

Shakespeare possessed some rudimentary legal education or considerable familiarity with these “bawdy” courts since legal issues figure prominently in a number of his plays, e.g., *The Merchant of Venice*.

In the end, however, the mind and life of William Shakespeare, despite Bate's best efforts, remain elusive. A clever businessman, Shakespeare recognized that the managers were making all the money in the theater; hence he organized the *Lord Chamberlain's Men* whereby the profits of performances would also go to the players (an Elizabethan precedent for our contemporary professional ballplayers). He also, through shrewd investments, left a considerable estate on his death. (These facts are all documented.) However, his activities in London and Stratford (when the plague closed the London theaters) remain somewhat mysterious. He probably preferred not to draw too much attention to himself given the fine line he walked between the radicalism of many of his plays and the political conservatism that surrounded him. It was politically deft to remain somewhat anonymous, which he seems to have done to the chagrin of later admirers and academics. Many playwrights of the period ended up in jail for works deemed “subversive.”

Bate's account of what is known of Shakespeare's life is perceptively placed in the turbulent cultural context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England—a dangerous, violent world filled with political conspiracies and riven with lethal sectarian battles where (as reflected in the history plays) the state's authority was frequently under siege. (Shakespeare's brilliant contemporary, the dramatist and sometime spy Kit Marlowe, was probably assassinated because he was thought to be an agent for political forces opposed to the government.)

This vivid portrayal of Shakespeare's time is one of the great strengths of the book. It immerses us in a world that, though distant, contains many echoes that resonate with our own and thus enhances our appreciation and understanding of the sublime legacy that we have been bequeathed.

## Reference

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*The author reports no financial relationships with commercial interests.*

*Book review accepted for publication September 2009 (doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2009.09081219).*

***The Lazarus Project*, by Aleksandar Hemon. New York, Riverhead Books, 2008, 304 pp., \$24.95.**

There are two protagonists in Aleksandar Hemon's incredibly rich and evocative novel, *The Lazarus Project*. The book opens with a straightforward account of a historically true event, the shooting death of Lazarus Averbuch. Averbuch, a Polish-Jewish immigrant, escaped the pogroms only to die at the hands of George Shippy, the Chicago chief of police, in 1908. Shippy was convinced that Averbuch was an anarchist bent on his assassination.

The brilliant opening chapter manages to simultaneously convince the reader of Averbuch's naivete and innocence

while juxtaposing the subsequent newspaper coverage that distorts his motives and portrays him as a dangerous intruder.

The assistant chief of police, Schuettler, whose descendants figure later in the novel, uncovers a piece of paper in Averbuch's hatband that says, “1. My shoes are big. 2. My room is small. 3. My book is thick. 4. My soup is warm. 5. My body is very strong.”

It is clear, the story continues, “that the sentences are a coded description of the stages of a murderous plot.” It is clear to the reader without any stage whispering at all that this is a young newcomer trying to learn the English language.

The second protagonist is Brik, a Bosnian immigrant living in a Chicago circa 2004 but still brimming with unassimilated souls vulnerable to all manner of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Brik's first-person narrative is entirely different from the flat third-person account of Lazarus's life and death, which is suffused with sadness and helplessness. Brik is irreverent, hypomanic. His sentences run on, punctuated by semicolons. His life, marriage, and career are chaos. His goal is to secure a grant for something he calls “the Lazarus Project,” research into the life of Lazarus Averbuch. He wants to understand the earlier immigrant experience and the prejudices that led to his predecessor's demise.

His potential angel, the grantor of research money, is Susie Schuettler, the granddaughter of the policeman who investigated Lazarus's death.

Brik is an impecunious writer with grandiose dreams and minimal income. His wife, Mary, is an Irish-Catholic neurosurgeon and obviously the family's breadwinner. Brik's every action intends redemption in her eyes, for he is consumed with guilt at the difference in their usefulness, their work ethics, and their discipline. Yet his path in search of Lazarus carries him ever further from her. “Mary would not like me going away, particularly because she had suggested that it would do us good—especially her—to go on a vacation; possible dates had floated on the surface of our dinner conversations, then sunk into the after-dinner stupor. And I certainly didn't want to beg her for money, again, and go through the whole debasing process of proving that my plans, hopes, dreams are not overly indulgent.”

The structure of the novel is unique, careening between the matter-of-fact yet heartbreaking narrative of Lazarus's misadventures in cruel turn-of-the-century Chicago, which is told with distance and reserve, and the increasingly frenetic first-person account of Brik's progress toward understanding the immigrant experience, which takes him back to war-torn Bosnia. The dual plots are told in alternating chapters. Each chapter is flanked by a picture either from the Chicago historical society or from a contemporary of Hemon's, Velibor Bozovic. The book thus has a multimedia feel without a shred of gimmickry or contrivance.

