Working with a Novel:
Q&A / Slumdog Millionaire
The following aspects of the novel are covered in this article:

- setting
- point of view
- plot
- themes
- characters
- style and irony

Tasks are included.

Setting

See page 305 of *Access to International English* for more about setting.

The changing fortunes of Ram Mohammed Thomas take us backwards and forwards across the western part of India between the capital Delhi and the largest city, Mumbai, as well as to Agra, the site of India’s most famous tourist attraction, the Taj Mahal. We meet some of the extremes of Indian life from the worst slums to the privileged lives of film stars and foreign diplomats.

As far as the time period is concerned, we are given only indirect clues; no dates are mentioned. The quiz show itself places the action in the relatively recent past and we are told that Ram is 18 years old at the time of the show. The show on which the game show W3B seems to be modelled was first aired in 2000. That would mean that Ram was born at the very earliest in 1982. However, in the chapter called “A Soldier’s Tale” we hear of an attack by the Pakistani air force on the town of Pathankot, while Ram and Salim are youngsters. This took place in 1965, which would make Ram considerably older than 18 in 2000.

Anomalies like this serve to underline an important feature of the novel; although rooted in the realities of Indian life, it is a work of fiction and can therefore take liberties that a documentary book cannot. We do not need to see some of the more graphic aspects of Indian society depicted in the novel – the police brutality, the blinding of children to make them beggars, the corruption of the media – as social realism. “This isn’t social critique,” Swarup himself said in an interview, “It’s a novel written by someone who uses what he finds to tell a story.” “What he finds” is often taken from
popular culture, in particular from Bollywood films. This Bollywood element contributes to making both the setting and the action “larger than life”. Ram, the main character, talks about the difference between “reel” life and “real” life, and we might say that the novel takes place somewhere in between the two.

**Point of view**

See page 278 for more about point of view.

Point of view refers to the perspective that the story is told from. The opening sentence of the novel (“I have been arrested.”) tells us that we are dealing with a first-person perspective. The author chooses this point of view for the whole novel, although this does not mean that other voices are not heard. Ram is clearly a born storyteller and allows the people he has met to express themselves through him, using long passages of direct speech. In the chapter “Licence to Kill” he tells the story of Ahmed Khan through his friend, Salim: “So this is the story narrated by Salim in his own words.”

Unusually, this story not only has a narrator, but what we might call a narratee – that is, a person it is narrated to. With the exception of the first part of the prologue and the whole epilogue, the story is...
told to Ram’s lawyer, Smita Shah. As you read the novel, you can judge for yourself how much her presence influences the way the story is told.

Plot
See page 268 for more about plot.

The most unusual, indeed unique, aspect of the composition of *Slumdog Millionaire* is the way the plot is structured; it is dictated by the order of the questions in a quiz show! Ram is miraculously able to answer each question he is asked on the programme because of some knowledge he has picked up in his dramatic life. It appears quite natural, because, of course, that is the way memory is: we have our whole lives stored in our memories and particular recollections crop up at random when we are reminded of them.

