

A Partnership with God

The novelist Nicholas Mosley saw humanity's salvation at the confluence of love, faith, and technology.

By Shiva Rahbaran



The author. Via YouTube.

I met Nicholas Mosley for the first time in London in 1994. I was an English literature student who had come all the way from Germany in search of firsthand material for a thesis on his novels. I had come across his work through the recommendation of my former literature teacher at school, who urged me to read *Hopeful Monsters*, which had just won the Whitbread/Costa Book of the Year Award.

I was struck by that novel's love story, which is set in England and Germany in the interwar years. The novel made me feel liberated, in the sense that it enabled me to see the bigger picture. Of course, I had already heard and read a lot about love being a liberating and

empowering force. Most love stories I'd read till then, however—when they didn't end in tragedy—offered unconvincing, clichéd happy endings, and did not say much about what happened to the love when the passion of its inception faded with the years. Even in one of the most successful love stories in English literature, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett had little prospect of freedom and happiness after marrying Mr. Darcy. *Hopeful Monsters*, by contrast, spans decades of the German-Jewish scientist Eleanor Anders' relationship with the Englishman Max Ackerman. That scope, and Eleanor's fulfilling life as a woman and a scientist, was liberating.

My fascination with *Hopeful Monsters* quickly gave way to surprise, however, when I found out that very little academic research had been published on Mosley and his writings. I needed secondary sources in order to embark on my thesis, so I wrote a letter to Mosley's publisher, Secker & Warburg, explaining what I was looking for. I was pleasantly surprised (I thought my letter would end up in the trash, or under a huge pile of unanswered mail) when Mosley himself wrote back. He invited me to visit him at his large Victorian house on a quiet, leafy crescent a stone's throw from the buzz of Camden Town.

Once I was in front of him—a very charming, very tall, very English man with large hands and lively eyes that looked at me through black-framed glasses—he warned me about his stammer (which varied in intensity), then sank into an old armchair in the reception room in the basement. He joked about his study being the seat of the subconscious – his psychotherapist wife had the other three floors of the large house all to herself. He seemed quite pleased that I wasn't there because of his father, Oswald Mosley, who had founded the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s, but rather because I was interested in his novels of ideas. He had just finished his autobiography, *Efforts at Truth*, and told me it was to be the seal to his artistic career. He was mistaken. The following twenty-five years proved to be one of the most productive phases of his life: he published twelve books in that period.

Over those twenty-five years we mostly talked about love. For Mosley, love is a framework, or a safety net, within which lovers can experiment with ways and possibilities of partnership with a greater force—history, evolution, God, an all-encompassing consciousness. As individual parts in that frame, they can influence the course of humanity, and save it, as Nietzsche put it, from “a dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping.” For the lovers in *Hopeful Monsters*, the threat of humanity's extinction becomes reality when the atomic bomb (in whose development Max the physicist actually takes part before joining the anti-nuclear Aldermaston protests) is dropped by the Americans on Japan.

So what scientific advancement might *save* humanity? Could humans learn from their mistakes? Evolve into higher beings that could “become a rope over the Abyss [...] a bridge and not a goal,” and thus save themselves from extinction? This question has been at the heart of Mosley's literary experiment since *Hopeful Monsters*.

In addressing this question, Mosley was greatly inspired by the writings of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. He was particularly fascinated by Jasper's description of the different stages in the development of human consciousness, beginning with the

development of religions two-and-a-half to three millennia ago. Then, according to Jaspers, in Greek antiquity, at around 500 B.C.E., dramatists, philosophers, musicians, scientists, and mathematicians showed humans that they were not limited to obeying the words of gods in order to survive: they could do the job of the gods themselves. The next (and perhaps final) stage in the evolution of human consciousness came at the dawn of the twentieth century, when humans discovered that not only did they have a talent to understand what God meant, but also the talent to represent it. For Mosley, this is where love comes in. Love is a framework in which man and God can negotiate as equals, and so become partners in creation.

