

A NINETIES QUIZ

FIRST, THE TEXT. TWO thirds of the way through Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the title character discovers a simple truth about some other creatures — those who have heretofore seemed a fearsome opposition. They have seemed fearsome because they have seemed able to stifle imagination, stop the flow of storytelling, usurp power in the world, and control the future. It's a combination that might have given anyone pause. But when Haroun looks closely at those who labour to curtail others' freedom of enquiry and, well, their joy of using words, he

kept being struck by how ordinary they were, and how monotonous was the work they had been given. There were hundreds of them in their Zipped Lips cloaks and hoods, attending to the tanks and cranes on the deck, performing a series of mindless, routine jobs: checking dials, tightening joints, switching the tanks' stirring mechanisms on and off again, swabbing the decks. It was all as boring as could be; and yet — as Haroun kept having to remind himself — what these scurrying, cloaked weaselly, scrawny, snivelling clerical types were actually up to was nothing less than the destruction of the Ocean of the Streams of Story itself! 'How weird,' Haroun said to Iff, 'that the worst things of all can look so *normal* and, well, *dull*.'

It's an allegory, of course, about modern life — about the way many people seem passively to accept current fashion as though it were an ethical absolute, and the way a few people seem only to thrive when they actively impose restrictions on others' dreams of possibility. Now the quiz.

1. Are language and beauty incompatible notions?
2. Is it possible for an English-language writer to use any word in the language, or are certain words restricted because they offend? If some offend, who decides what is and is not offensive, and why are such people worth listening to? Are there fashions in offensiveness, as there are fashions in enthusiasms? Does *time* necessarily stale words, or make them better? Just because certain English-language words, word combinations, and sentence patterns have been around for many decades, does this mean that they are therefore ugly, restrictive, politically heinous, and evil to use?

3. Are openly political statements necessarily more beautiful, more purposeful, or more utilitarian than other statements? Is dense prose naturally more beautiful, more intellectually profound, or more politically responsible than lucid prose? Is clarity a virtue — or is "virtue" not an acceptable category of aesthetic response? Who says?
4. If a critic recognizes the artifice of literature, must it follow from this categorization that literature is unrelated to the physical, emotional, and intellectual world in which, for better or worse, readers live? Do those who enthuse about, say, postmodernism think that postmodernism is intrinsically better than, say, realism (or more beautiful, more virtuous, more intellectually profound)? Or do they recognize that, like realism, postmodernism is a fashion, and that, like realism, it can be inventive, exciting, cultish, or stale?
5. Do majorities set fashion — or do minorities? If it follows that majorities are not necessarily benevolent, thoughtful, or worthy of respect, and that they can always benefit from constructive criticism, does it also follow that minorities are necessarily without blemish and cannot benefit from constructive criticism? Who, then, is the "constructive critic"? If, in an open society, it's always worth listening to the voices of those on the margins, who defines the margins? And do those on the margins necessarily have more insight into literature and society than those not on the margins? Are they somehow, *a priori*, more worth listening to on all subjects and for all determinations of value?
6. If "nationality" is not a literary virtue, why is "region," "margin," "gender," "class," or "race" considered to be one?
7. Why is it that so many people who (with justification) criticize the restrictiveness of a given "convention" fallaciously assume that all orthographic and syntactic and social "conventions" must also be bad?
8. Why is it that so many people who claim not to despise others find it so easy to despise the past?
9. What happens when dullness becomes the discourse model of contemporary choice? Isn't some political agenda served? Whose? Doesn't dullness do the work of those who would circumvent the open exchange of ideas? Aren't those who would limit speech, by claiming how offensive "conventional" words are, using a technique that would silence opposition rather than liberate the imagination and society? Isn't critical safety — which joins in the attack on the current scapegoat, whatever it happens to be — as dangerous as dullness, in that it pretends that the self-serving absolutes of a received tyranny are preferable to the liberal uncertainties of having to make judgments (about aesthetics as well as social ethics) and to choose among options?

W.N.