

An interview with Vikas Swarup, author of *Slumdog Millionaire*



Did you always want to be a writer?

Not really. I used to write in my school days but did not write a word of fiction for almost twenty years before I wrote *Slumdog Millionaire*, my first novel.

What do you find easiest/most enjoyable/most difficult about writing novels?

Writing is an incredibly lonely process, but for me it is the means to tell a story. I think one of the pleasures of writing is to see a fictional character take a life of his or her own and then work his or her way into the minds of those who read the published novel.

How do you plan your novels – for example, do you start with the character or the plot?

Both are important. The plot should be interesting enough to make you want to turn the page and find out what happens next. And the characters should be believable enough to make you laugh or cry. Because my books have rather detailed plots, I first think of the ending and then work backwards.

In our Macmillan Reader Note About The Story, we learn that you got the idea for *Slumdog Millionaire* from watching *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. What appealed to you so much about the idea of a street boy winning the quiz?

This quiz show is really about the power of money and the kinds of people who are expected to do well on the show are people who read books and go to schools and universities. So I thought it would be interesting to have a contestant who has not had a formal education, who has 'street' knowledge rather than 'book' knowledge. Moreover, the contestant does not come to the quiz show for the money.

What do you feel were the main differences between the book and the film of *Slumdog Millionaire*? Were there any changes that made you unhappy?

Slumdog Millionaire is an incredible piece of cinema with some amazing performances, brilliant music and original cinematography. It does differ from my novel in some important ways (for example, my novel was about luck while the film is clearly about destiny), but it also keeps the soul of my novel. The entire narrative structure is borrowed from my book. My book was about survival and hope and the triumph of the underdog¹ and the same things can be said about the film. Many of the characters in the film are also from the book. But I was sorry to see that Ram Mohammad Thomas had become Jamal Malik. His unusual name, combining three religions, had an important message for our times.

You must be delighted at the success of *Slumdog Millionaire* the film – but are you surprised by it?

Everyone was surprised. Who could have believed that a small budget film, shot entirely in India with Indian actors, would go on to challenge the mighty blockbusters of Hollywood? It is almost a fairy tale.

***Slumdog Millionaire* is really about the slum children of India. Do you believe the situation in India is getting better or worse? Why?**

I think the situation is improving every day. It is important to bear in mind that slums in India are not places of hopelessness and despair. All those living in the slums work every day to try to make a better life for themselves, so they can get out of the slum.

There is a lot of violence towards women in *Slumdog Millionaire*. What made you want to write about it? Is Gudiya's situation common in India?

The violence towards women is yet another example of exploitation² of the weak by the strong. Fortunately we now have very strong laws against such violence and many agencies are working to ensure that women are given respect.

Ram gains respect from people because he can speak English. How important is it to be able to speak English in India? Why is it so important?

English is a global language. It is the language of the internet and commerce. People in India know that speaking in English can lead them to greater success in life and open new doors for them. But this does not mean that we should neglect³ our local languages.

English is your second language. How important is reading texts in English when learning the language?

I think it is the most important element. Just focusing on grammar can make your writing seem somewhat unnatural. Only when you read texts do you realize the best way to use words.

What is the main message you would like readers to take from *Slumdog Millionaire*?

Essentially my novel is about finding your own pot of gold. I have tried to show that knowledge does not just belong to the wealthy and educated. All of us, whether rich or poor, are given ability, and he who tries, wins. So the basic idea behind *Slumdog Millionaire* is to show that education and wealth are no bar for ingenuity⁴ and that it can work even in a game show. Of course all of us also need a little bit of luck. And, as Ram Mohammad Thomas says at the end of the book, 'Luck comes from within.'

What is your second novel *Six Suspects* about? Are its themes similar to that of *Slumdog Millionaire*?

Six Suspects is completely different from *Slumdog Millionaire*. It is a murder mystery, sort of. It is a tale of six different people – a corrupt bureaucrat⁵, a clever actress, a small-time thief, a trusting American, a stone-age tribesman⁶ and an ambitious politician – who are all suspects in a murder investigation. At its core, however, it is about storytelling, just as *Slumdog Millionaire* was.

Glossary

- 1 a person or group that has very little money, power or social status
- 2 unfair treatment of someone or the use of a situation in a way that is wrong, in order to get some benefit for yourself
- 3 to fail to pay attention to something
- 4 the ability to solve problems in new and clever ways
- 5 someone who is employed to help run an office or government department
- 6 a tribe is a large group of related families who live in the same area. A tribesman is a male member of a tribe.

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Author photograph by Aparna Swarup