



Rich little poor boy

A nameless child of poverty climbs the ladder of life

HOW TO GET FILTHY RICH IN RISING ASIA, by Mohsin Hamid. Riverhead, 228 pp., \$26.95.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

What do you get when you cross “How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying,” the cynical musical comedy, with “Behind the Beautiful Forevers,” the award-winning portrait of life among India’s most abject?

I can think of only one person who would even dream up such a hybrid: the brilliant Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid. “How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia” is Hamid’s third novel, following the acclaimed “Moth Smoke” and “The Reluctant Fundamentalist,” the latter an eye-opening and spellbinding 9/11 tale shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The film by Mira Nair comes out in April.

In his latest, Hamid focuses on a wretched, diseased, yet ambitious child of the Indian subcontinent, picking him up by the scruff of his neck and advising him in the brisk, imperious tones of a self-help manual on how to improve his lot. The invisible mentor follows this unnamed boy up the ladder of success with new admonishments for each rung: “Learn From a Master,” “Don’t Fall in Love,” “Be Prepared to Use Violence,” “Befriend a Bureaucrat” and “Dance With Debt” are some of the chapter titles. Though the ending does contain one sweet surprise, it is no spoiler to reveal that “How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia” does not have the joyous finale of the musical comedy it resembles.

In its cleverness, its slightly cruel satire and its complex understanding of both West-



Mohsin Hamid’s third novel, “How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia,” follows an unnamed boy on his entrepreneurial and life journey.

ern and Eastern paradigms, “How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia” is pure Hamid. After spending part of his childhood in California, the author studied at Princeton and Harvard and worked in finance in New York and London before returning to live in Lahore, Pakistan. He seems to know the worst and best of both cultures, and his storytelling style is both timeless and contemporary, a post-modern Scheherazade.

The entire book is addressed to a “you” whom we meet “huddled, shivering, on the

packed earth under your mother’s cot one cold, dewy morning. . . . The whites of your eye are yellow, a consequence of spiking bilirubin levels in your blood. The virus afflicting you is called hepatitis E. Its typical mode of transmission is fecal-oral. Yum. It kills only about one in fifty, so you’re likely to recover. But right now you feel like you’re going to die.”

The voice shifts fluently between close-up tracking of this character and his friend “the pretty girl” and a grander philosophical meditation. In each chapter, the notion of self-help and the project of reading and writing are re-evaluated. “It’s in being read that a book becomes a book, and in each of a million different readings becomes one of a million different books, just as an egg becomes one of potentially a million different people

when it’s approached by a hard-swimming and frisky school of sperm.”

The sharp-eyed storyteller follows our young friend as he struggles through his childhood and adolescence, taking in what education there is to be had, working his way up from bicycle delivery of pirated DVDs to the selling of expired canned goods to his first entrepreneurial venture: the bottling of lightly sterilized water posing as eau minérale. This business — thriving due to the contaminated water system that caused his hepatitis — is the rickety car in which he ascends the roller coaster track of the South Asian economy. Meanwhile, the pretty girl is on her own journey, seen on billboards and in tabloids, then on television hosting a cooking show. Their paths

crisscross and, ultimately, converge.

This novel is smart about many things, including medicine and the processes of death, but is smartest of all about literature itself. “We are all refugees from our childhoods,” the narrator informs us. “And so we turn, among other things, to stories. . . . Writers and readers seek a solution to the problem that time passes, that those who have gone are gone and those who will go, which is to say every one of us, will go. For there was a moment when anything is possible. And there will be a moment when nothing is possible. But in between, we can create.”

According to Hamid, a novel is co-created by the writer and the reader. Three novels in, I really enjoy working with him and spending time in his world.

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