One might reasonably have imagined that *Midnight's Children* was destined to remain merely a novel. Not such a terrible fate, perhaps, and even a point of pride for its few dozen writers. But Rushdie was determined to turn his book into a movie. "I have been a film buff all my life and believe that the finest cinema is fully the equal of the best novels," he said in an interview with *The Times of India*. He has written a monograph on *The Wizard of Oz* (describing it as his first literary influence), served as a guest director of the Telluride Film Festival, and even, famously, played a cameo role in Bridget Jones's Diary.

Inspired by Hanif Kureishi's collaboration with Stephen Frears on *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Paul Auster's with Wayne Wang on *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*, Rushdie has written, "I had long hoped that I might some day encounter a filmmaker with whom I could create a single, happy, fruitful working relationship. Deepa Mehta was the answer to that dream."

Mehta is the renowned Indian-Canadian director of the "Elements Trilogy," *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998), and *Water* (2005), based on a select few stories of India's modern cultural, religious, and emotional upheaval that are both intimate and epic. *Earth*—an adaptation of Raisi Sibhe's *Cracking India*—is one of Mehta's most imaginative and emotionally resonant films, depicting a child's perspective on Lahore's turbulent partition.

The two agreed to collaborate when they met in 2009, deciding that Rushdie himself would write the screenplay. Rushdie's prose is severely abridged and compressed, resulting in a densely packed, tightly written script. Deepa Mehta, at the helm of the film, has a strong understanding of global cinema and is known for her intimate, human-centered narratives.

"Midnight's Children," when it finally comes to the screen, could be a landmark for cross-cultural storytelling. The film promises to bring Rushdie's novel to life in a way that respects its complexity and richness, while also paying homage to the rich heritage of Indian cinema.

Director Deepa Mehta and Salman Rushdie at a screening of the film in Toronto.
future on Rushdie in 1989 after deeming his fiction blasphemous—made complaints that forced a brief shutdown, but the Sri Lankan president authorized its resumption of filming after Mehta appealed to him.

Both Rushdie and Mehta are prophets without honor in their own homelands. They have found no distributor in India, so the film might not be shown there. Besides the ever-present danger that any project hearing either of their names is likely to incite protests, further complications arise from the film's treatment of Indira Gandhi. In the words of one Indian commentator, she appears as "a Lord Voldemort-like politi-
crison with dark grey clouds hanging over her beard." Rushdie and Mehta portray her as a totalitarian tyrant responsible for repression, torture, and other rampant violations of human rights during the emergency rule that she imposed from 1975 to 1977.

Shortly before her assassination, in 1984, Gandhi said Rushdie in England for libel. He was forced to apologize and remove one sentence (repeating a common rumor that Sanjay Gandhi had accused his brother of casting the death of her husband, Feroze, by her cruel neglect). Sonia Gandhi, Indira's daughter-in-law and Sanjay's widow, is now president of India's ruling Congress Party, and Sonia's son, Rahul, is a potential future prime minister; even decades later, Midnight's Children still unsettles India's ruling classes.

So after the extraordinary effort to make the film, scheduled to open in the United States in the spring, is it any good? After this festival-circuit debut last month, the critical buzz was tentative, sometimes tepid. NPR loved it: "a profoundly spectacular film saturated with color and music and passion." But The Hollywood Reporter wrote that the film "dawdles and fails to justify its two-and-a-half-hour running time," and Farivar said it "feels like too much to take in all at once." Auslindess will wonder what all the fuss is about," said The Independent.

But I caught it at the Toronto International Film Festival, and you heard it here first: The critics (except NPR, which is, of course, infallible) are wrong. The film is a remarkably achieve-
ment, and it should be savored by anyone who cares about Rushdie. "It's not just an adaptation of the novel," Rushdie said. "We should think of it as a relative of the book. There's a strong fam-
ily resemblance." And I, for one, welcome this new member of the family.

The film augments this landmark of postcolo-
nial fiction, instantly becoming part of the text, part of the world of Midnight's Children. While the novel remains the core, the Mehta-Rushdie collaboration advances our efforts to understand and appreciate what's going on in the book. The film is inseparable from the value added.

Some aspects of the novel are missing in the film (but we can do without them), and some confusing strains are rendered more clearly on screen (for which I am grateful). Mehta's pacing is refreshingly quick. The novel is sometimes tough going—again, merrily, as Rushdie and his protagonist slog through the meaniness of India's moarors. Without claiming that Mehta does a better job of modulating the narrative flow than does Rushdie, I will say that she has a different vision of how she wants the story to progress. As with so many other novel-vs.-film comparisons, I feel that instead of finding one approach superior to the other, I'm glad to have both.

Mehta's casting is brilliant, and the actors consummately effective as an ensemble. The newcomer Sayra Bhabha (son of the Harvard faculty members, Jacqueline and Homi Bhabha) triumphs in a breakout role as the adult Saleem. Mehta does a better job—or again, just differ-
ent—of focusing on the major characters and letting the others recede into the background. Both her major and minor characters seem sharper than in the book. The novel, like India, is very crowded, the film feels more accessibly arranged.

Rushdie brings more Hindi (subtitled) and "English" to the film, which moves smoothly back and forth between languages. Some postco-
nomians find it problematic that the great mod-
ern Indian epic novel is written in English; the film version has a somewhat more hybrid feel.

She conveys Rushdie's heavy-handed magical realism with a lighter touch, infusing the film with an effective but not overpowering sense of that genre. There was no doube, based on her track record, that she would finally render Rush-
die's milieu, and she has done so par excellence, teasing out with sound, color, costumes, set-
ings, and physical movements a sensory tri-

Sanya Bhabha
and Shreyas Saran
play two of "mid-
night's children"
in the story of a
nearly independent
India.

Sensitivity

Randi Mohammmed
is chair of the
English depart-
ment at Georgia
State University
and author of An
Introduction to
Animals and Visual Culture (Pulitzer Mac-
millan, 2012).

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