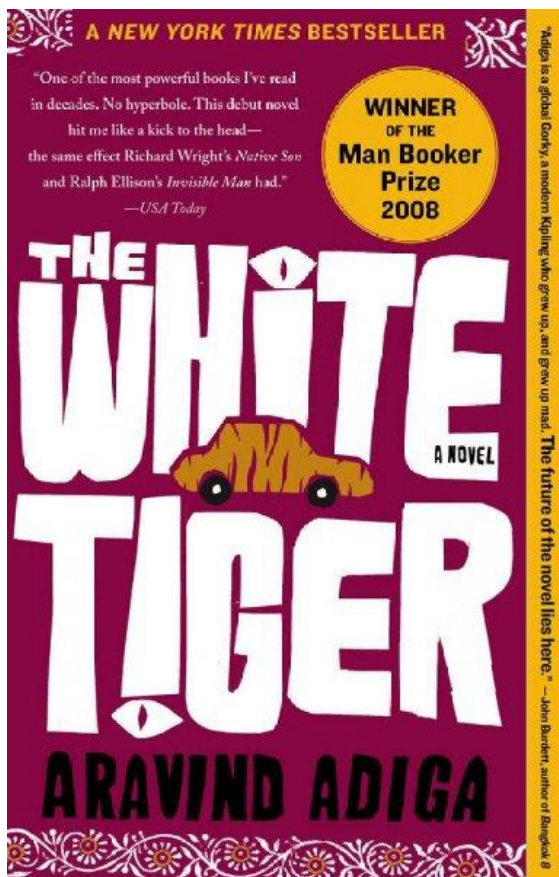


About the book...



Balram Halwai is a complicated man. Servant. Philosopher. Entrepreneur. Murderer. Over the course of seven nights, by the scattered light of a preposterous chandelier, Balram tells us the terrible and transfixing story of how he came to be a success in life -- having nothing but his own wits to help him along.

Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver for his village's wealthiest man, two house Pomeranians (Puddles and Cuddles), and the rich man's (very unlucky) son. From behind the wheel of their Honda City car, Balram's new world is a revelation. While his peers flip through the pages of *Murder Weekly* ("Love -- Rape -- Revenge!"), barter for girls, drink liquor (Thunderbolt), and perpetuate the Great Rooster Coop of Indian society, Balram watches his employers bribe foreign ministers for tax breaks, barter for girls, drink liquor (single-malt whiskey), and play their own role in the Rooster Coop. Balram learns how to siphon gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell Johnnie Walker Black Label bottles (all but one). He also finds a way out of the Coop that no one else inside it can perceive.

Balram's eyes penetrate India as few outsiders can: the cockroaches and the call centers; the prostitutes and the worshippers; the ancient and Internet cultures; the water buffalo and, trapped in so many kinds of cages that escape is (almost) impossible, the white tiger. And with a charisma as undeniable as it is unexpected, Balram teaches us that religion doesn't create virtue, and money doesn't solve every problem -- but decency can still be found in a corrupt world, and you can get what you want out of life if you eavesdrop on the right conversations.

About the author...



Born in Madras (modern Chennai), India, and raised in India and Australia, Aravind Adiga published his debut book, *The White Tiger: A Novel*, in 2008. A former correspondent for *Time* magazine, he has also written articles for the *Financial Times*, the *Independent*, and the *Sunday Times*.

The protagonist of *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai, lives as a young entrepreneur in Bangalore, the center of India's high-tech boom. Through a series of seven letters to China's Premier Wen Jiabao, who is about to pay a visit, Balram recounts his life story and his view of India as two separate countries: the Light and the Darkness. Like many, he was born into the Darkness, a world of landlord and peasant. The son of a poor rickshaw-puller, Balram grew up in a small coal-mining village in the state of Bihar. As the top student in his small village school, he is promised a scholarship by a visiting dignitary. His chance for a real education is lost, however, when a loan shark, who financed a relative's wedding, forces him into servitude in order to pay the debt. Later, Balram teaches himself to drive and is hired as a chauffeur for a local landlord and his two sons. He moves to New Delhi with the landlord's youngest son, Mr. Ashok. As a coal-trading businessman, Ashok has experience in bribery and the corruption of public officials. Balram, who is determined to live like his master, sees an opportunity to rise from servitude. He cuts his employer's throat and uses Ashok's bribe money to start a soon-flourishing business. "Along with the events that lead up to the crime, we catch glimpses of the sort of indignities and injustices endemic to a country that's still

emerging from decades of political, economic, and social dysfunction--teachers who don't teach, hospitals without doctors," noted *New York Sun* reviewer Scott Medintz, who also noted that "Balram proves to be a seriously charming sociopath." - Literature Resource Center