But our own memories are one thing (at least we have all lived our lives in chronological order!) – other people’s memories are something else. The challenge of the novel *Slumdog Millionaire* is to grasp the life and development of the hero as he jumps backwards and forwards between the various periods of his life. Sometimes the author gives us guidance, by explicitly referring to events
that have already been told or that will be told later in the book. Often we are left to work things out for ourselves. The following table may be useful as you read. It gives the chapters in the order in which they are told, the quiz question that leads him to tell each story and, on the right, a number indicating where each chapter belongs in the chronology of Ram’s life:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>QUIZ QUESTION</th>
<th>CHRONOLOGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Death of a Hero</td>
<td>What is the name of the Bollywood blockbuster in which Armaan Ali starred with Priya Kapoor for the first time?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Burden of a Priest</td>
<td>What is the sequence of letters often inscribed on a cross?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brother’s Promise</td>
<td>Which is the smallest planet in the solar system?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Thought for the Crippled</td>
<td>Surdas, the blind poet, was a devotee of which god?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Speak Australian</td>
<td>What does <em>persona non grata</em> mean?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold on to Your Buttons</td>
<td>What is the capital of Papua New Guinea?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder on the Western Express</td>
<td>Who invented the revolver?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Soldier’s Tale</td>
<td>What is the highest award for gallantry in the Indian Army?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licence to Kill</td>
<td>How many test centuries has India’s greatest batsman, Sachin Malvankar, scored?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragedy Queen</td>
<td>In which year did Neelina Kumari win a National Award?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Love Story</td>
<td>In which of Shakespeare’s plays is there a character called Costard?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Thirteenth Question</td>
<td>What was the name of Mumtaz Mahal’s father?</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In some novels we find what is called a frame story. This is a story that frames - or surrounds - the other stories that are told. It is a typical feature of much older storytelling, like The Canterbury Tales or A Thousand and One Nights, in which a fictional person or group of people tell stories. Slumdog Millionaire belongs to this tradition, which is also found in older Indian literature. In this novel, though, we can say that there is a frame-within-a-frame. In the prologue Ram is saved from police brutality by the intervention of the young lawyer, Smita. It is to her that he tells the story of his life. But the catalyst for each story – i.e. what sets his memories in motion – is Ram’s performance in the quiz show, which Smita has on DVD. Through the novel we shift between these three levels – the conversation with Smita, the quiz show, and Ram’s life story.

In novels that frequently return to a frame story, there is always a danger of losing tension and cohesion. When Swarup in addition chooses the random structure of the quiz show to order his plot, this danger is even greater. No amount of flashbacks and flashforwards – and the novel is full of them – can prevent a novel like this from seeming episodic, even chaotic. So how is it that, in spite of this, Swarup manages to keep our attention and keep us wondering how it will end? Well, for one thing the structure of a quiz show has tension in itself – that is why they are so popular. Will he manage the next question? Will he make it right to the top? Another factor holding the novel together is that certain characters and objects crop up several times in the narrative, our understanding of them increasing as the narrative progresses. An example here is Ram’s lucky coin, the true nature of which we do not discover until the end. Keep an eye out for other such objects and characters as you read!

Themes
See page 268 for more about theme.

Vikas Swarup has made it very clear that his first priority was to entertain. Nevertheless, the life story of Ram Mohammed Thomas is very much the story of an underdog, and his dealings with police brutality, corruption and crime undoubtedly give an impression of Indian society that is far from flattering. However, the happy ending of the story implies that the underdog can win in the end and that India, in spite of all its faults, is a country of opportunity.

The themes of a novel are usually closely related to the conflicts it focuses on. As you read the novel, look for parallels between the conflicts in each chapter. In “A Soldier’s Tale”, for example, we meet a person who is essentially living a lie. Can you find any other instances of this in the novel?
**Character**

See page 297 for more about characterization.

In *Slumdog Millionaire* we meet a rich gallery of characters. How are they characterised: directly or indirectly? Which are flat and which are round? Do the flat ones fill any particular stereotypes? Is there any connection between how they are characterised and whether they are flat or round? What about the main character; is he complex and contradictory or straightforward and predictable? Think about these questions as you read the story.

**Style and irony**

See page 278 for more about irony.

Ram’s style is in the best tradition of oral storytelling. He brings his scenes to life with direct speech and visual details, moving from the past to the present tense to give them immediacy. It is no coincidence that the novel has become a successful movie – there is something rather like a film about the novel itself.

At the same time it is important to remember when reading *Slumdog Millionaire* that, while it is told by a young, penniless waiter with no formal education, it written by a civil servant with a university degree. In other words, the style of the writing is chosen to fit a particular persona. Behind the fresh, rather naïve voice of Ram the orphan there is an author who is both older and wiser. This gives the narrative an element of irony, as the author invites us to laugh at Ram. An example is this passage from “Licence to Kill”, where Salim is telling him of his dramatic escape from the evil Maman:

“I just turned around and ran towards the main road. A bus was pulling away and I jumped on it just in time, leaving Maman panting behind me on the road.”

