

Q & A by Vikas Swarup (Doubleday) R150

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Although published in 2005, *Q & A* won the Exclusive Books “Boeke” Prize this year, and thus merits a belated review. It has since its publication been sold in 15 countries, and we are told a film is on its way.

*Q&A* is structured around a brilliant idea: the eighteen-year old Ram Mohammed Thomas, a waiter in a second-rate restaurant in Mumbai, enters the Who wants to Win a Billion TV quiz show, answers all twelve questions correctly and wins a billion rupees – only to be summarily arrested for cheating. It would seem the show’s sponsor doesn’t have a billion rupees, and wasn’t banking on anyone’s winning the prize before any advertising revenue had been generated. The police readily lend themselves to the scheme to incriminate Ram, and he is in the process of having some very imaginative tortures applied to his extremities and appendages when a young woman he has never seen, one Smita, bursts into the room: she is his lawyer, she announces, and demands time to reopen the case.

The rest of the novel is in effect a conversation between Ram and Smita, as he explains to her how he came to know all the answers. Each question entails a different story and a different stage in Ram’s growing up in the slums of Mumbai, Delhi and Agra, which on this showing are considerably worse than those in Dickens’ London.

Swarup is no Dickens, but Ram’s career is recounted with some verve, from being found in a laundry basket outside a Catholic church, to six years of happiness with a Roman Catholic priest, and thereafter horror upon horror: a priest who is a gay Hell’s Angel, a drunken astronomer who molests his daughter, a “shelter” for mutilated boys where the boys are in fact mutilated in order to beg on the trains, an Australian Military Attaché who is a spy (he keeps a copy a *Spying for Dummies* in his den) ... and so on, culminating in a whore with a heart of gold and “doe-like eyes” ...

Swarup’s central device serves him well, connecting in a plausible way this wild array of tales. This does not mean that the tales themselves are plausible. Indeed, as the novel progresses from one outrage to the next, and from one huge coincidence to another, to climax in an utterly incredible resolution, it becomes apparent that we are not in the realm of the realist novel at all: this is the world of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, brought up to speed with Marvel Comics.

The blurb informs us that we are dealing with “the struggle of good against evil”, which places it in a category capacious enough to contain the Bible, Casino Royale and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Even so, this is a fair enough summary of the novel’s straightforward morality. Early in the novel Ram reflects that “the dividing line between good and bad is very thin indeed”, but in fact good and bad are signposted as clearly as cowboys and crooks in an old Western. The villains tend to have moustaches and to snarl; the good have large eyes: meeting Shankar, a deranged but saintly boy, Ram “sense[s] friendship and curiosity and warmth in those expressive brown eyes.”

The melodramatic characterisation, whereby characters are either very good indeed or very bad indeed, does not allow for much growth or development. *Q & A* is in effect a 300-page graphic novel, in which action takes precedence over character, and the writing

is merely adequate to the task of keeping the action going. The dialogue is wooden and predictable: after hearing Ram's tale of the mutilated boys, "Smita shivers involuntarily. 'I cannot imagine there are still people in this day and age who can inflict such cruelty on innocent children'".

Smita's trite comment is about as searching as social commentary ever gets in this novel. The horrendous social conditions in modern India do not seem to be offered as any kind of social criticism, which the author, a diplomat in the service of the Indian government, would presumably have been in a position to provide: they are there merely as circumstances making possible Thomas's impossible career. Insofar as the novel has a moral, it may be the curiously nineteenth-century one pronounced by Ram, upon hearing of the sad fate of a young woman with upwardly mobile aspirations: "Lajwanti made the cardinal mistake of trying to cross the dividing line which separates the existence of the rich from that of the poor."

There is an entertaining sequence in the centre of the novel in which the actress Neelima Kumari, the Tragedy Queen of India, advises Ram never to mix genres: "A good film has to respect its genre," she says. The problem with this novel is to decide what its genre is. It reads best as a picaresque melodrama of high adventure, and does not offer much in the line of psychological insight, moral complexity or sophistication of expression.

Somebody looking for those qualities in a tale of boyhood would be better off reading David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* and Naeem Murr's *The Perfect Man* (both recently reviewed here). But for someone looking for fast-paced action, lurid suffering and easily identifiable heroes and villains, *Q & A* might well offer a beguiling few hours