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## Saving America

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## SAVING AMERICA

Jan Garden Castro

### QUICHOTTE

Salman Rushdie

Random House

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/612467/quichotte-by-salman-rushdie/>  
416 Pages; Print, \$18.99

*Quichotte* (pronounced key-shot) stirs up endless questions as Rushdie's "fiction" mirrors 2020 world events: the Black Lives Matter movement has blasted the lid off of racism in America and worldwide as targeted violence against non-whites makes headlines. In another direction, drug companies who bribe doctors to overprescribe opioids are being prosecuted: John Kapoor is the first drug company CEO convicted of criminal schemes to induce doctors to hook patients on an addictive form of fentanyl and Purdue Pharma has pleaded guilty and paid eight billion dollars— but so far no Sackler family members have been jailed. (Because *they* are white?) *Quichotte* fictionalizes Kapoor and addresses the big story that opioid suicide and overdose deaths in the United States have risen from 21,000 in 2010 to 70,237 in 2017, according to CDC and the NIH (National Institute on Drug Abuse) statistics. Enter Miss Salma R., a strong-willed Indian ex-pat and TV host who becomes a fentanyl addict.

Rushdie's cautionary yet hopeful metafiction cloaks hard truths about racism and

addiction in America in a tale purportedly written by a second-rate writer named Sam DuChamp or Brother, who explains it this way to his son:

He tried to explain the picaresque tradition, its episodic nature, and how the episodes of such a work could encompass many manners, high and low, fabulist and commonplace, how it could be at once parodic and original, and so through its metaphoric roguery it could demonstrate and seek to encompass the multiplicity of human life.

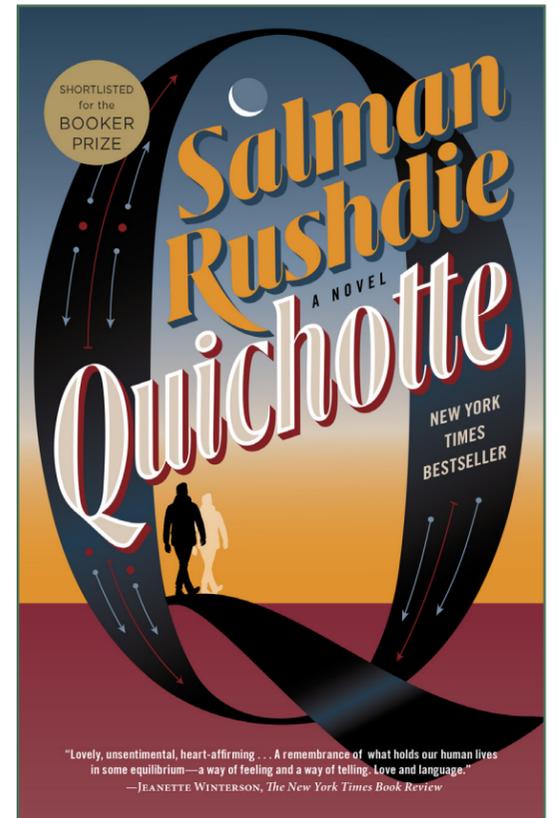
Sam's quest novel opens with allusions to Cervantes' 1505 *Don Quixote*, a saga in which the main character parodies those whose fantasies exceed their capabilities. First, a rambling monologue introduces the inner thoughts of Sam's fictional character Ismail Smile, who selects his own name Quichotte after remembering listening, as a boy, to his father's vinyl recording of the Jules Massenet opera *Don Quichotte*. In writer Sam's parallel "real" universe, his son has rejected both birth parents, now leads a cult, and wears an "original" mask from *Man of La Mancha*, the 1965 musical set in a prison where the fictional Cervantes is writing a fictional *Don Quixote*. Sam's son, or the Son of Sam, is a creepy loner involved in unspecified cult and cyber-spy activities as his character is introduced.

The main characters in the novel, both good and evil, come from Bombay or other locations in

*This fast-paced quest offers self-healing, finding love, reuniting with family, and facing, head-on, the looming crises in our world.*

India, but all are now American citizens with varied careers: Sam is a mystery writer who invents Ismail Smile, a traveling salesman who works for his rich cousin Dr. R. K. Smile, who runs the highly profitable Smile Pharmaceuticals, Inc., a company pushing a fentanyl sublingual spray. Dr. Smile's wife Happy Smile delights in being an arts patron and helping others. Salma R., a cinema star in India who moved to New York in her mid-twenties and starred in the *Five Eyes* spy series, now hosts a popular TV talk show. Smile is a huge Salma fan and addicted to watching TV in general when he's on the road selling drugs. Human Trampoline is Smile's sister in New York; her story has parallels with that of Sam's sister in London. These two women are sensible, have some of the best lines, and their personalities are not as inflated as the men's. Many parallel situations in the lives of Sam the writer and Quichotte have different outcomes but start with each being estranged from his son and sister, embracing a dual American-East Indian identity, and facing unprovoked racist incidents due to their brown skin and features.

