

MINUTES  
of the Meeting of  
The Novel Club of Cleveland  
Tuesday, March 1, 2011

Location: Home of Larry Siegler, 18975 VanAken, #308  
Hosts: Al Kirby and Larry Siegler  
Novel: *The White Tiger*, by Aravind Adiga  
Papers: Biographical: Clyde Henry  
Critical, Karen Kirby

**Opening:** On a warming pre-spring evening, approximately 26 members and friends of the Novel Club gathered at the home of Larry Siegler to discuss *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. After opening refreshments, Clyde Henry called the meeting to order at 8:35. Two guests were introduced. Committee reports were called for but none emerged. Minutes for last month were presented. Special thanks were offered to Larry Siegler for offering his home for the meeting, even though he has Emeritus status.

**Clyde Henry presented the biographical paper.**

Aravind Adiga was born in India and educated in Australia and England. He began his writing career as a financial journalist and moved to reviewing, working for *Time* magazine, and then went free-lance. He currently lives in Mumbai, India. After this brief summary, Clyde drew excerpts from a 2008 interview. Adiga said that he wrote “things he would like to read,” which can be more ambiguous than journalism. Full-time writing is “less fun” than being a journalist, because there is no office to go to. Things Adiga observed as a journalist but couldn’t write about in journalism went into a “secret diary” and became *The White Tiger*. People he lives among haven’t heard of the Man Booker Prize—so his life goes on much as before. He’s not a part of any “literary set” in India. He has drawn the content for his stories and novel from living an ordinary life and talking to poor people even though this is dangerous and is not based in his own (rather privileged) background. He says a novel can provide ambiguity and complexity that reportage cannot supply. Adiga indicated that Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin (3 African American writers) influenced *The White Tiger*. He believes that is important to try to highlight the “brutal injustices” of society, as such great writers of the past have done.

**Karen Kirby presented the critical paper.**

Aravind Adiga is in his 30s, a young person by Novel Club standards. The novel is the story of the main character's meteoric rise from poverty to the wealth of entrepreneurship through the narrator's blunt and darkly humorous telling of his life story. This acquaints readers with the brutality of his life and the social injustice and corruption around him.

Balram, the main character, takes driving lessons and gets a chauffeuring job for a wealthy family, rising in his professional life through disloyalty to colleagues and a talent for profiting from the corruption of others. He vows to get out of his status as a servant; does so by murdering his master; takes his nephew on an extended holiday; and goes on for a long time through society as an "invisible man" by merely changing his clothes, since people of his class are never noticed much. Adiga picked up on this theme from his undergraduate reading of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The two novels have several common features—including a young man who seems to be rising in society but becomes angry when he realizes that he is being exploited by his upper-class patrons—but while Ellison's protagonist goes underground, Adiga's stays on the surface as an entrepreneur.

*The White Tiger* is about the human condition: humans see themselves as others see them. It takes strength to change this view and to go forward to a new identity—especially for people who start from the lowest, darkest places. Readers perhaps cannot approve of Balram's way of rising from the darkness, and thus are left with a dilemma regarding how to regard their own needs/wants and those of people "in the dark."

### **Notes on group discussion:**

#### **Q1: On the question of the name "White Tiger" for the protagonist and as the title for the novel:**

It was noted that Tiger can be seen as a substitute for India, and White indicates an absence of identity (as in *Invisible Man*). The name was originally given to Balram in school as recognition of his strong achievement there. After starting out as "boy" and then acquiring the name "Balram" given by a government worker, he was called White Tiger because he was "exceptional." This last naming enhances the pessimism of the novel, because so few people can be exceptional in this way. "White Tigers" are unusual, approximately one in ten thousand in the wild, because both parents need to carry a recessive gene. The question then arises whether this exceptionalism also gives Balram the right to kill, because he's "exceptional" like Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*?

**Q2 raised the issue that Mr. Ashok (his employer) calls Balram “half-baked” in the sense of only partially educated. Balram agrees but sees this state of curtailed formal education as a driving force for entrepreneurship. Readers offered the following thoughts:**

Since the typical aspiration of a young Indian is civil service, which requires education, entrepreneurship could offer an alternative path. In 2005, Bangalore was a hotbed of entrepreneurship, yet still, given the huge population the percentage possibility for big success would be small. And even then, entrepreneurial success without education is unlikely—even successful entrepreneurs in India are likely to have Ph.D.s.

It is possible to read the novel as picaresque, with Balram the picaro; since his education comes from listening and from the “school of hard knocks,” he is tough and resourceful. The book seems thus to suggest that starting out “half-baked” requires more resourcefulness, which is a valuable characteristic of the “entrepreneur”—in contrast to going to business school

The term “entrepreneur” used with approval generally does indicate resourcefulness, but this story seems to show entrepreneurship in its lowest terms—just getting the basic bribe money. Then in this context, is the term ironic and aimed at exploring the nature of evil which is fostered by total absence of humanizing opportunities in a society? Is the novel a “scathing denunciation of the infrastructure of India, denouncing the entrepreneurial system, including the passivity of the middle class”—thus presenting another country on the brink of internal warfare based on class warfare? (Therefore, is the book in the tradition of the muckrakers...exposing evil...or, rather does it present similar content except in a self-referential mode, with its point of view coming from below rather than from above as the American muckrakers intended?)

**Q3: However, Balram’s achievements come after the murder of his employer and the theft of the employer’s money. How can Balram’s later success as “Mr. Sharma” the entrepreneur be reconciled with the evil of murdering his employer and stealing the employer’s money? Or should it be?**

Readers questioned whether the course of the story could be read in a positive light. Perhaps it primarily describes the moral disorder of India and the world, even though in an entertaining way. Or, again, it may present the power of the armies of the poor which will not be held back.

**Q 4-5:** Does the narrator's engaging character or the audience of the letter (the Chinese Wen Jiabao) mellow the effect of White Tiger's ruthless climb to success? Does the identification of this audience relate to White Tiger's now-established status as an economic player? Is the story's comment about inequality and corruption specific to India or is it universal?

Readers offered various responses to these last questions, but with time running out the questions were not resolved.

**Closing:** After lively discussion and appreciative revisiting of the refreshment tables, the meeting closed on schedule.