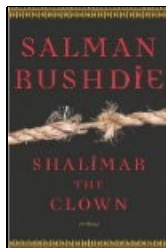


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Book Review
Shalimar the Clown
by [Salman Rushdie](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: May 2, 2006

Shalimar the Clown is an important novel by one of the world's greatest writers. It is the book in which Salman Rushdie grapples most directly with the phenomenon of religious extremism — the force that has generated so much agony in recent years, that once threatened

Rushdie's own life, and that may yet end it.

Shalimar the Clown is not easy to read, and it cannot have been easy to write. Though it is a better book than Rushdie's last, the lackluster *Fury*, and though it is written with formidable skill and intelligence, it doesn't have the flash and lightness of his past work. There are glimpses of humor, but the humor is as dark as the tomb.

The story is centered in the Indian province of Kashmir, where two villages live in mostly friendly rivalry: one devoted to traditional theater and acrobatics and the other to cuisine. Shalimar is one of the best performers in the village of Pachigam: a skilled acrobat and a tightrope walker of almost supernatural skill. (He is not a "clown" in the Western sense of pratfalls and greasepaint.) A Muslim, he falls in love with a beautiful Hindu dancer named Boonyi. Though there are squabbles among relatives over the wedding ceremony, both Hindus and Muslims accept the couple.

The U.S. ambassador to India arrives for a visit. A cultured and charismatic man, a Jew from the Alsace, he is named (like the real-life German film director) Max Ophuls. Max is powerfully attracted to the young dancer, and although she does not share his feelings, she is quick to see the chance for a new life away from her remote village. She abandons her young husband Shalimar, and his grief and wounded pride become fuel for the first of the Islamic extremists to arrive in Kashmir.

As in his other major works, Rushdie carries his tale forward with enormous energy, spawning Dickensian minor characters (like Olga Volga, the potato witch of Los Angeles), sweeping up great tracts of history, politics, and culture, and energizing his tale with eruptions of the supernatural. But about the most serious things, Rushdie is serious. So concerned is he to give tragedy its respect and dignity that his description of the destruction of Pachigam may seem almost unfeeling. When he has said enough, he breaks off abruptly: "Pachigam was destroyed. Imagine it for yourself."

With the exception of some secondary characters and the psychically wounded daughter of the dancer and the ambassador — a modern-day Artemis with a movie camera and a bow and arrow — no one comes off well. The ambassador himself is blinded by lust and self-regard, the dancer has little heart, and Shalimar himself is nearly opaque: a trained killer who lives for revenge and seems to have no inner life. In the end, *Shalimar the Clown* does not explain how extremists are made, but it is devastating in the way it tells what they do.

About the Reviewer

Geoff Wisner is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.

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