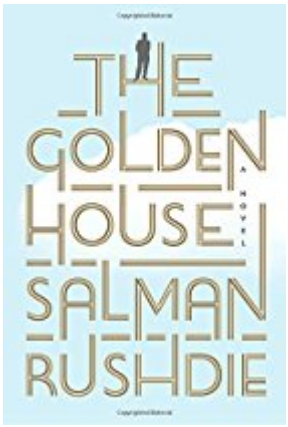
Read The Golden House By Salman Rushdie



One of the truly great writers of the century reaches beyond the very top of his game in this uncannily timely knockout of a novel. In quality and compelling scope, this is Rushdie's The Godfather meets The Great Gatsby--an unparalleled modern-day American thriller, with wonderful, moving characters and a grippingly entertaining story straight out of today's headlines, set against the panorama of American culture and politics from the inauguration of Obama to post-election Trump. When powerful real-estate tycoon Nero Golden immigrates to the States under mysterious circumstances, he and his three adult children assume new identities, reinventing themselves as emperors living in a lavish house in downtown Manhattan. Arriving shortly after the inauguration of Barack Obama, he and his sons, each extraordinary in his own right, quickly establish themselves at the apex of New York society, even as Nero Golden continues to raise huge buildings carrying his name in gold letters. The story of the powerful Golden family is told from the point of view of their Manhattanite neighbour and confidant, René, an aspiring filmmaker who finds in the Goldens the perfect subject. René chronicles the undoing of the house of Golden: the high life of money, of art and fashion, a sibling quarrel, an unexpected metamorphosis, the arrival of a beautiful former model, betrayal and murder, and far away, in their abandoned homeland, some decent intelligence work that could ruin Nero Golden forever. Invoking literature, pop culture and the cinema, Rushdie spins the story of the American zeitgeist over the last eight years, hitting every beat: the rise of the birther movement, the Tea Party, and identity politics; Gamergate; the backlash against political correctness; the ascendancy of Superman and Batwoman and the superhero movie; and, of course, the insurgence of a ruthlessly ambitious, narcissistic villain with painted skin and coloured hair.

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Review ADVANCE PRAISE: “[A]mbitious and rewarding. . . . Replete with allusions to literature, film, mythology and politics, the novel simultaneously channels the calamities of Greek drama and the information overload of the internet. The result is a distinctively rich epic of the immigrant experience in modern America, where no amount of money or self-abnegation can truly free a family from the sins of the past.” —Publishers Weekly (starred review) “Rushdie returns with a topical, razor-sharp portrait of life among the very rich, who are, of course, very different from the rest of us. Where Tom Wolfe’s Bonfire of the Vanities sent up the go-go, me-me Reagan/Bush era, Rushdie’s latest novel captures the existential uncertainties of the anxious Obama years. . . . A sort of Great Gatsby for our time: everyone is implicated, no one is innocent, and no one comes out unscathed, no matter how well padded with cash.” —Kirkus Reviews (starred review) “A canny observer whose imagination is fueled by anger, bemusement and wonder over humankind’s delusions and destructiveness, Rushdie writes novels that range from the mischievously fantastical . . . to the sharply satiric and unnervingly realistic. . . . [G]alvanizing epic. . . . It is also electric with literary echoes from Homer, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and Fitzgerald, and vivid with cinematic tributes to Bunuel, Bergman and Hitchcock. . . . There is a scorching immediacy and provocation to Rushdie’s commanding tragedy of the self-destruction of a family of ill-gotten wealth and sinister power, of ambition and revenge, and the rise of a mad, vulgar, avaricious demigod hawking ‘radical untruth’ and seeding chaos. The Golden House is a headlines-stoked novel-on-fire sure to incite discussion. But it is also a ravishingly well-told, deeply knowledgeable, magnificently insightful, and righteously outraged epic which poses timeless questions about the human condition.” —Booklist (starred review) PRAISE FOR SALMAN RUSHDIE: “In the selection of Salman Rushdie for the Chicago Tribune Literary Award, we honor one of the world’s most prominent writers, and one who has devoted his life to a principle we hold dear: freedom of speech. A prophetic writer, Rushdie has transcended boundaries and distinguished himself internationally with work that has both reflected and influenced the world.” —Chicago Tribune Literary Award citation “Rushdie’s lavish prose has the power to mesmerize and enthrall.” —TIME “Salman Rushdie plunges us into a world of marvels.” —The New York Times “As with Joyce or Borges or other great writers, Rushdie’s linguistic virtuosity incarnates the metamorphic