

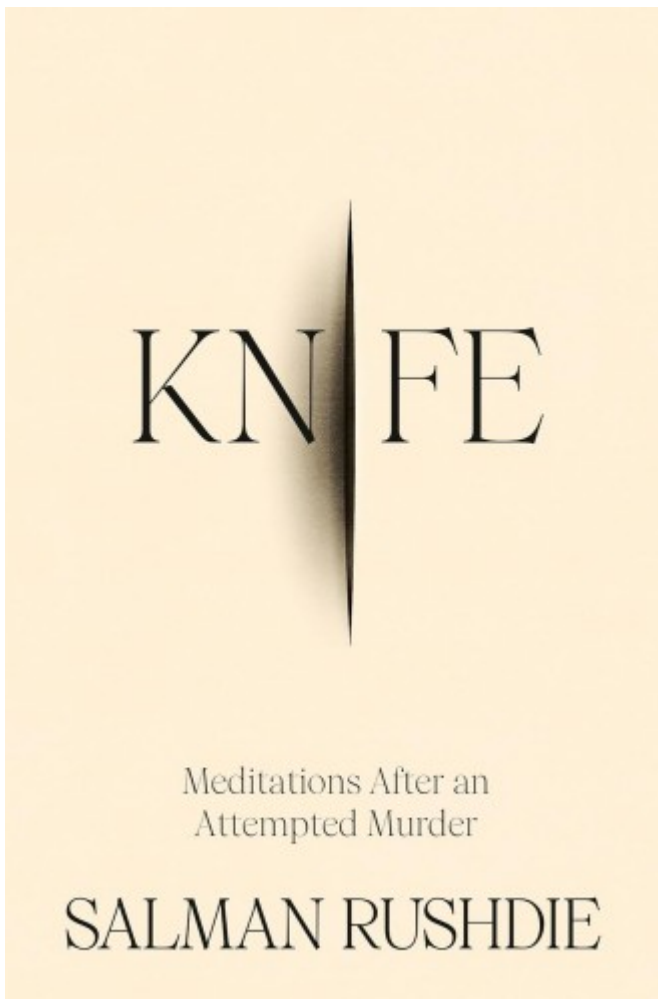
Salman Rushdie returns to the scene

In *Knife*, the novelist goes back to Chautauqua, where he was nearly killed in a 2022 attack.

by [Beth Kissileff](#)

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In Review



Knife

Meditations After an Attempted Murder

By Salman Rushdie
Penguin Random House
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

“Where do you feel least safe?” the gun violence expert asked the crowd at the Chautauqua Institution amphitheater last July. This question held more than a hint of irony. Two years earlier, another speaker had been stabbed on that same stage in upstate New York, causing him injuries that nearly took his life.

Salman Rushdie, best known for his novels, has now turned to the genre of memoir to discuss that attack and its effect on him and his family. This is Rushdie’s second memoir. In 2012, he published *Joseph Anton*, a memoir about living under a fatwa—the 1989 order for his execution proclaimed by Ayatollah Khomeini, who deemed Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous.

This new memoir, suitably titled *Knife* after the weapon used by Rushdie’s assailant, is a meditation on the meaning of the weapon itself, why the attacker might have wielded it, the damage it did to him, and how he experienced the aftermath. He describes the memoir as “a book I’d much rather not have needed to write.” He continues,

I tell myself it’s my way of taking ownership of what happened, making it mine—making it my *work*. Which is a thing I know how to do. Dealing with a murder attack is not a thing I know how to do. A book about an attempted murder might be a way for the almost-murderee to come to grips with the event.

That Rushdie even wrote this book is an act of bravery. To face in such piercing detail the most painful thing one has experienced is not something most humans would wish to do.

Since Rushdie had the assistance of his wife, poet and documentary filmmaker Rachel Eliza Griffiths, in chronicling the aftermath of his assault, the memoir feels both immediate and reflective at the same time. Griffiths began to make a “video, audio, and photographic record of what was happening to me—to us” almost immediately, but it took Rushdie some time to decide to write the book. The memoir’s heft is increased by the way Rushdie splices later analysis and thought into the immediacy of such things as the description of his tongue needing to be sutured because he accidentally bit it during the attack.

The tongue is not Rushdie's only weapon in his defense. He recalls realizing from his hospital bed, "language, too, was a knife. It could cut open the world and reveal its meaning, its inner workings, its secrets, its truths. It could cut through from one reality to another. It could call bullshit, open people's eyes, create beauty. Language was my knife." He realized that writing a memoir could be a way to "fight back"—and "to rebuild the frame in which my picture of the world could once more hang on my wall, to take charge of what had happened to me, to own it, to make it mine."