“I was sitting on the bus, thinking what a lucky escape I’d had, when guess what happened?”

“What?”

“The bus stopped at a traffic light and a group of ruffians wearing head bands and armed with swords, spears and tridents got on.”

“Oh, my God! Don’t tell me it was a mob.”

“Yes, it was ...”
The dialogue seems childish and slightly ridiculous, and is meant to be so. It serves to emphasise Ram’s (and Salim’s) innocence and enthusiasm, and gives an added ironic dimension to the narrative.

We find the same childlike innocence in Ram’s account of his own dramatic experiences. Coupled with the atmosphere of “reel” rather than “real” life that we mentioned earlier, this gives his account of terrible events like torture, rape and murder a distance that makes them less shocking than we might expect. Here is an extract from Ram’s description of his torture at the hands of Inspector Godbole, which has an element of farce about it in spite of the violence:

Now he is holding a live wire in his hand like a sparkler on Diwali. He dances around me like a drunken boxer and suddenly lunges at me. He jabs at the sole of my left foot with the naked wire. The electric current shoots up my body like hot poison. I recoil and convulse violently.

There is an element of farce about the scene that makes it amusing, in spite of the violence. It is the boundless optimism and enthusiasm of the narrator that prevents the novel from being a catalogue of injustice and poverty and makes it as much a celebration of India as a criticism of it.

**TASKS**

1. **Tasks on the novel**

These tasks can be used as discussion questions and/or writing assignments. Read about various essay types on page 254 and choose a type that suits the writing task.

   a. Several characters in the novel *Slumdog Millionaire* could be said to be “living a lie”. Give examples of this and describe how these characters find themselves confronted with reality.

   b. Write a portrait of Ram Mohammad Thomas. How does he relate to the world around him?
In Norwegian fairy tales we meet a character called “the Ash Lad” (Askeladden). What similarities are there between him and the main character of this novel? To what extent can we see *Slumdog Millionaire* as a sort of fairy tale?

The world of show business plays a central role in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Is Swarup criticising this world or celebrating it, in your opinion?

*Slumdog Millionaire* has been accused of being a homophobic novel. Critics point out that the only homosexuals in the story are portrayed as child-molesters and perverts. Swarup has denied any homophobia and said that the point of these characters is to show how the powerless are at the mercy of the powerful. What do you think? Do you find *Slumdog Millionaire* a homophobic novel?

“Why did you throw away your lucky coin?” “I don’t need it any more. Because luck comes from within.” This is how the novel ends. How is the theme of destiny vs. luck treated in the novel? What does Swarup seem to be saying about this theme through the career of his main character?

“*Slumdog Millionaire* is essentially an Indian novel. It could not take place anywhere else in the world.” Discuss this statement.

2 Comparing the novel and the film

These tasks can be used as discussion questions and/or writing assignments.

How are the two boys, Ram/Jamal and Salim, presented differently in the novel and the film, both in terms of background and character? Can you think of any reasons why the filmmakers made these changes?

One of the unusual – and demanding – aspects of the novel is the way the chronology of events is broken up. How is this dealt with in the film?

Compare the characters Nita and Ladika. Why do you think the filmmaker chose to change the love story?

Many chapters in the novel are not included in the film. Which ones? Why do you think they were omitted?

How does Prem Kumar’s role in the film differ from his role in the novel?

The film manages without the character Smita Shah. How do they replace her?
g+ Both the novel and the film draw on the culture of Bollywood. Which of them does so to best effect, in your opinion?

h+ The film ends with the words “It is written” on the screen, just after the main character says “It is our destiny”. How does this compare to the way the novel deals with the question of destiny? (Think of Ram’s visit to the palmist in “A Thought for the Crippled” and his use of the lucky coin.)

i Would you recommend someone who had only seen the film to read the novel? Would you recommend someone who had only read the novel to see the film? Explain!

3 Writing genre texts

a Write a book review of Q&A / Slumdog Millionaire. (See page 345 for book review.)

b Write a film review of Slumdog Millionaire. (Se page 345 for film review.)