



Luka and the Fire of Life

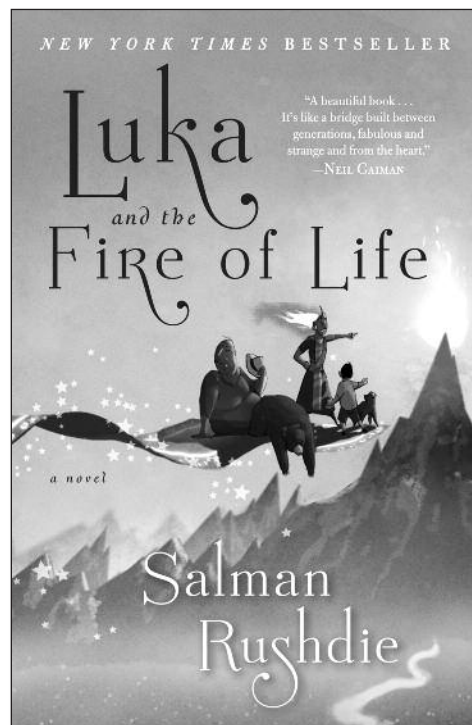
A Novel

By Salman Rushdie

Random House | TR | 978-0-679-78347-3 | 240pp. | \$15.00/NCR

Reading Level: 6th Grade

Also Available in e-Book



“*Luka and the Fire of Life* is a beautiful book. Well-written (obviously), imaginative (astonishingly so) and wonderful in the way it builds heartfelt magical fiction for kids who love video games: It’s like a bridge, built between generations, fabulous and strange and from the heart.” —Neil Gaiman

“This entertaining fable, dedicated to Rushdie’s second son, is a stand-alone sequel to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). . . . Readers will enjoy the silly puns and fun magic-carpet ride, and should appreciate the literary in-jokes and wry humor. Although the tone is fairly lighthearted overall, the triumphant finale is a fantastic tribute to the rich interior world of the storyteller and the transformative power of his art.” —Booklist

“A celebration of storytelling.” —Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

• note to teachers •

Luka and the Fire of Life (hereafter *Luka*) is that rare literary feat—endlessly entertaining and skillfully crafted, the bearer of a powerful and timeless message, and truly accessible to readers of all ages—an accomplishment reminiscent of the act of a skilled juggler who keeps all balls suspended in the air as if by magic. So, it is not surprising that Salman Rushdie’s latest tale begins with a circus. When Captain Aag’s Great Rings of Fire comes to the city of Kahani, Rashid Khalifa refuses to take his family, citing the horrible mistreatment of the animals by the grandmaster. After witnessing with his own eyes “a cage in which a mournful dog and a doleful bear stared wretchedly all about,” Rashid’s youngest son, Luka, curses the circus master. Shortly thereafter, it is reported on television that the animals have revolted, and later that night, the circus goes up in flames. The next day, a singing dog named Bear and a dancing bear named Dog turn up at Luka’s doorstep. The scene is telling, suggestive of the whimsy that makes the book enchanting and immensely fun while providing a glimpse of the astonishing depth of Rushdie’s storytelling. Through the tale of a young boy who must travel through the World of Magic to steal the Fire of Life that will save his father—a famous storyteller who has fallen into a deep sleep and cannot be awakened—Rushdie delves deep into matters to which every person can relate: love, life, and death. Rashid Khalifa may not live to see his youngest son grow up and Luka must confront the fact of his father’s mortality—as well as his own. Those who have enjoyed Salman Rushdie’s previous works will recognize the Khalifa family from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), an immensely engaging tale of adventure and love that also functions as fable. In *Luka* they appear again, this time with the

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• note to teachers continued

addition of young Luka, a child who turns back time for his parents by virtue of his very existence. As far as stories go, Luka and Haroun are brothers—unique but inseparable tales about father-son love, courage, and the very real power of imagination that are best explored together.

Like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Luka* is a classic without any stodginess, combining traditional elements of quest—including fire-breathing dragons—with relatable contemporary references such as the video-game elements of Luka’s magical world, where lives can be stored up and one’s progress can be saved. Students will enjoy the vivid imagery, fantastical characters, and clever wordplay, the sweeping action, nail-biting suspense, and lighthearted humor. References to countless other tales and myths create a doorway to a world of literature, while details such as the Luka’s left-handedness and the diversity of The World of Magic create a platform to discuss timely issues and current events, especially surrounding the topics of differentness, tolerance, and respect. In addition to the central themes of love, life and death, Rushdie touches on a stunning range of secondary themes including the nature of time, ethics, authoritarianism and freedom, truth and illusion, which might be explored profitably by older students. Demolishing any boundaries between children’s literature and adult literature, *Luka* is an immensely enjoyable story that truly grows and evolves along with its reader.