In this way, *Knife* follows the path charted by *Charlie Hebdo* survivor Philippe Lançon in *Disturbance*, a memoir about the 2015 attack that killed 12 of his colleagues and gravely injured him. What is different about Rushdie's account is that it is written in the months following the attack and ends with him and Griffiths returning to Chautauqua a scant year later. In his words, the purpose of the visit is to return to the scene of the crime, and feel myself standing up again, healthy and strong—or at least relatively healthy and no longer weak—in the place where I had fallen down and very nearly died; where Death had aimed at me, and (narrowly) missed. I hoped it would feel like a rite of overcoming, and help me to leave that terrible day behind.

I'm glad if this narrative works for Rushdie. But as the spouse of someone who narrowly escaped a shooting at the synagogue where he is the rabbi, I am skeptical. The mere fact of revisiting a scene of trauma and describing it in language cannot automatically overcome the residual feelings of trauma that linger for years or a lifetime. Rushdie's simplifying narrative in the book's final pages—that somehow his return to the site brought the realization that he could be happy once again, although it would always be a "wounded happiness"—feels unsatisfying and forced to me. A year after an event feels too soon to render a final verdict on what kind of lasting effects an assault will have on a person (beyond the continuing physical difficulties, which include in Rushdie's case the complete loss of sight in one eye).

Which is not to say that the author is unaware of the role that post-traumatic stress will continue to play in his life. Rushdie writes, "It's hard to write about post-traumatic stress disorder at any time, because, well, there's trauma involved, and a lot of stress, and a consequential disorder in the self." He laments the difficulty of doing it with one eye and one and a half hands, because the physicality of the writing, its awkwardness, reminds you at every stroke of the keyboard of the cause of your pain. The hand feels like it's inside a glove, and it kind of crackles inside when moved. The eye . . . is an absence with an immensely powerful presence.

He writes about his ongoing attempts to open up in therapy: “I tried to let things out, but it wasn’t easy. It’s against my nature.” Despite the sunny nature of the book’s ending, the reality of PTSD is also present in these pages.

My objection to the simplified “rite of overcoming” does not lessen the value of what Rushdie has accomplished. He makes a stunning case for the utility and beauty of a life lived in the world of writing and literature. His frequent references to literary works, poems, and movies add a density to his descriptions that readers will find rewarding. Additionally delightful are the cameos of his celebrity literary friends: Here is Colum McCann standing in front of the New York Public Library, stating “Je suis Salman” seven days after the attack (just as “Je suis Charlie” was proclaimed after the *Charlie Hebdo* murders). There are the late Paul Auster and the late Martin Amis offering their support. At one point, Rushdie recounts how the playwright Samuel Beckett dealt with his own stabbing (by a pimp). Anyone enchanted by such literary dishiness will cherish these tasty tidbits.

Chautauqua Institution is the most coddled of bubbles. There is a steep daily admission fee in the summer, and visitors must also rent a place to stay. But those who go regularly—a group I count myself fortunate to be among—feel the price is worthwhile. When I enter the gates and see the blue of the lake in the background, I can exhale and relax, at peace. It is safe to walk everywhere, since cars are mainly parked outside the grounds. People say hello to one another and engage in pleasantries. We are all on vacation and at ease, and it shows in our interpersonal communication.

But how different is it from any other part of the United States in terms of safety? An avowed devotee of Donald Trump was killed attending one of his rallies. Americans have been killed at Fourth of July parades, at bars, at movie theaters, in their churches and synagogues and mosques. Politicians have been shot while practicing on a ball field. There is no public arena which is exempt from violence, and this menace takes both a physical toll and a mental one.

“The targets of violence experience a crisis in their understanding of the real,” Rushdie writes as he ponders why he didn’t fight against his attacker.

They no longer know the shape of things. Reality dissolves and is replaced by the incomprehensible. Fear, panic, paralysis take over from rational thought. “Thinking straight” becomes impossible, because in the presence of violence people no longer

know what “thinking straight” might be. They—we—become destabilized, even deranged. Our minds no longer know how to work.

Which is why in some ways it was fortuitous that Rushdie was at Chautauqua when he was stabbed, 33 years after the threatening fatwa was issued against him. Members of the audience rushed to the stage and helped Rushdie’s co-speaker physically restrain the armed assailant. Rushdie writes:

That Chautauqua morning I experienced both the worst and best of human nature, almost simultaneously. This is who we are as a species: We contain within ourselves both the possibility of murdering an old stranger for almost no reason—the capacity in Shakespeare’s Iago which Coleridge called “motiveless Malignity”—and we also contain the antidote to that disease—courage, selflessness, the willingness to risk oneself to help that old stranger lying on the ground.

If you enjoy those sentences, read *Knife*. It is a primer for how literature can inform a life.