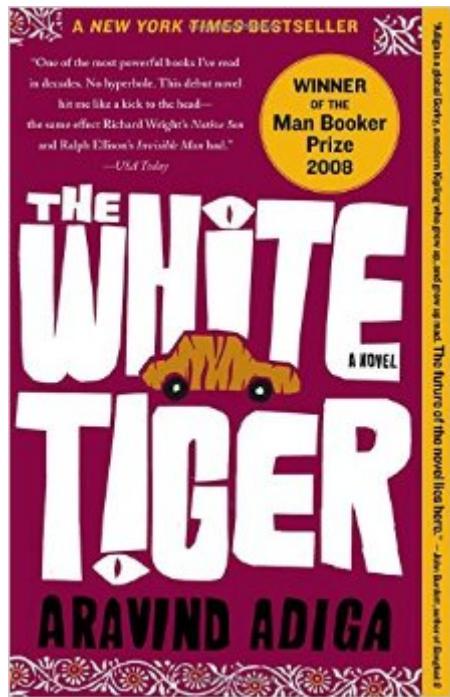


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The White Tiger: A Novel



Synopsis

A stunning literary debut critics have likened to Richard Wright's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, follows a darkly comic Bangalore driver through the poverty and corruption of modern India's caste society. "This is the authentic voice of the Third World, like you've never heard it before" (John Burdett, *The White Tiger*). The white tiger of this novel is Balram Halwai, a poor Indian villager whose great ambition leads him to the zenith of Indian business culture, the world of the Bangalore entrepreneur. On the occasion of the president of China's impending trip to Bangalore, Balram writes a letter to him describing his transformation and his experience as driver and servant to a wealthy Indian family, which he thinks exemplifies the contradictions and complications of Indian society. Recalling *The Death of Vishnu* and *Bangkok 8* in ambition, scope, *The White Tiger* is narrative genius with a mischief and personality all its own. Amoral, irreverent, deeply endearing, and utterly contemporary, this novel is an international publishing sensation "and a startling, provocative debut."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In his debut novel, Aravind Adiga takes on some hefty issues: the unhappy division of social classes into haves and have-nots, the cultural imperialism of the First World, the powder-kegged anger that seethes among the world's dispossessed, and entrapment. But his skills as an author protect the novel from becoming one of those horrible didactic stories in which characters and plot are little more than mouthpieces and vehicle for delivering Great Truths. *The White Tiger* entertains and gives pause for thought. This is a good combination. The plot centers around Balram Halwai, a laborer born and raised in a small village utterly controlled by crooked and feudally powerful

landlords. The village is located in 'the Darkness,' a particularly backward region of India. Balram is eventually taken to Delhi as a driver for one of the landlord's westernized sons, Ashok. It's in Delhi that Balram comes to the realization that there's a new caste system at work in both India and the world, and it has only two groups: those who are eaten, and those who eat, prey and predators. Balram decides he wants to be an eater, someone with a big belly, and the novel tracks the way in which this ambition plays out. A key metaphor in the novel is the rooster coop. Balram recognizes that those who are eaten are trapped inside a small and closed cage--the rooster coop--that limits their opportunities. Even worse, they begin to internalize the limitations and indignities of the coop, so that after awhile they're unable to imagine they deserve any other world than the cramped one in which they exist. Balram's dream is to break free of his coop, to shed his feathers and become what for him is a symbol of individualism, power, and freedom: a white tiger. But as he discovers, white tigers have their own cages, too. Of course, it's not simply the Balram's of the world caught in the rooster coop. Adiga's point seems to be that even the world's most privileged suffer from a cultural and class myopia that limits perspective and distorts self-understanding. The White Tiger is a good tonic with which to clear one's vision and spread one's wings.

What's astonishing about "The White Tiger" isn't Adiga's depiction of the social and economic inequalities of contemporary India. Other writers--Rohinton Mistry in "A Fine Balance," Kiran Desai in "The Inheritance of Loss," among others--have written very good novels about this. What is astonishing is the economy with which he does it. Novels about societal inequities are often lengthy; think of a novel by Dickens or Stowe or Dreiser or Steinbeck, in which the accumulating weight of the details of suffering creates a powerful impression. Adiga creates two disparate worlds, Balram's tiny native village in the Darkness and the sliver of Delhi he inhabits in his life as a driver for the urbanized son of the village landlord. The first is a place of absolute hopelessness presided over by allegorical figures of corrupt wealth: the four landlords known as The Stork, The Buffalo, The Wild Boar, and The Raven. From afar (and occasionally up close) The Great Socialist is re-elected again and again through promises of change (always unkept) and corrupt electioneering. Balram's family, it is clear, will be poor forever. The city, for Balram, consists of the glittery American-style mall (which he can't enter); the air-conditioned Honda that he drives; and the red bag stuffed with cash for politicians with power over The Stork's businesses. These two settings (and the human animals that inhabit them) set out a chasm that is utterly unbridgeable. Thus, when Balram murders his master (a fact established at the very beginning of the novel), it seems less a tragedy than the outcome of impeccable logic. I kept thinking of Dreiser's Sister Carrie, another small town character who

migrates to the city. But where Dreiser is intent on portraying Carrie as someone corrupted by grinding social forces far beyond her control, Adiga deftly portrays Balram as an entrepreneur, one whose tiger's leap across the chasm is equally the product of social forces he cannot control. This leap leads to a 21st century ascent (in social and economic terms) not a 19th century descent into the loneliness that an obsession with wealth can bring.M. Feldman

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