Aleksandar Hemon came to the United States as a published writer in Bosnia. He was stranded after the Bosnian civil war and enrolled in a master's program at Northwestern University, where he devoured the English canon and then started writing in English. When an agent saw a piece of his in a prestigious literary journal, *TriQuarterly*, he was on his way. *The Lazarus Project* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award in fiction and also for the Booker Prize in 2008, Britain's highest literary award. These achievements gain in stature with the realization that English is not Mr. He-

mon's native language, a fact that has led some literary critics to compare him to Joseph Conrad, another master stylist whose native language was Polish.

The novelist searches for the truth through fiction. In Hemon's book, truth and fiction do an elaborate dance with one another. In the end, the reader appreciates with emotional depth how hard it is ever to know what is true. But the search, in this case, is a great literary experience.

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*The author reports no financial relationships with commercial interests.*

*Book review accepted for publication September 2009 (doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2009.09091297).*

***The White Tiger*, by Aravind Adiga. New York, Free Press, 2008, 288 pp., \$26.00.**

In a series of letters, Balram Halwai attempts to prepare the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, for his upcoming trip to Bangalore. The purpose of the letters is to ensure that Jiabao is not given a false view of India. Balram believes that the story of his life provides a much better description of the country than Jiabao is likely to receive from its leaders. The story describes his emergence from the dark, impoverished interior of India that runs along the Ganges to his current life as an entrepreneur who lives in the light of Bangalore.

His life story begins at his first day in school when he finds that he is lacking both a name and a date of birth. His mother was too ill with tuberculosis and his father was too busy in his work as a rickshaw puller to have his birth recorded. His early life is spent in the "India of Darkness." He is forced to leave school at an early age to work in a tea shop. This India has no clean water or electricity and is populated by children who are thin and hungry. The doctors who are employed to work in the government hospital are never there since they need to work at a private hospital to pay for their bribes; the teacher takes the lunch money provided by the government for the students because he has not been paid. The political leader, the Great Socialist, has lost interest in fighting the corruption that he claimed he would stop.

In his first novel, Adiga uses Balram's biting humor and cynicism to describe the reality of democracy in India. Balram is given an identity by a government official so the party can use his vote at every election. When another man in the slums believes the posters that describe the wonders of democracy and his right to stand up against corruption, others try to explain to him that this is a sham. He ignores those who plead with him not to attempt to record his own vote. There are terrible consequences when he fails to understand that results of elections are predetermined.

Balram is able to see glimpses of the "India of Light" when he becomes a driver for a wealthy family. Eventually he comes to Delhi, where the worlds of light and darkness meet. The masters live in luxurious high-rise buildings, supported by drivers and other servants who live in a squalid underground. It is a world where a relatively small group of wealthy and corrupt masters is able to control a vast population of well-con-

trolled poor. Balram realizes that in modern India there is no moral path connecting these two worlds. He breaks out of the darkness by murdering his boss and stealing a large sum. He then uses his money to become an entrepreneur.

Adiga—previously a correspondent with *Time* who has written extensively about the emergence of India as an economic power—uses this novel to show the paradox of modern India. From the vantage point of a visitor to its great cities, it is a world of the present and the future bringing new opportunities to its population. The truth of India is far more complex. This surface covers over a parallel truth of vast suffering and hopelessness. The great Indian democracy—according to Adiga—is an illusion, which can fool outsiders from China or the West. People living within the dark interior of India understand that the rapid economic development of the country has no effect on their lives or even the lives of their children. Moreover, a complex system of castes in which individuals understood their roles has deteriorated into a system with just two castes: a caste with fat bellies and one with thin bellies.

On another level, Balram's external success also covers something very dark and shameful. The acts that led to his current success also led to the death of his boss and probably to the deaths of family members. Although he never expresses contrition for these acts, his letters convey an awareness that there is also a dark core that underlies his own life. Adiga is also telling the reader that the poverty and humiliation that India's poor suffer do not necessarily make them nobler. Rather, they bring an anger and contempt that seethes within the country.

Adiga is able to tell the story of Balram and India with remarkable humor and humanity. At times, it is extraordinarily comic, particularly when it describes the silliness of the masters or the corruption in India's politics. Balram brings a commanding voice to the narration. His descriptions convey an understanding of the people that surround him and the corruption that pervades India. However, his masters hear a different voice; they hear the voice of a loyal servant who has the same feelings for his masters as he has for his parents. The small number of individuals who appear to be in control of modern India are unaware of the anger and contempt that surround them.

The reader is brought to fascinating parts of India that he or she may never have imagined. These include a community of drivers and other servants who have a quiet contempt for the people they are driving or serving; the rickshaw pullers and farm workers who are so focused on survival that they lack the time to name their children; and the multitudes who crowd the streets of Delhi where they sleep by street lights. The importance of the novel is its compelling depiction of the forces that are in conflict in India and elsewhere that are likely to shape our future as well as India's.

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*The author reports no financial relationships with commercial interests.*

*Book review accepted for publication September 2009 (doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2009.09091322).*