possibilities of language.” —Toronto Star “[Rushdie] wreathes every book with layers of myth, legend and literary allusion.” —Maclean’s “Swift in Gulliver’s Travels, Voltaire in Candide, Sterne in Tristram Shandy. . . . Salman Rushdie, it seems to me is very much a latter-day member of their company.” —The New York Times Book Review “Rushdie illuminates without sentimentality or political preaching.” —Philadelphia Inquirer “Rushdie’s Shame changed everything. It was the book that changed my narrow perception of how to write a novel. It exploded what I considered to be the rules of writing fiction. . . . Reading Salman liberated my voice as a writer in the same way as Kafka and Marquez liberated Salman’s rise.” —Marlon James, author of A Brief History of Seven Killings “Rushdie has emerged as arguably the most significant writer of the global novel.” —Asian American Writers’ Workshop “His inventiveness never flags.” —Kirkus Reviews “A rare and magical writer.” —Michael Chabon, author of Moonglow “His adroit mastery of language serves brilliantly imagined characters and . . . mesmerizing narrative.” —Toni Morrison “A great novelist operating as a master of metamorphosis—transforming life, art and language in the subterranean maze of his imagination.” —Don DeLillo “One stands in awe of Rushdie’s skill and his vision.” —Edmonton Journal “With Rushdie one is always in the presence of a true original. . . . More than any other contemporary English writer, Rushdie makes the page sing with his prose.” —Washington Post Book World “Time and space, understood conventionally, have never been enough for Rushdie’s antic imagination. . . . Comic and dazzling. . . . A writer of undeniable genius.” —Publishers Weekly “Gracefully parses politics and art with equal vigor, knowledge and, most remarkably, irrepressible joy. A world-class writer and perceptive witness to international politics, personal valor, religious intolerance and artistic transcendence. . . . Rushdie’s literary mind is vibrant and generous, his heart stalwart, his pen mighty.” —Booklist About the Author Sir SALMAN RUSHDIE is the multi-award winning author of twelve previous novels--Luka and the Fire of Life, Grimus, Midnight's Children (which won the

Booker Prize, 1981, and the Best of the Booker Prize, 2008), Shame,The Satanic Verses, Haroun and the Sea of Stories, The Moor's Last Sigh, The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Fury, Shalimar the Clown and The Enchantress of Florence--and one collection of short stories, East, West. He has also published three works of non-fiction: The Jaguar Smile, Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991 and Step Across This Line, and co-edited two anthologies, Mirrorwork and Best American Short Stories 2008. His memoir, Joseph Anton, published in 2012, became an internationally acclaimed bestseller. It was praised as "the finest memoir...in many a year" (The Washington Post). His books have been translated into over forty languages. He is a former president of PEN America. The author lives in New York and London. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1 On the day of the new president's inauguration, when we worried that he might be murdered as he walked hand in hand with his exceptional wife among the cheering crowds, and when so many of us were close to economic ruin in the aftermath of the bursting of the mortgage bubble, and when Isis was still an Egyptian mother-goddess, an uncrowned seventy-something king from a faraway country arrived in New York City with his three motherless sons to take possession of the palace of his exile, behaving as if nothing was wrong with the country or the world or his own story. He began to rule over his neighborhood like a benevolent emperor, although in spite of his charming smile and his skill at playing his 1745 Guadagnini violin he exuded a heavy, cheap odor, the unmistakable smell of crass, despotic danger, the kind of scent that warned us, look out for this guy, because he could order your execution at any moment, if you're wearing a displeasing shirt, for example, or if he wants to sleep with your wife. The next eight years, the years of the forty-fourth president, were also the years of the increasingly erratic and alarming reign over us of the man who called himself Nero Golden, who wasn't really a king, and at the end of whose time there was a large—and, metaphorically speaking, apocalyptic—fire. The old man was short, one might even say squat, and wore his hair, which was still mostly dark in spite of his advanced years, slicked back to accentuate his devil's peak. His eyes were black and piercing, but what people noticed first—he often rolled his shirtsleeves up to make sure they did notice—were his forearms, as