

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia

Author: Mohsin Hamid

Published by: New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2013, 235 pages

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Searching for an acceptable common reader on college campuses is no easy task, and anyone who has ever served on a selection committee understands the challenges of picking an effective option. Although an abundance of possible works is published each year it is still worth the effort, to consider less recent titles, such as Mohsin Hamid's (2014) *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the book's initial publication, yet its relevance and applicability to today's societal discourse are undeniable. As a Pakistani-born author who has lived in the Western world, Hamid's incredible knowledge of the many complexities that shape the human experience transcends across communities, cultures, and time. He crafts a narrative of several themes, including poverty, resilience, privilege, love, health, and learning that prompt endless topics for discussion in a variety of settings and particularly as a common reader.

An expertly written work of fiction, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* offers the story of a young boy from a developing country in Asia, the specific whereabouts of which are never given, as he confronts childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and eventually death on the quest for wealth following his rural, poverty-stricken beginnings. Hamid's protagonist describes the book as one from the "self-help" realm. In each chapter, the main character imparts a fundamental "rule" or general wisdom by which the reader is suggested to live to amass wealth in a place like rising Asia. Examples of such advice from Hamid's (2014) protagonist include chapters titled "Get an Education" (p.17), "Don't Fall in Love" (p. 34), "Learn from a Master" (p. 75), "Be Prepared to Use Violence" (p. 117), and "Have an Exit Strategy" (p. 211).

Both traditional and non-traditional college students may relate to and ponder the events of the book's first half, which is dedicated to the main character's youth and early adulthood. He leaves the countryside where he was born and travels to the city for education and greater economic opportunity. He also addresses the notion of going to school, and through the story, he divulges that not all students in rising Asia (including his siblings who are forced to quit school to work) have the chance to attend and finish their education. Eventually, he, too, leaves school and starts his own company—bottling and selling water, which careful readers will recognize as the source of life—and of course, he meets the character Hamid never names, like all characters, calling her the “pretty girl.” Unsurprisingly, the protagonist begins to both eschew and follow many of the “rules” he has set forth for the audience.

The second half of Hamid's novel covers the main character's prime working years through his death, providing college students and other readers the opportunity to look ahead and examine what their own lives may become. In the later chapters, the protagonist starts a family, expands his company, deals with government corruption as a corrupt man himself, and grapples with personal and professional loss in rising Asia. Through a gradual and astute use of irony, Hamid eventually employs his main character to reveal the book is indeed not a true self-help book as previously conveyed but rather more of a life story and a “how to” for living, a fitting confession for the main character whose self-proclaimed gift and proven career is that of marketer and salesman. The central figure writes, “This book, I must now concede, may not have been the very best of guides to getting filthy rich in rising Asia.... We are all refugees from our childhoods. And so we turn, among other things, to stories. To write a story, to read a story is to be a refugee from the state of refugees” (Hamid, 2014, p. 213).

Aside from its engaging story, on a pragmatic level, Hamid's work offers basic strengths as a common reader. Short, clear, and to the point, the book is a quick read at a mere 222 pages, depending on the version, and is also available in audiobook format, making it less daunting for students who shy away from larger texts in favor of condensed forms of literature in varied formats. Moreover, Hamid's ability to draw the reader in from the first pages and keep the reader tuned in to the very last page show the beauty of his narrative storytelling and appeal to greater audiences, a major advantage given that most common readers are meant for large numbers of people and diverse scholarly communities.

In terms of the skills it facilitates, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* has additional qualities helpful in a common reader. One unique feature is that Hamid never names the characters in the novel or even the country where the story takes place. The lack of these details allows readers to focus more on the primary messages of the story and the fundamental wisdom given to the audience, which may be up for debate.

Additionally, just enough information is given so that college students and members of the campus community may practice empathy and perspective-taking, abilities fundamental to the college experience in curricular and co-curricular settings. As a faux self-help book, readers will compare the advice the main character provides and consider it in relation to their own lives, helping readers to reflect, another pertinent lesson in the learning process. Finally, given that the plot extends over the course of its central figure's life, Hamid's book implores the reader to think critically, not just about the self, but about others and those we encounter along the developmental lifespan.

While Hamid's book fits the university's common reader agenda, it is also a suitable choice for introductory courses and seminars in other academic disciplines. In particular, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is an applicable read in courses ranging from lower-level international affairs, political science, economics, public health, Asian studies or history, English, and composition or creative writing. Its transferability to these areas of study is possible in part due to the range of topics and themes previously noted within the text.

The book may be dissected from various angles to address certain points of interest, depending on course aims and learning objectives. For example, international affairs and political science courses may consider the common theme of how different cultures interact and communicate in relation to government and politics. Economics and similar business-focused classes may use the text to discuss the challenges and discrepancies of economic and financial disparities in countries that are quickly growing and emerging but are not yet major world players. Public health and community well-being and development courses would find the consistent theme of inadequate and inaccessible healthcare in the lives of the main characters' family members of special interest, especially when juxtaposed with his own healthcare needs in the second half of the story. Finally, Hamid's style of writing, its content, and the structure of easy and engaging reading make *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* a wise choice for any Asian studies or history course, as well as introductory writing or composition.

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia is an excellent candidate for a common reader and other courses. For those who simply love stories, it outlines the nostalgic recollection of one man's life with his personal wisdom, although he does not always follow his own advice. For academic communities, Hamid's narrative further elicits both emotion and contemplation while promoting numerous topics for discourse. Because reflection is an important outcome of the novel, the questions following this review are offered to enhance that discussion. They are meant to encourage mindfulness of the text and show that even a decade after it was first made public, Hamid's thought-provoking and speedy tale deserves a formidable place in the common reader lineup.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What is the true meaning of wealth uncovered in the novel? Does the protagonist ever gain wealth? Why or why not?
- How does the young boy's humble upbringing and the challenges he faces throughout life ultimately help or hinder him on his journey toward wealth?
- Why does Hamid's protagonist never reveal the names of the characters or the country? What are the benefits or drawbacks to this approach?
- Why did Hamid have his protagonist convey his life story through the self-help genre?
- What was the purpose of this?
- What key lessons can we take from this "self-help" book to apply to the collegiate experience?
- Which of the main character's "rules" would you follow or not follow in college and the years afterward?
- How does the chapter on getting educated serve today's college students? How does getting educated differ between generations and cultures of college students?

Reference

Hamid, M. (2014). *How to get filthy rich in rising Asia* (reprint edition). Riverhead Books.