This guide contains an introduction to *Luka* and its author, ideas for how the book can be used in a variety of classroom settings as both a primary text and as an impetus for the study of other texts, questions and terms for discussion and exposition, and a brief list of other works that can be used profitably alongside the book. Overall, the guide suggests how *Luka* can be put to its fullest use in the classroom, provoking questions and prompting discussions that will leave students with something they can carry with them beyond the classroom: a sense of their own power and their own voice, an awareness of their own story, their own adventure, and their ability to influence and truly create the world they inhabit

• about this book

When Salman Rushdie’s son Zafar asked his father to write a book that he could read and enjoy, the author responded with *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a clever fable about a child’s quest to save the Sea of Stories from the pollution and destruction that threaten not only to silence his father but to end all storytelling once and for all. More than twenty years later, Rushdie’s younger son, Milan, requested that a book be written with him in mind. The author answers him with *Luka*—not a sequel but a companion story that brings back the Khalifa family, a father in need of rescue by his son, and a young hero—this time, Luka, the twelve-year-old brother of Haroun. When the famed storyteller Rashid Khalifa falls into a deep sleep and cannot be awakened, his youngest son must travel through the World of Magic to steal the Fire of Life that will save his father’s life. Accompanied by Dog (his pet bear) and Bear (his pet dog), and guided by nervous Elephant Birds and the feisty Insultana of Ott, Luka travels down the River of Time and through allegorical territories such as the Respectorate of I, a place ruled and inhabited by rats who squeak that there is “no need to think when you’ve got Ressspect,” and the land of Badly Behaved Gods, where forgotten creatures, gods, and goddesses live on within their own stories. He must find a way past the terrifying Great Rings of Fire and conquer the Mountain of Knowledge to reach the Heart of Magic where the Fire of Life is fiercely guarded by monstrous mythological doormen, and,

• about this book continued

finally, by the Aalim—a “wanton, willful, and cruel” trio of hooded figures who wish not only to defend time but to keep all knowledge to themselves. Along the way, Luka must contend with strange and unexpected foes, including Nobodaddy, a holographic double of his father that serves as a constant reminder of impending death. Motivated by the unfailing memory of his father’s love, Luka uses courage and wit to conquer each obstacle that stands in his way, but he is not able to accomplish his ultimate task alone; he does so with the help of friends and enemies-turned-allies.

Luka is an explosive, magical exploration of filial love, courage, and the power of our will. “To decide to do a thing was decidedly not the same thing as actually doing the thing,” Luka reflects, and it is true that in *Luka*, the most interesting place that Rushdie writes about is neither reality nor the stunning lands of magic, but the place where the two meet—where imagination and reality collide and thought combines with “something more powerful than [our] own nature” to become the action that shapes our world.

• about the author



Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, in 1947. He has written eleven novels: *Grimus*, *Midnight’s Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Fury*, *Shalimar the Clown*, *The Enchantress of Florence*, and, most recently, *Luka and the Fire of Life*. He is the author of a short story collection titled *East, West* and several works of nonfiction, including *The Jaguar Smile*, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, and *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992–2002*. Rushdie has coedited two anthologies: *Mirrorwork*, a collection of contemporary Indian writing penned in English, and *Best American Shorts Stories 2008*. He has also written many essays, including a contribution to *Free Expression Is No Offence*, an essay collection sponsored by English PEN in response to proposed legislation by the British government that would curtail free expression by prosecuting anyone considered to be inciting religious hatred—a move that would potentially silence artists and writers and leave them susceptible to arrest. Rushdie’s work has been translated into more than forty languages and has been adapted for stage and screen. He holds several honorary doctorates, has served as a fellow at many American and European universities, and has been recognized with countless international awards—not only for his writing but for his advocacy and activism. Rushdie was the president of PEN American Center from 2004 to 2006 and has served as the chairman of the PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature for many years. He is currently writing his memoir.

• teaching ideas

Luka is a versatile text that can be used in a wide variety of classroom settings. The style and accessibility of the book make it easy to incorporate into lessons tailored to your specifications, no matter what subject you are teaching or the age of your students. For those teaching **literature and storytelling**, there is much to consider. You might examine form and genre, considering how the book weaves elements of the traditional quest, fable, allegory, fairy tale, and myth into a contemporary story. *Luka* and many of Rushdie’s other works of fiction are often identified as examples of magical realism. The book can be considered within this mode in association with other works belonging to this genre, such as those of Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, and Angela Carter, to name a few. *Luka* can also be studied

• teaching ideas continued

as a work of children's literature, considering how (and why) authors have worked within this particular genre and exploring how the works are alike.