thick and strong as a wrestler's, ending in large, dangerous hands bearing chunky gold rings studded with emeralds. Few people ever heard him raise his voice, yet we were in no doubt that there lurked in him a great vocal force which one would do well not to provoke. He dressed expensively but there was a loud, animal quality to him which made one think of the Beast of folktale, uneasy in human finery. All of us who were his neighbors were more than a little scared of him, though he made huge, clumsy efforts to be sociable and neighborly, waving his cane at us wildly, and insisting at inconvenient times that people come over for cocktails. He leaned forward when standing or walking, as if struggling constantly against a strong wind only he could feel, bent a little from the waist, but not too much. This was a powerful man; no, more than that—a man deeply in love with the idea of himself as powerful. The purpose of the cane seemed more decorative and expressive than functional. When he walked in the Gardens he gave every impression of trying to be our friend. Frequently he stretched out a hand to pat our dogs or ruffle our children's hair. But children and dogs recoiled from his touch. Sometimes, watching him, I thought of Dr. Frankenstein's monster, a simulacrum of the human that entirely failed to express any true humanity. His skin was brown leather and his smile glittered with golden fillings. His was a raucous and not entirely civil presence, but he was immensely rich and so, of course, he was accepted; but, in our downtown community of artists, musicians and writers, not, on the whole, popular. We should have guessed that a man who took the name of the last of the Julio-Claudian monarchs of Rome and then installed himself in a domus aurea was publicly acknowledging his own madness, wrongdoing, megalomania, and forthcoming doom, and also laughing in the face of all that; that such a man was flinging down a glove at the feet of destiny and snapping his fingers under Death's approaching nose, crying, "Yes! Compare me, if you will, to that monster who doused Christians in oil and set them alight to provide illumination in his garden at night! Who played the lyre while Rome burned (there actually weren't any fiddles back then)! Yes: I christen myself Nero, of Caesar's house, last of that bloody line, and make of it what you will. Me, I just like the name." He was dangling his wickedness under our noses, reveling in it,

challenging us to see it, contemptuous of our powers of comprehension, convinced of his ability easily to defeat anyone who rose against him. He came to the city like one of those fallen European monarchs, heads of discontinued houses who still used as last names the grand honorifics, of-Greece or of-Yugoslavia or of-Italy, and who treated the mournful prefix, ex-, as if it didn't exist. He wasn't ex-anything, his manner said; he was majestic in all things, in his stiff-collared shirts, his cuff links, his bespoke English shoes, his way of walking toward closed doors without slowing down, knowing they would open for him; also in his suspicious nature, owing to which he held daily separate meetings with his sons to ask them what their brothers were saying about him; and in his cars, his liking for gaming tables, his unreturnable Ping-Pong serve, his fondness for prostitutes, whiskey, and deviled eggs, and his often repeated dictum—one favored by absolute rulers from Caesar to Haile Selassie—that the only virtue worth caring about was loyalty. He changed his cellphone frequently, gave the number to almost no one, and didn't answer it when it rang. He refused to allow journalists or photographers into his home but there were two men in his regular poker circle who were often there, silver-haired lotharios usually seen wearing tan leather jackets and brightly striped cravats, who were widely suspected of having murdered their rich wives, although in one case no charges had been made and in the other, they hadn't stuck. Regarding his own missing wife he was silent. In his house of many photographs, whose walls and mantelpieces were populated by rock stars, Nobel laureates, and aristocrats, there was no image of Mrs. Golden, or whatever she had called herself. Clearly some disgrace was being implied, and we gossiped, to our shame, about what that might have been, imagining the scale and brazenness of her infidelities, conjuring her up as some sort of most high-born nymphomaniac, her sex life more flagrant than any movie star's, her divagations known to one and all except to her husband, whose eyes, blinded by love, continued to gaze adoringly upon her as he believed her to be, the loving and chaste wife of his dreams, until the terrible day when his friends told him the truth, they