and situations where creativity is completely dismissed as irrelevant.

Haroun enters the mythical belly of the whale and confronts the man behind the plot to poison the Ocean of Stories and cease all creative expression, the Cultmaster, also known as Khattam-Shud. On a tour of the dark ship, Haroun listens to the Cultmaster’s explanation:

“ ‘These are the Poison Blenders’… ‘We must make a great many poisons, because each and every story in the Ocean needs to be ruined in a different way. To ruin a happy story, you must make it sad. To ruin an action drama, you must make it move too slowly. To ruin a mystery you must make the criminal’s identity obvious even to the most stupid audience. To ruin a love story you must turn it into a tale of hate. To ruin a tragedy you must make it capable of inducing helpless laughter…for every story there is an anti-story…every story—every Stream of Story—has a shadow-self…’” (160)

Using the Poison Blender as a metaphor, Rushdie illustrates the way to “kill” stories, suggesting that someone else can hold the story, reconstruct it, critique it, re-write it, impose a completely different story onto it, or react to it and react in a way that is different from the original creator’s intention. Who “owns” the story? Is it the writer? Is it the editor? Is it the publisher? Is it the readers? A play is a “living story”; actors feed off of the energy of the audience, and when the audience laughs at an inappropriate moment, it can disrupt the entire play and derail the performance. It destroys the creative work. Imagine the effect on the artist. Responding to Haroun’s question about why he hates stories, Khattam-Shud replies, “The world, however, is not for Fun. The world is for Controlling” (161). Here the veil is lifted, and we see the menacing truth: killing creative expression is about control. Dismissing creative energy and expression as irrelevant can hurt the artist. When does it hurt all of us? At what point does it become more than dismissive? Consider the continuum: on the one side, dismissive, and on the other end, murderous (killing creativity).

After the publication of The Satanic Verses in 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwa*, a death threat, against Rushdie’s life, which was never “officially” lifted but “finished” in 1998 according to President Khatami (HuffingtonPost.co.uk). Clearly, this is an extreme example. Nevertheless, it is very real for an author who spent ten years of his life in hiding. For a decade, Rushdie had to realize that with every interaction with everyone, every member of his community, he was endangering another’s life.

Some stories entertain us. Some stories engage us to consider relevant questions. Rushdie’s novel achieves both, creating a tale that is enchanting and compelling. We are more than readers. We are more than passive consumers of media. Our stories matter, and the act of sharing them can help build a more inclusive community, the first step toward a truly pluralistic society. Our stories can be our liberation.