An investigation of any of the formal elements of the text—such as the imagery, language, symbolism, and characterization—will also work well. Alternatively, you might choose to focus on an analysis of the themes of the story, which include, but are not limited to, filial love, time, death and mortality, freedom, and the power of voice and storytelling. Consider other works that have treated these themes, but try to have students identify what makes Rushdie's treatment of these themes unique, challenging, and important. In light of the imperiled storyteller in the book and related secondary themes, the text can also be used as a starting place to discuss censored and banned works of literature. Invite students to consider why these works are considered provocative or controversial, and why they are important and powerful. You might begin by exploring corresponding themes found in *Luka* and also in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Next you might use these themes to enter into a discussion of the controversy surrounding provocative books such as Rushdie's own *The Satanic Verses*. Consider the works of other authors that address the themes of freedom and censorship within the text (such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, for example) and study banned or censored texts (such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*—which, quite notably, all contain young protagonists), discussing what makes them controversial and what makes them significant. *Luka* can also be used to initiate a study of contemporary international literature. While it will be useful to explore the differences among the texts and how they reflect the concerns of the cultures they represent, your focus should be on illuminating what ultimately unites the books, despite their varied origins, as a study of diversity as well as the universal power of literature.

The book presents an equally vast amount of possibilities for those studying **religion and myth**. Of course, the banished gods of the land of the Badly Behaved Gods will be useful, but the work also refers to the beginning of time and The Bang (which, of course, raises the issue of creationism versus Darwinism). Consider, also, how the text reflects on that which is divine. Does the text indicate that it is immortality alone that confers this status?

A stunning range of philosophical themes are presented in the text, and so, *Luka* is an excellent candidate for those studying **philosophy**. You might analyze the treatment of time, free will, or death and mortality in the story. Luka's quest also raises ethical questions about how we define right and wrong, and how intention and effect play a role in moral decision making. The text might also be used as a place to begin exploring authenticity and truth, which could be considered through a study of corresponding works of existentialist philosophy.

Luka might also be incorporated into **psychology** curricula, as a lead-in for discussions about such topics as confronting mortality, identity, childhood and growing up, the power of our will, the relationship between the realm of the imagination and reality, and naming and the ways we find meaning.

Considering how the work functions as a contemporary allegory opens it up for use in **history** or **political science** units as well. Consider divisions and symbolic applications of geography such as the right and left banks; the Aalim and the Respectorate of I; the symbolic use of Luka's left-handedness; and ideas about security, borders, and citizenship.

Sociology and **anthropology** students may consider what the book reveals about society and behavior by observing patterns and trends in the treatment of the inhabitants and the leadership of the land of Ott, the Respectorate of I, and the land of Badly Behaved Gods.

• discussion and writing

- 1 Explore the symbolic applications of fire. While the story reveals that fire represents life, consider how else it is used in the story. How else has fire commonly been used as a symbol in literature and in myths?
- 2 Analyze the Respectorate of I, including its parliament and leadership, its landscape and location, its inhabitants and their mottoes and beliefs. One of the rats moans, “That you say you are offended, insults me mortally.” What does he mean? They also say that there is no need to think when you have respect. What does this mean? What might the Respectorate of I symbolize or represent?
- 3 Evaluate the land of Ott, including its location and leadership, its inhabitants, and descriptions of their lifestyle and habits. The Otters insult each other freely, but why are they not insulted?
- 4 The Insultana of Ott tells Luka that the flying carpet that transports them once belonged to King Solomon. Although King Solomon does not actually appear in the text, he is a figure represented in several religions and also appears frequently appearing in works of fiction. Why might Rushdie have chosen to reference King Solomon in this story?
- 5 The Great Rings of Fire are revealed to be nothing more than an illusion. With this in mind, what might they be symbolic of?
- 6 When the characters talk about Prometheus, they hold different opinions of the type of bird that chewed on his liver. Why is this dispute notable? What does it seem to say about memory, myth, and storytelling?
- 7 Consider the author’s appropriation of natural elements as symbol and metaphor. Explore the geography of the World of Magic, discussing each element of the landscape and the philosophical concept it corresponds to. How do the physical components of the World of Magic serve as representations of ideas? Does this also say something about the way we find meaning in the world around us?
- 8 Luka’s magic world resembles a video game. Discuss the relationship of contemporary gaming to myth, fable, and fairy tale.
- 9 Analyze the Aalim. Consider their many names and how they are depicted. What is the significance of their names and their role as weavers and hooded figures? How do they view knowledge and time? Why is Rashid Khalifa their enemy?
- 10 Many of the characters and creatures in *Luka* have multiple names. The Insultana is also known as Soraya, Dog and Bear claim to have alternate identities, the Aalim go by many names, the dragons have more than one moniker, and so on. Why is this significant? How does it relate to the major themes of the book?
- 11 Evaluate the treatment of time in the book. Consider all representations of time, including age, symbolic and metaphorical representations of time, the information that is presented via characterization, such as the Aalim, and Rashid’s views on time. Does the book suggest which interpretation of time is the correct one?
- 12 Captain Aag says that “[s]ecurity is a hard taskmaster.” What does this mean? How do his statements about security raise ethical questions about right and wrong, good and evil, and matters of point of view? Do his views hold some symbolic political or cultural significance?
- 13 What does the land of Badly Behaved Gods convey to readers about the relationship between myth, religion, and storytelling? What does it mean that each character is stuck in his or her own story? Do the characters remain isolated at the conclusion?

