A Book to Kill For? Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*

‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ This was the question raised by Salman Rushdie’s consciously provocative novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988). A section of the Muslim community responded with outrage: mass protests and the public burning of Rushdie’s book were followed by Ayatollah Khomeini’s *fatwa*, which called upon Muslims to assassinate Rushdie, his publishers and translators. The novel remains banned in several countries for alleged blasphemy against Islam.

Few of those who have condemned or defended *The Satanic Verses* have read it, although it is one of the most important novels of the late twentieth century. These lectures are designed to make it accessible and thus enable readers to make their own informed judgement about it. Although controversy has centred on Rushdie’s treatment of religion, his book about migrants to Margaret Thatcher’s Britain is also a postcolonial satire and a fascinating autobiographical work. I will clarify what orthodox Muslims find offensive in it, locate Rushdie’s politically engaged narrative in the multicultural London of the 1980s, and consider its legacy in public debate about free speech and censorship.


Dozent: Prof. D.Phil. Alan Robinson, Professor für Englische Sprache und Literatur

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