Ismail Smile, the tall, slender, older East Indian main character, reminds readers of the character Ishmael who opens Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) — the only survivor of a captain's insane whale hunt. But Ismael uses an Americanized version of his Indian name, calling himself Smile



Smile. Smile's cousin Dr. R. K. Smile is a charming con man who boasts he is saving the public from disreputable pharmaceutical manufacturers as he hooks new customers into dependence on his products. After the rich cousin forces his poor cousin to retire from his traveling salesman job (*Death of a Salesman*, anyone?), Ismail quickly changes his name to Quichotte. He then embarks on what he realizes may be an overly-ambitious quest — to win the love of popular TV host Miss Salma R., who is known for her self-deprecating humor. It is not known that she is bipolar or that thanks to Dr. R. K. Smile, she becomes addicted to fentanyl. Salma has many handlers and fan mail sorters. At first, she singles out Quichotte as a loser who must be kept away at all costs, yet she notes his old fashioned, courtly way of addressing her.

Quichotte goes on a road trip (*On the Road* [1957], *Easy Rider* [1969], many more) and adapts the stages of Don Quixote's quest to suit his American itinerary. As he drives across America, he invents a sidekick Sancho, who is, initially, a black and white two-dimensional character. Sancho comes "alive" in a magical Pinocchio moment; at times, he's critical of Quichotte. Sancho also is never fully human, and, like Pinocchio, and despite help from an Italian cricket named Jiminy, Sancho has no moral compass: his behavior later harms others and himself. Sancho's name resonates for writer Sam and his Sister in London; she lives over a noisy party joint named Sancho — which insults the memory of a famous British African historic figure named Sancho.

Readers are treated to many versions of Quichotte's and Sam's stories. Sam tells his sister in London what he is doing, and she reports:

He talked about wanting to take on the destructive, mind-numbing junk culture of his time just as Cervantes had gone to war with the junk culture of his own age. He said he was also trying to write about the impossible, obsessional love, father-

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is also much thinner, barefaced, shameful.

Peter N. Stearns's *Shame: A Brief History* is an excellent short guide to the largely sociological dimensions of its subject, specifically its changing cultural meanings:

There are three major signs of this important emotional change: overall reference to shame; huge reforms ... in the treatment of social offenders, particularly around the rise of a prison system but also the new regulation of private and community efforts in using shame, in U.S. child rearing with opinion shapers quietly rejecting shaming in favor of more positive methods of discipline

For Stearns, shame is the public face of guilt, the embarrassed red-faced public display of knowing one is in the wrong with regard to a public norm of the time, exactly what one misses, perhaps, in contemporary politics.

I want to give the last word to Clifton, as his superb elegy here for Yvor Winters, "The Dry-Souled Man," best captures the human perspective on shame and its dispensations that Yeats would flout and Stearns helpfully catalogues. Winters

(1900-1968) was a major critic of the first half of the twentieth century, a traditionalist in the age of modernism, whose students went on to great fame and influence, beyond that of their master. His students included the poets Edgar Bowers, Turner Cassity, Thom Gunn, Donald Hall, Philip Levine, Jim McMichael, N. Scott Momaday, Robert Pinsky, John Matthias, Moore Moran, Roger Dickinson-Brown and Robert Hass, the critic Gerald Graff, and the theater director and writer Herbert Blau. He was also a mentor to Donald Justice, J. V. Cunningham, and Bunichi Kagawa. And Winters created one of the era's famous fallacies, "the imitative fallacy" (others were "the affective fallacy," Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy," etc.). He saw that Eliot's grand achievement in *The Waste Land* (1922) was no such thing; rather, its wrestling with modern chaos and fragmentation imitated too closely what it was said to overcome. Most critics today, however much the poem remains a modernist monument, would agree with Winters for, despite Pound's last-minute editorial work, *The Waste Land*, like Burroughs' more obvious *Naked Lunch* (1959) forty years later or so, is a hash, or in Eliot's own words in the poem, "a heap of broken images." Nonetheless, in the end, in the basement of the English department

at Stanford, Winters ends his days ignored if not openly scorned, a model of the stoic for the contemporary poet to emulate with respect to the ultimate reality of time and its cutting strokes: "Outside that basement room — / Your *Forms of Discovery* stacked on shelves, unread — / The unmistakable sweep of an iron broom."

