

A short guide to: The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga

written by Jonathan Wong

Author Bio

Name: Aravind Adiga

Key facts:

- Indian-Australian writer
- Worked as a journalist for Time Magazine
- Won the Man Booker Prize for ‘The White Tiger’

Mini Plot Summary:

Fictional novel, set in modern day India, concerning the class struggle between poor and rich. Balram Halwai, the protagonist, comes from a poor village. He obtains a job as a chauffeur for a rich and corrupt landlord. He yearns to break free from his ‘servitude’ (which he describes as ‘The Rooster Coop’) and ultimately achieves this by killing his master and stealing his money. He becomes a ‘self-made entrepreneur’ and starts his own taxi company which he names ‘The White Tiger’.

Extended Plot Summary:

Balram Halwai (fictional protagonist) writes letters to the Premier of China. In these letters he describes his life story.

Balram starts off as a poor boy from the village of Laxmangarh. The village is oppressed and controlled by four landlords known as the Wild Boar, the Stork, the Buffalo and the Raven.

His father is a rickshaw driver and his mother died when he was young. The head figure of his family is his grandmother, Kusum.

Balram initially does not have a name (he was called 'Munna' by his family, which means 'boy'). He is named 'Balram' by his school teacher. One day, a school inspector praises Balram as a 'White Tiger' on account of his talent and intelligence. Balram is eventually removed from school to work in a tea shop. He 'educates' himself by eavesdropping on customers. He learns about things such as the government and the economy.

Balram believes there are two Indias: the 'Darkness' (poor) and the 'Light' (rich). He believes the poor are trapped in servitude by a mechanism called the 'Rooster Coop', which involves the oppressive behaviour of the rich, and the oppressed mentality of the poor.

At a young age, Balram learns how to drive. Through a stroke of luck, Balram secures a job in Dhanbad driving Ashok, the son of a Laxmangarh landlord, the Stork. He soon takes the job of the main driver from another servant, Ram Persad, driving the luxurious Honda City. He stops sending money back home. He eventually moves to New Delhi (a city in Delhi) with Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam, where he witnesses the extent of corruption in India.

Pinky Madam kills a child while drink-driving. The initial plan of Ashok's family is to put the blame on Balram, but this is avoided when the Stork buries the case via his police connections.

The Stork's coal-mining business runs into trouble with the 'Great Socialist' (the region's ruling politician) and Ashok has to distribute more and more bribes.

Balram murders Ashok with a bottle and steals a large bribe. He does this to escape the 'Rooster Coop'. He escapes with his young cousin, Dharam, and escapes to Bangalore, although he knows the rest of his family will be killed because of his actions. In Bangalore, Balram creates 'White Tiger Drivers', which brings call-centre workers home safely. He achieves this by initially bribing the police.

At novel's end, Balram believes his sacrifice is justified. He has traded his freedom for the lives of his family.

Overarching Themes:

- Sacrifice
 - Balram Halwai sacrifices his family (via murdering his master and employer, Ashok) to break from the servitude of ‘The Rooster Coop’

- Inequality
 - Balram believes that India is split into two groups
 - The ‘Darkness’
 - The poor, rural villages (e.g. Balram’s hometown of Laxmangarh)
 - The ‘Light’
 - The urban, wealthy and sophisticated (e.g. Mumbai, Delhi)

- Corruption
 - The ‘Great Socialist’ (a politician) controls the Darkness through election fraud
 - The Stork’s family regularly bribes the Great Socialist to assure their coal business thrives
 - Balram engages in corruption himself

- Identity
 - Balram (who narrates the novel retrospectively, as a wealthy businessman) is proud of his identity as a ‘self-made entrepreneur’
 - By novel’s end, Balram is proud that he is no longer living a ‘donkey’s life’
 - Balram is convinced that he is a ‘White Tiger’ (a rare, intelligent creature) who should be allowed to play by different rules

- Morality
 - ‘The White Tiger’ contends that morality is not absolute:
 - Balram believes that in the brutal world of the ‘Darkness’, there are certain immoral acts which may be necessary to break the cycle of poverty

- The ‘Light’ themselves do not act morally
 - They are portrayed as corrupt and self-interested and cruel, and are only ‘Light’ in the sense that they live in luxury

Key Characters:

- Balram Halwai
 - Protagonist
 - ‘White Tiger’ who ascends from a poor villager to rich entrepreneur through corruption and murder

- Mr. Ashok
 - Son of ‘the Stork’ (Laxmangarh landlord) and master of Balram
 - Engages in bribery/corruption
 - He initially seems kinder and more compassionate than his family members, but in the end Balram believes him to be just as cruel and selfish
 - Murdered by Balram

- Kusum
 - Grandmother who controls, organises and runs their family
 - She makes all the family’s decisions (particularly those that affect finances) including:
 - Pulling Balram out of school
 - Marrying off Kishan (Balram’s brother)
 - Sending Balram for driving lessons
 - Sending Dharam (Balram’s cousin) to Delhi

- Pinky Madam
 - Mr. Ashok’s beautiful wife, who lived in America
 - Kills a young child in a hit-and-run and returns to America

Other characters:

- Kishan (Balram’s brother)
- Dharam (Balram’s cousin)

- The Stork (Mr. Ashok's father)
- Ram Persad (The 'other' driver who Balram does not talk to)

Key quotes:

'Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay' (p 8)

'The white tiger' (p 30)

'I've always been a big believer in education—especially my own' (p 43)

'... There are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat—or get eaten up'(p 54)

'We were like two separate cities—inside and outside the dark egg' (p 116)

'Rooster Coop' (p 147)

'The Rooster Coop was doing its work' (p 166)

'Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans' (p 237)

'[My education came from] the road and the pavement' (p 259)

'Every man must make his own Benaras' (p 261)

'It was all worthwhile to know ... what it means not to be a servant' (p 276)