came in numbers to tell him, and how he raged!, how he abused them!, calling them liars and traitors, it took seven men to hold him and prevent him from doing harm to those who had forced him to face reality, and then finally he did face it, he accepted it, he banished her from his life and forbade her ever again to look upon her sons. Wicked woman, we said to one another, thinking ourselves worldly-wise, and the tale satisfied us, and we left it there, being in truth more preoccupied by our own stuff, and only interested in the affairs of N. J. Golden up to a certain point. We turned away, and got on with our lives. How wrong we were. 2 What is a good life? What is its opposite? These are questions to which no two men will give the same answers. In these our cowardly times, we deny the grandeur of the Universal, and assert and glorify our local Bigotries, and so we cannot agree on much. In these our degenerate times, men bent on nothing but vainglory and personal gain—hollow, bombastic men for whom nothing is off-limits if it advances their petty cause—will claim to be great leaders and benefactors, acting in the common good, and calling all who oppose them liars, envious, little people, stupid people, stiffs, and, in a precise reversal of the truth, dishonest and corrupt. We are so divided, so hostile to one another, so driven by sanctimony and scorn, so lost in cynicism, that we call our pomposity idealism, so disenchanted with our rulers, so willing to jeer at the institutions of our state, that the very word goodness has been emptied of meaning and needs, perhaps, to be set aside for a time, like all the other poisoned words, spirituality, for example, final solution, for example, and (at least when applied to skyscrapers and fried potatoes) freedom. But on that cold January day in 2009 when the enigmatic septuagenarian we came to know as Nero Julius Golden arrived in Greenwich Village in a Daimler limousine with three male children and no visible sign of a wife, he at least was firm about how virtue was to be valued, and right action distinguished from wrong. "In my American house," he told his attentive sons in the limousine as it drove them from the airport to their new residence, "morality will go by the golden standard." Whether he meant that morality was supremely precious, or that wealth determined morality, or that he personally, with his glittering new name, would be the only judge of right and wrong, he did not say, and the younger Julii, from long filial habit, did not ask for clarification. (Julii, the imperial plural they all preferred to Goldens: these were not modest men!) The youngest of the three, an indolent twenty-two-year-old with hair falling in

beautiful cadences to his shoulders and a face like an angry angel, did however ask one question. “What will we say,” he asked his father, “when they inquire, where did you come from?” The old man’s face entered a condition of scarlet vehemence. “This, I’ve answered before,” he cried. “Tell them, screw the identity parade. Tell them, we are snakes who shed our skin. Tell them we just moved downtown from Carnegie Hill. Tell them we were born yesterday. Tell them we materialized by magic, or arrived from the neighborhood of Alpha Centauri in a spaceship hidden in a comet’s tail. Say we are from nowhere or anywhere or somewhere, we are make-believe people, frauds, reinventions, shapeshifters, which is to say, Americans. Do not tell them the name of the place we left. Never speak it. Not the street, not the city, not the country. I do not want to hear those names again.” They emerged from the car in the old heart of the Village, on Macdougal Street a little below Bleecker, near the Italian coffee place from the old days that was still somehow struggling on; and ignoring the honking cars behind them and the outstretched supplicant palm of at least one grubby panhandler, they allowed the limousine to idle in mid-street while they took their time lifting their bags from the trunk—even the old man insisted on carrying his own valise—and carried them to the grand Beaux-Arts building on the east side of the street, the former Murray mansion, thereafter to be known as the Golden house. (Only the eldest son, the one who didn’t like being out of doors, who was wearing very dark dark glasses and an anxious expression, appeared to be in a hurry.) So they arrived as they intended to remain, independently, with a shrugging indifference to the objections of others. The Murray mansion, grandest of all the buildings on the Gardens, had lain largely unoccupied for many years, except for a notably snippy fifty-something Italian-American house manager and her equally haughty, though much younger, female assistant and live-in lover. We had