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son relationships, sibling quarrels, and yes, unforgivable things; about Indian immigrants, racism toward them, crooks among them; about cyber-spies, science fiction, the intertwining of fictional and "real" realities, the death of the author, the end of the world. He told her he wanted to incorporate elements of the parodic, and of satire and pastiche.

Nothing very ambitious, then, she said.

And it's about opioid addictions, too, he added.

This passage spells out yet makes light of serious issues in our present moment in history.

Nested stories are famous in many ancient cultures, including Indian, Persian, and Arabic as seen in the epics such as *Mahabharata*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, and in Western works — Rushdie named J. R. R. Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin at a PEN America event on September 4.

The quest plot of *Quichotte* unwinds in episodic chapters that integrate original material, remakes of literary allusions, the daily news, and daily life. Rushdie told Deborah Treisman (*New Yorker* 7-22-19) that Dr. R. K. Smile is based on John Kapoor, a corrupt Indian-American pharmaceutical billionaire who ran Insys Therapeutics. Rushdie's acknowledgements credit Miguel de Cervantes, Eugène Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, Farid-ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, and more. His characters quote from a wide range of Western and Eastern texts, and the disguised locations, such as Beautiful, Kansas, Capote Lake, and Berenger, New Jersey have literal and figurative meanings. In addition, breast cancer and a double breast mastectomy and other medical challenges, including some associated with aging, are described in detail and are well integrated into the plot. Secrets the sisters have kept from Sam and Quichotte about their elders behaving badly when they were younger are less developed and/or more awkward. For example, Salma's grandfather was abusive toward her. Curiously, though, Quichotte looks like him, and even then, Salma and Quichotte end up hand in hand.

Evil Cent, a character I have not discussed yet, is a kind of pitchman who is building NEXT, a

portal to a parallel universe after this earth breaks apart. His vision of the end of the world is not exactly the same as that of Quichotte — who envisions the world ending after he unites with Salma, but these two threads intertwine at the end.

The death of the author is mentioned in several places and can be interpreted in as many ways in *Quichotte*. It may mean the author severs his connection with the text and departs with the last word on the last page. The death of the author refers to Roland Barthes' famous 1967 essay arguing that the author's intention, politics, religion, etc. should not be used to interpret a text. Barthes posited that the text should not be colored by things outside its domain. In the domain of *Quichotte*, the many characters *each* have a hand in telling the story and often disagree with each other, yet Rushdie controls every word of each character. In literal terms, perhaps Rushdie wants his life (and any death threats) kept *out* of discussions of the book. The death of the author here signals aging and the stages of life, which the characters variously discuss. Rushdie handles the death of the author theme with humor, kindness toward his characters, and literary allusions, such as Sam's fear of flying as he's on a rough plane ride to London to visit his dying sister:

He pulled the window blind down again. We are lost wanderers, he thought. We have eaten the cattle of the sun god, and incurred the wrath of Olympus. He closed his eyes. Sister was waiting in London. That was what mattered right now. Death, and Quichotte, and everything else, could wait. A fourth vodka, however, would be a good idea.

A reviewer has many choices. I enjoyed reading the novel and carrying its story lines in my head until they came together at the end: "Here at the heart of a canyon of light an old man and the woman he loves stand in front of an open door." In the end, this is a love story and one about shedding one's old behaviors, finding a self that is humble, reuniting with family, and accepting the loneliness that may come from being born in one country and being a citizen of a new country. It's about corruption in both countries. It's also about facing the racism, opioid addiction, and other ills that plague America.

I can't speak for all readers, but I was entertained by the journey.

*Quichotte* can be dizzying to read, side-splittingly funny, and crockful of literary tropes, trips, and traps. It at times mirrors the demented behaviors of people who watch TV nonstop and possibly that of the author himself in his previous lives. Its nonstop humor makes me wonder why humor is missing from most at the top, say Melville and Faulkner. It reminds me, too, that some humor, such as Mark Twain's, now seems racist and sexist. Also, ranking novels as great or funny or American can itself be elitist, racist, and sexist. Anyway, Rushdie won the Booker and the Best of the Booker for *Midnight's Children*, but in 2019 his funniest — and *most American novel* — was shortlisted for the Booker, which Atwood won.

*Quichotte* has laughs and carefully drawn conversations on every page. Women may find that the sisters and Salma aren't as fully fleshed out as Sam and Quichotte, and that they need a quest journey of their own. Women mainly move the plot along or explain it. However, Rushdie is careful to include all genders, including trans, in his epic tale. In fact, bipolar femme Salma R has *his* name. This fast-paced quest offers self-healing, finding love, reuniting with family, and facing, head-on, the looming crises in our world.

*Jan Garden Castro (www.jancastro.com/) is co-editor of Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (1988) and author of The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe (1985).*