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Families and their Stories: Salman Rushdie and Ezra
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Salman Rushdie visited Laramie last week. A highly acclaimed novelist originally from India, then England and now New York, Rushdie gained international notoriety when his book, "The Satanic Verses," was banned in Muslim countries and earned him a fatwa calling for his death.

Now that the fatwa has been lifted, Rushdie has emerged from hiding and resumed his life as a public author and speaker. In Laramie thanks to the efforts of UW's Department of English, Rushdie spent a day talking to people, in large groups and small.

Rushdie presented himself as a storyteller, and spoke a great deal about the importance of stories in our lives - illustrating each of his observations by telling a couple of stories. One remark struck me at first as innocuous, and then as I considered it further I understood its power. The comment was this: stories are the glue that unifies families. Sure birth and blood create the family group, but that does not give them anything to talk about. It is the stories like those about "crazy uncle Willie," "young Sam's winning home run," or "the incident with the waitress caused when granddad's hearing aid went on the blink" that bind family members together. Every family has tales like these, which they tell and retell to each other.

Not only do families treasure these narratives, but their shared body of stories reinforces their identity and their unity as a family. They are the only group of people that share them.

Families are created as much by marriage as by birth, and marriage brings a person into a family from outside. While a wedding officially joins a person to the family, they become fully integrated when they learn the family's shared stories, and then pass on those stories themselves.

For an example, let's turn to Scripture and discuss the disturbing story of mass divorce engineered by Ezra. The Book of Ezra, chapters 9-10, is set a few decades after the Israelites return to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylonia. This was a powerful act of God done out of forgiveness, Ezra declares, but he believes that God is about to punish the returnees. Why? Because the young

Israelite men married daughters from the "peoples of the land." That is, those who returned from exile intermarried with those who never left.

In sermons and other forms of interpretation, the problem Ezra saw is usually described in terms of blood. Ezra wanted to keep Israelite blood lines pure and not have them mixed with non-Israelite blood. But in his speeches Ezra never said anything about blood, instead he talked about worshipping other gods. He used strong language when he said, "The land which you are entering is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations." What pollutions and abominations? Those of worshipping gods who are not the Israelite God.

The danger here is that just as the Israelites have the story of how their God brought them back from exile, so the gods of "the peoples of the land" have their own stories. Gods like Baal, Asherah and Molech have their own tales which are shared by their followers. The families who worship these gods tell themselves these stories. These stories are not about coming back to the land, like Ezra's narrative of Israel's God, but stories about staying in the land. Such stories would imply that there had been no reason to leave and hence no need for God's miracle of bringing people back.

For Israelites to intermarry, then, was to join them to a family that would tell competing family stories. When those stories involved the god which the family worshiped, then the tales would compete against those told about Israel's God, and perhaps compete successfully by making them look unnecessary. Rather than bring the people closer to God, it would push them away, and eventually into the arms of the other gods.

So in the end, the central role of stories in the formation of families, as Salman Rushdie observes, has been long recognized, even if occasionally overlooked. It was a key motivating factor in causing Ezra to bring about the divorce of hundreds of Israelites who married outside the people more than 2,500 years ago.