Awards

Man Booker Prize 2008

Book reviews

Publishers' Weekly

A brutal view of India's class struggles is cunningly presented in Adiga's debut about a racist, homicidal chauffeur. Balram Halwai is from the "Darkness," born where India's downtrodden and unlucky are destined to rot. Balram manages to escape his village and move to Delhi after being hired as a driver for a rich landlord. Telling his story in retrospect, the novel is a piecemeal correspondence from Balram to the premier of China, who is expected to visit India and whom Balram believes could learn a lesson or two about India's entrepreneurial underbelly. Adiga's existential and crude prose animates the battle between India's wealthy and poor as Balram suffers degrading treatment at the hands of his employers (or, more appropriately, masters). His personal fortunes and luck improve dramatically after he kills his boss and decamps for Bangalore. Balram is a clever and resourceful

narrator with a witty and sarcastic edge that endears him to readers, even as he rails about corruption, allows himself to be defiled by his bosses, spews coarse invective and eventually profits from moral ambiguity and outright criminality. It's the perfect antidote to lyrical India.

Library Journal

This first novel by Indian writer Adiga depicts the awakening of a low-caste Indian man to the degradation of servitude. While the early tone of the book calls to mind the heartbreaking inequities of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, a better comparison is to Frederick Douglass's narrative about how he broke out of slavery. The protagonist, Balram Halwai, is initially delighted at the opportunity to become the driver for a wealthy man. But Balram grows increasingly angry at the ways he is excluded from society and looked down upon by the rich, and he murders his employer. He reveals this murder from the start, so the mystery is not what he did but why he would kill such a kind man. The climactic murder scene is wonderfully tense, and Balram's evolution from likable village boy to cold-blooded killer is fascinating and believable. Even more surprising is how well the narrative works in the way it's written as a letter to the Chinese premier, who's set to visit Bangalore, India. Recommended for all libraries

Kirkus Reviews

What makes an entrepreneur in today's India? Bribes and murder, says this fiercely satirical first novel. Balram Halwai is a thriving young entrepreneur in Bangalore, India's high-tech capital. China's Premier is set to visit, and the novel's frame is a series of Balram's letters to the Premier, in which he tells his life story. Balram sees India as two countries: the Light and the Darkness. Like the huddled masses, he was born in the Darkness, in a village where his father, a rickshaw puller, died of tuberculosis. But Balram is smart, as a school inspector notices, and he is given the moniker *White Tiger*. Soon after, he's pulled out of school to work in a tea shop, then manages to get hired as a driver by the Stork, one of the village's powerful landlords. Balram is on his way, to Delhi in fact, where the Stork's son, Mr. Ashok, lives with his Westernized wife, Pinky Madam. Ashok is a gentleman, a decent employer, though Balram will eventually cut his throat (an early revelation). His business (coal trading) involves bribing government officials with huge sums of money, the sight of which proves irresistible to Balram and seals Ashok's fate. Adiga, who was born in India in 1974, writes forcefully about a corrupt culture; unfortunately, his commentary on all things Indian comes at the expense of narrative suspense and character development. Thus he writes persuasively about the so-called Rooster Coop, which traps family-oriented Indians into submissiveness, but fails to describe the stages by which Balram evolves from solicitous servant into cold-blooded killer. Adiga's pacing is off too, as Balram too quickly reinvents himself in Bangalore, where every cop can be bought. An

undisciplined debut, but one with plenty of vitality.

Literary Criticism

Title: Getting and Spending

Author(s): Nakul Krishna

Publication Details: New Statesman 137.4890 (Mar. 31, 2008): p59.