• discussion and writing continued

- 14 What may be the purpose of the overwhelming variety of creatures found in the book and the diversity of their origins?
- 15 In chapter 7, Luka struggles with whether to continue with his quest, upon realizing that he is endangering his friends. He says that there seems to be “no such thing as a purely good deed.” Do you agree with this statement? Although Luka ends up saving the world of magic and his father, the story raises some questions—primarily, is Luka’s crime ethical? Is the answer to this question dependent upon the outcome of his quest? What determines whether an action is right or wrong, ethical or not?
- 16 At the start of the story, readers learn of Luka’s frustration with being left-handed. How does Luka’s left-handedness function as a metaphor? For instance, how does it create a sense of the struggle of being different, the idea that there may not be one certain correct path? What else might it be representative of? How does Luka’s left-handedness ultimately serve him at the conclusion of the story? Why is this significant?
- 17 The River of Time causes Luka to wonder whether or not people have control over their own fate. What does the book ultimately seem to indicate about fate and free will?
- 18 How does the text treat authoritarianism? Where is it represented in the text, and are there any indications of how it may be overcome?
- 19 At the end of the story, despite offers of assistance from his friends, Luka says that he must conquer the Mountain of Knowledge on his own. What does he mean by this, and why must he do so alone?
- 20 How does Luka’s character suggest a young Prometheus? Consequently, how does Luka’s story become a contemporary retelling of a classic myth? How are the two stories different and how do the similarities create a link between past and present and speak about the retelling and evolution of myth? What universal concerns do they share? Alternatively, how does each story reflect key concerns of the culture and time period it represents?
- 21 The Elephant Birds refer to “natural order,” and the Egyptian god Ra speaks of “Maat,” the divine music of the universe. Through its explorations of time, order, and mortality, does the text ultimately seem to support the view that there is some natural (or divine) order, or does it counter this idea?
- 22 Who are Luka’s friends and who are his foes? How do these designations change throughout the story? Considering the characters who form allegiances, what do they seem to be united by?
- 23 Consider the book as an example of magical realism. Explore the relationship of form and style to the major thematic concerns of the book. How do the structure and style of the book reflect humankind’s search for understanding and meaning, and how do these elements help to illuminate the relationship between imagination and reality?