It was in *Hopeful Monsters* that Mosley began investigating this idea in novelistic form. The title, from a term coined by the German-American biologist Richard Goldschmidt, describes the appearance of a new species through sudden, major mutations. Goldschmidt's theory of evolution, as opposed to Darwinian gradualism, postulated an evolutionary process that took place in big jumps. Mosley appropriated this idea in order to characterize his protagonists as "mutants" of a new, hopefully viable, strand—a possibility for the evolution of their old and threatened species.

The young Max Ackerman tries to prove Goldschmidt's theory by changing the environment of a pair of lowland salamanders, whose offspring are usually born in water, and getting them to reproduce in the manner of alpine salamanders, who give birth not to larvae but to fully formed offspring. In this experiment, he does not "isolate" certain mutations to propagate them, but rather prepares the ground that will allow the seeds of specific mutations to grow. The seeds—or mutations—are there. They fly, then fall and settle when they have reached the right environment. Max lovingly creates beautiful surroundings for his salamanders, which he calls "hopeful monsters." For Mosley, love is the only framework in which such experiments can take place.

In the last phase of his writing, Mosley applies the idea of hopeful monsters to the present. In the *Metamorphosis Trilogy* (which comprises *Metamorphosis*, *The Tunnel of Babel* and *Rainbow Children*) he depicts his protagonists as hopeful monsters whose offspring can be understood as harbinger of a new type of human being: one that could save humanity from annihilating itself. The survival of this new creature is the main topic of *Rainbow People*, the last book of this trilogy, which Mosley finished writing just a few weeks before the end of his life. The term "rainbow children," as Mosley explains in the introduction, is used by educationalists to refer to a type or species of children who are "different enough to make them distinct from normality by virtue of the intensity of their curiosity for how things worked [...] combined with a gentleness and even sweetness of disposition to others." Mosley depicts the present refugee crisis as a possibility for the evolution of such – the saviors of humanity. Like a rainbow, his protagonists bridge and combine different worlds. As Mosley writes, a rainbow is something that not only looks like a bridge between two worlds, but is also the aesthetic embodiment of a scientific process that involves two different forms of existence: energy, in the form of sunlight, and matter, in the form of water droplets. The rainbow is the aesthetic embodiment of a collision. It symbolizes the chance to turn things into beauty, to bridge frontiers—God willing.

That is the crux of the novel. God can only will something if humankind enters into partnership with God, like Nietzsche's dancers. Dance, for Mosley, is the most fitting metaphor to depict this partnership. As Mosley stresses, when two people are dancing, they must trust each other in order to be able to follow each other's steps and weave a pattern, a choreography. If they don't, they'll end up stepping on each other's feet. So, in order to engage with God, people must realize that their role is not one of obedience or disobedience, but of one half of a trusting partnership in which harmony, art, and beauty can evolve.

It was seeing this correlation that allowed humankind to participate in creation—in the dance of creation—and become God's partner in its own salvation. In this spirit, *Rainbow Children* ends with one of the refugee children performing a little dance at the border of the country he was trying to enter. When I asked Mosley why the child was dancing around the frontier guard in order to get to the other side, he winked. "You can only cross a bridge made of sunlight and raindrops, without falling, if you dance on it," he said. The frontier guard would only lift the barrier if there was some partnership between him and the refugee child. A dance is a perfect way to express this trust.

A version of this article will appear as a postscript in the forthcoming [Rainbow People](#), out from Dalkey Archive Press this February.

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Shiva Rahbaran studied literature and political science at the University of Düsseldorf (Germany) and obtained her DPhil in English literature on the works of Nicholas Mosley from the University of Oxford (UK). She is the author of several articles and books on Iranian cinema as well as Persian and English literature. Her books include *The Paradox of Freedom: A study of the life and writings of Nicholas Mosley* and, most recently, *Iranian Cinema Uncensored*. For her short story "Massoumeh," she won the 2016 Wasafiri New Writing Prize. She is currently working on a novel on an Iranian family during the time of the revolution.

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