Source: **Contemporary Literary Criticism**. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 280. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

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Full Text:

[(review date 31 March 2008) *In the following review, Krishna notes the sharp contrast between rich and poor as depicted in The White Tiger.*]

One is surely tired of being informed that one had better resign oneself to the prospect of an Indian-run and/or Chinese-dominated world. Dreary old "should we fear red(dish) China" debates apart, there are quarters in which it is declared preferable that the Indians should take over. India--liberal, democratic, English-speaking, westward-looking, investor-friendly, no longer non-aligned India--is where the action's at. It is where the action of Aravind Adiga's **The White Tiger** is at, and Adiga's is what might be called a cautionary tale.

"Mr. Premier," his narrator begins, addressing His Excellency Wen Jiabao of China in a letter that lasts the entire length of the novel, "neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English." The novel's framing as a seven-part letter to the Chinese prime minister turns out to be an unexpectedly flexible instrument in Adiga's hands, accommodating everything from the helpful explanatory aside to digressions into political polemic. It is also just the thing he needs to tell the story of his narrator, Balram Halwi--from his origins in a part of India he calls "the Darkness" to his current position as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore's "Electronic City". But Balram is emphatically no working-class hero, and he quickly shows himself to be worldly, cynical and consciously immoral.

Hired as chauffeur for the son of the village landlord, Balram is told (and the metaphorical resonance is made amply obvious) that the road "is a jungle, get it? A good driver must roar to get ahead on it." When he gets to Delhi, we are treated to some of the most acute social criticism yet made of the new Indian middle class. As he writes: "The rich of America or England," who have no servants, "cannot even begin to understand what a good life is." An example:

Now, while they walked around the apartment block, the fatsos made their thin servants ... stand at various spots on that circle with bottles of mineral water and fresh towels in their hands. Each time they completed a circuit around the building, they stopped next to their man,

grabbed the bottle--gulp--grabbed the towel--wipe, wipe--then it was off on round two.

One might note the distinctive narrative voice, rich with the disconcerting smell of coarse authenticity. It is simultaneously able to convey the seemingly congenial servility of the language of the rural poor as well as its potential for knowing subversion. It sends up the neo-Thatcherite vocabulary of the new rich, their absurd extravagance and gaudy taste, but manages to do it tenderly and with understanding. In a turn of phrase that recalls the early V S Naipaul, it understands fully this world of "half-baked cities, built for half-baked men".

Adiga's style calls to mind the work of Munshi Premchand, that great Hindi prose stylist and chronicler of the nationalist movement, especially in passages like this: "A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank", but the "story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen". We would probably be right to describe the impulse of Adiga's fiction as a kind of social realism, contemporary India offering just the sorts of conspicuous contrasts on which such writing thrives. He is too canny an observer to labour under romantic illusions about the poor; the failures of India's old left are good reason not to expect any immediate redemption from that quarter. The author's optimism tends in a different direction.

Adiga might overstate the point, but he is surely right when he writes that "the difference between ... this India and that India [is] the choice". Cut through all the rhetoric,

and it is probably true that where India offers more cause for hope than China is in the possibility that with economic freedom might come a measure of the political and social liberalism which was the foundation of progressive change in the west.

He observes thoughtfully that, in cities all over the country, people "sit under lamp posts at night and read. Men huddle together and discuss and point fingers to the heavens." Which is not to say that the Indian Revolution is nigh, but it certainly says something. When the dust from all the new construction has settled, Bangalore (and the many places like it) "may turn out to be a decent city", more decent than the brutal world its immigrants have left behind.

Adiga's narrator quotes with approval the Urdu poet Iqbal, who said: "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world." Perhaps that line, and the novel, serve as a manifesto for the sort of writing that the new India needs but isn't getting enough of.

Source Citation

Krishna, Nakul. "Getting and Spending." *New Statesman* 137.4890 (31 Mar. 2008): 59. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 280. Detroit: Gale, 2010. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 31 July 2011.