often speculated on the owner’s identity, but the fierce lady guardians of the building refused to satisfy our curiosity. However, these were years in which many of the world’s superrich bought property for no reason other than to own it, and left empty homes lying around the planet like discarded shoes, so we assumed that some Russian oligarch or oil sheikh must be involved, and, shrugging our shoulders, we got used to treating the empty house as if it wasn’t there. There was one other person attached to the house, a sweet-natured Hispanic handyman named Gonzalo who was employed by the two guardian dragons to look after the place, and sometimes, when he had a bit of spare time, we would ask him over to our houses to fix our wiring and plumbing problems and help us clear our roofs and entrances of snow in the depths of winter. These services, in return for small sums of cash money folded discreetly into his hand, he smilingly performed. The Macdougal--Sullivan Gardens Historic District—to give the Gardens their full, overly sonorous name—was the enchanted, fearless space in which we lived and raised our children, a place of happy retreat from the disenchanted, fearful world beyond its borders, and we made no apology for loving it dearly. The original Greek Revival–style homes on Macdougal and Sullivan, built in the 1840s, were remodeled in Colonial Revival style in the 1920s by architects working for a certain Mr. William Sloane Coffin, who sold furniture and rugs, and it was at that time that the rear yards were combined to form the communal gardens, bounded to the north by Bleecker Street, to the south by Houston, and reserved for the private use of residents in the houses backing onto them. The Murray mansion was an oddity, in many ways too grand for the Gardens, a gracious landmark structure originally built for the prominent banker Franklin Murray and his wife Harriet Lanier Murray between 1901 and 1903 by the architectural firm of Hoppin & Koen, who, to make room for it, had demolished two of the original houses put up in 1844 by the estate of the merchant Nicholas Low. It had been designed in the French Renaissance manner to be both fancy and fashionable, a style in which Hoppin & Koen had considerable experience, gained both at the École des Beaux-Arts and, afterwards, during their time working for McKim, Mead & White. As we afterwards learned, Nero Golden had owned it since the early 1980s. It had long been whispered around the Gardens that the owner came and went, spending perhaps two days a year in the house, but none of us ever saw him, though sometimes there were lights on in more windows than usual at night, and, very rarely, a shadow against a blind, so that the local children decided the place was haunted, and kept their distance. This was the place whose ample front doors stood open that January day as the Daimler limousine disgorged the Golden

men, father and sons. Standing on the threshold was the welcoming committee, the two dragon ladies, who had prepared everything for their master's arrival. Nero and his sons passed inside and found the world of lies they would from now on inhabit: not a spanking-new, ultra-modern residence for a wealthy foreign family to make their own gradually, as their new lives unfolded, their connections to the new city deepened, their experiences multiplied—no!—but rather a place in which Time had been standing still for twenty years or more, Time gazing in its indifferent fashion upon scuffed Biedermeier chairs, slowly fading rugs and sixties-revival lava lamps, and looking with mild amusement at the portraits by all the right people of Nero Golden's younger self with downtown figures, René Ricard, William Burroughs, Deborah Harry, as well as leaders of Wall Street and old families of the Social Register, bearers of hallowed names such as Luce, Beekman, and Auchincloss. Before he bought this place the old man had owned a large high-ceilinged bohemian loft, three thousand square feet on the corner of Broadway and Great Jones Street, and in his far-off youth had been allowed to hang around the edges of the Factory, sitting ignored and grateful in the rich boys' corner with Si Newhouse and Carlo De Benedetti, but that was a long time ago. The house contained memorabilia of those days and of his later visits in the 1980s as well. Much of the furniture had been in storage, and the reappearance of these objects from an earlier life had the air of an exhumation, implying a continuity which the residents' histories did not possess. So the house always felt to us like a sort of beautiful fake. We murmured to one another some words of Primo Levi's: "This is the most immediate fruit of exile, of uprooting: the prevalence of the unreal over the real."