• beyond the book: suggested activities

- 1 Ask your students to write a story about an important event or experience in their life in a realistic mode. Then ask them to write about the same event or experience in a symbolic mode. Have them share their stories and discuss the differences between the stories and the effects of each method. Which style seems to evoke a stronger response among readers? What are the pros and cons of each?
- 2 Use the text to explore naming and its relationship to the ways we find and construct meaning in our world. Explore etymology, including the origins of popular words and phrases. Have students research the origins and meanings of their own first and last names. A useful list of resources can be found at <http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/resources/>. An interesting list of the meanings of names of countries can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_country_name_etymologies, and there are many other options available online.
- 3 Choose a few myths that are common among multiple cultures, such as the creation of the world or the origin of fire. Explore various representations of the myth and discuss how the myth varies among cultures. What elements remain consistent among the stories? What do the differences indicate about the various cultures represented, and what do the similarities suggest about the likenesses between cultures and universal human concerns?
- 4 Consider *Luka* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as allegories about the imperiled storyteller/artist and the fate of storytelling/art. Use the books as a starting place to discuss issues surrounding free speech and censorship. Begin by exploring themes such as the power of storytelling/art, freedom, and authoritarianism. Next, consider a few works of literature that have been banned or censored. Why are they considered to be provocative and controversial? Why are these works important? Are they still considered controversial today? Why or why not? The American Library Association maintains an informative website at <http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/banned/bannedbooksweek/index.cfm> that contains information about relevant works, as well as about Banned Books Week, a celebration of freedom in reading takes place the last week of September. Read Salman Rushdie's op-ed article "Dangerous Arts" which appeared in *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/20/opinion/20Rushdie.html>) and "Coming After Us" from *RHI: Censorship & Banned Books* (http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/RHI_magazine/pdf3/Rushdie.pdf), in which he discusses the influence of religion on society and literature and the religious motivation that fueled the response to his novel *The Satanic Verses*.
- 5 *Luka* can also serve as a starting place for a survey or discussion of contemporary international literature. Keep in mind that the gods and mythological creatures in the book have many different origins, but they all become part of one story in *Luka*. Begin by exploring the book's representation of the variety of stories and myths, as well as the cultural significance of storytelling. Next, choose a few texts by authors inhabiting various parts of the globe and discuss what they have in common despite their varied origins. What issues do they address and what themes do the works share? How do the texts advocate for cultural change? How do the themes relate to those found in works of American literature? You may find helpful information and further resources at Words Without Borders (www.wordswithoutborders.org) or the websites for PEN American Center (www.pen.org), PEN International (<http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/>), and PEN's annual World Voices Festival of International Literature (www.pen.org/festival).

terms and topics for further discussion

Several of the characters and places referenced in *Luka* first appeared in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and an excellent index of those names and their meanings is found at the conclusion of *Haroun*. Below are additional terms and topics for discussion, including some of the key mythological figures presented in *Luka*, major themes, and important literary terms for consideration.

The Aalim	Fairy tale	Maat	Natural order
Alifbay	Filial love	Magical realism	Prometheus
Allegory	Fire-stealing myths	Menetius (aka Menoetius or Menoeteus)	Quest
Authoritarianism	Folklore	Mortality	Ra
The Beauties	Free will	Myth	Satire
Censorship	Kahani		Time
Fable	Khalifa		

other titles of interest

The following is a brief list of suggested works (including novels, essays, poems, plays, and nonfiction books) that can be studied alongside *Luka*. Included are writings that share similarities in formal characteristics, such as characterization and symbolism; belong to a similar classification or genre; or overlap in their exploration of themes.

<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> , Mark Twain	<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> , Maya Angelou	<i>Mythology</i> , Edith Hamilton
<i>Alice in Wonderland</i> , Lewis Carroll	<i>In the Country of Men</i> , Hisham Matar	<i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i> , Gabriel García Márquez
<i>Animal Farm</i> , George Orwell	<i>Inherit the Wind</i> , Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee	<i>Peter Pan: Peter and Wendy and Peter in Kensington Gardens</i> , J. M. Barrie
<i>The Arabian Nights</i>	<i>Interpreter of Maladies</i> , Jhumpa Lahiri	“Rip Van Winkle,” Washington Irving
<i>Beloved</i> , Toni Morrison	<i>The Jungle Book</i> , Rudyard Kipling	<i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i> , Kurt Vonnegut
“Beowulf,” Anonymous	<i>The Katha Sarit Sagara</i>	<i>The Sword and the Stone</i> , Terence Hanbury White
<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> , Junot Díaz	<i>Le Morte D’Arthur</i> , Sir Thomas Mallory	<i>The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle</i> , Haruki Murakami
<i>The Donkey Prince</i> , Angela Carter	<i>Life of Pi</i> , Yann Martel	
<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> , Ray Bradbury	“Literature Is Fire,” Mario Vargas Llosa	
“ <i>Fire and Ice</i> ,” Robert Frost		

about this guide’s writer

Jennifer Banach has written on a wide range of topics, from Romanticism to contemporary literature, for publishers including Random House, EBSCO, and Oxford University Press. She served as the contributing editor for *Bloom’s Guides: The Glass Menagerie* and *Bloom’s Guides: Heart of Darkness*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File. She is the author of *How to Write About Tennessee Williams*, the forthcoming *How to Write About Arthur Miller* and *How to Write About Kurt Vonnegut* (also edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File), and the forthcoming *Understanding Norman Mailer*, to be published by the University of South Carolina Press.