Discussion questions:

1. The author chose to tell the story from the provocative point of view of an exceedingly charming, egotistical admitted murderer. Do Balram's ambition and charisma make his vision clearer? More vivid? Did he win you over?
2. Why does Balram choose to address the Premier? What motivates him to tell his story? What similarities does he see between himself and the Premier?
3. Because of his lack of education, Ashok calls Balram "half-baked." What does he mean by this? How does Balram go about educating himself? What does he learn?
4. Balram variously describes himself as "a man of action and change," "a thinking man," "an entrepreneur," "a man who sees tomorrow," and a "murderer." Is any one of these labels the most fitting, or is he too complex for only one? How would you describe him?
5. Balram blames the culture of servitude in India for the stark contrasts between the Light and the Darkness and the antiquated mind set that slows change. Discuss his rooster coop analogy and the role of religion, the political system, and family life in perpetuating this culture. What do you make of the couplet Balram repeats to himself: "I was looking for the key for years / but the door was always open"?
6. Discuss Balram's opinion of his master and how it and

their relationship evolve. Balram says "where my genuine concern for him ended and where my self-interest began, I could not tell" (160). Where do you think his self-interest begins?

7. Compare Ashok and his family's actions after Pinky Madam hits a child to Balram's response when his driver does. Were you surprised at the actions of either? How does Ashok and his family's morality compare to Balram's in respect to the accidents, and to other circumstances?

8. Discuss Balram's reasons for the murder: fulfilling his father's wish that his son "live like a man," taking back what Ashok had stolen from him, and breaking out of the rooster coop, among them. Which ring true to you and which do not? Did you feel Balram was justified in killing Ashok? Discuss the paradox inherent in the fact that in order to live fully as a man, Balram took a man's life.

9. Balram's thoughts of his family initially hold him back from killing Ashok. What changes his mind? Why do you think he goes back to retrieve Dharam at the end of the novel? Does his decision absolve him in any way?

10. The novel offers a window into the rapidly changing economic situation in India. What do we learn about entrepreneurship and Balram's definition of it?

11. The novel reveals an India that is as unforgiving as it is promising. Do you think of the novel, ultimately, as a cautionary tale or a hopeful one?

Multimedia

“In White Tiger, Killer Exploits India’s Caste System”

Available through National Public Radio:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90452769>

“Adiga’s India, Through A Literary Kaleidoscope” Available through National Public Radio:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106702140>

Readalikes ~ *NoveList*

Company by Max Barry

On his first day of training, Stephen Jones, a young recruit, reports to the Zephyr Holding Building, where he finds a company defined by its lack of clarity, a building numbered in reverse, an invisible CEO, and a crisis over the theft of a donut, in a zany satire of corporate life. ~

The Mango Season by Amulya Mulladi

While visiting her family in India, Priya plans on announcing her engagement to an American man, but upon her arrival she learns that her parents have selected a husband for her and must choose between her own

desires and her parents' wishes.

Sacred Games by Vikram Chandra

Receiving an anonymous tip that could lead to the capture of a powerful criminal overlord, Bombay police officer Sartaj Singh is nearing his goal when he realizes that his imminent confrontation with the crime lord is part of a more sinister agenda.

Watchalikes ~ *Jinni.com*

Rocket Singh, Salesman of the Year, dir. Shimit Amin

Harpreet Singh Bedi (Ranbir Kapoor) has just graduated, and his marks are, well, let's say a little embarrassing. But marks never stopped him from dreaming of an exciting and adventurous career, and they never will. He takes a deep, positive breath and dives into the world of sales, rumoured to be an ultra cool career for all smart people blocked from entering medical, engineering or business schools by brainless entrance exams. It's everything he dreamt of, with its smooth dressing, smoother talking men and women who can sell ice to an Eskimo, dreams to an insomniac, and a lifetime mobile connection to a dying man. But soon, his idea of success begins clashing with the strange ways of these 'professionals' he looked up to.

It's a Wonderful Afterlife, dir. Gurinder Chadha

With nods to Frank Capra, ghost stories, murder mysteries,

and screwball comedies, Gurinder Chadha whips up an irreverent caper about the pressures on Indian women to tie the knot. Set in West London (Bend It Like Beckham territory), the film centers on Mrs. Sethi, a doting Punjabi mother obsessively seeking a suitor for her appealing, but (heaven forbid!) rapidly aging, daughter, Roopie. When a string of curious murders involving poisonous curries and chapati dough begins to rattle the neighborhood, things really start to heat up. As detectives and ghosts trample through the Sethi household, Roopie's love life gets an injection of excitement, too. Nothing in this supernatural escapade is as it seems as spicy truths unspool and fate takes its madcap course.



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