



Q & A: A Novel

By Vikas Swarup

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Vikas Swarup's spectacular debut, which provided the inspiration for the award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*, is a page-turning and beguiling story of love, perseverance, and drama.

Vikas Swarup's remarkable debut novel opens in a jail cell in Mumbai, India, where Ram Mohammad Thomas is being held after correctly answering all twelve questions on India's biggest quiz show, *Who Will Win a Billion?* It is hard to believe that a poor orphan who has never read a newspaper or gone to school could win such a contest. But through a series of exhilarating tales Ram explains to his lawyer how episodes in his life gave him the answer to each question.

Ram takes us on an amazing review of his own history—from the day he was found as a baby in the clothes donation box of a Delhi church to his employment by a faded Bollywood star to his adventure with a security-crazed Australian army colonel to his career as an overly creative tour guide at the Taj Mahal.

Swarup's *Q & A* is a charming blend of high comedy, drama, and romance that reveals how we know what we know—not just about trivia, but about life itself. Cutting across humanity in all its squalor and glory, Vikas Swarup presents a kaleidoscopic vision of the struggle between good and evil—and what happens when one boy has no other choice in life but to survive.

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Editorial Review

Review

"It was an inspired idea by Vikas Swarup to write Q & A...A broad and sympathetic humanity underpins the whole book."

-- *The Sunday Telegraph*, London

"Vikas Swarup weaves a delightful yarn. With an easy style, Q & A is sweet, sorrowful and funny. An enchanting tale."

-- *The Sunday Tribune*, India

"This page-turning novel reels from farce to melodrama to fairy tale."

-- *You Magazine*, London

"A very clever story told very cleverly and at a relentless pace."

-- *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Australia

"Swarup is an accomplished storyteller, and Q & A has all the immediacy and impact of an oral account."

-- *Daily Mail*, London

"[A] rare, seemingly effortless brew of humour, drama, romance and social realism...Swarup...has achieved a triumph with this thrilling, endearing work which gets into the heart and soul of modern India."

-- *The New Zealand Herald*

"Q & A is that rare novel that chugs along on the parallel tracks of being a rollicking read as well as being a polished, varnished, finished work of impressive craftsmanship."

-- *Hindustan Times*, India

About the Author

Vikas Swarup is an Indian diplomat who has served in Turkey, the United States, Ethiopia, and Great Britain. Q & A, his first novel, was translated into eighteen languages and adapted into the Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*. Swarup currently works in the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi.

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1,000 Rupees

The Death of a Hero

The third bell has sounded. The purple velvet curtain is about to be raised. The lights are progressively dimming, till only the red signs showing EXIT remain, glowing like embers in the darkened hall. Popcorn sellers and cold-drinks vendors begin to leave. Salim and I settle down in our seats.

The first thing you must know about Salim is that he is my best friend. The second is that he is crazy about Hindi films. But not all Hindi films. Just the ones featuring Armaan Ali.

They say that first there was Amitabh Bachchan. Then there was Shahrukh Khan. Now there is Armaan Ali.

The ultimate action hero. The Indian Greek god. The heartthrob of millions.

Salim loves Armaan. Or, more accurately, he worships Armaan. His tiny room in the chawl is a shrine. It is lined with posters of all kinds depicting the hero in various poses. Armaan in a leather jacket. Armaan on a motorbike. Armaan with his shirt off, baring his hairy chest. Armaan with a gun. Armaan on a horse. Armaan in a pool, surrounded by a bevy of beauties.

We are occupying seats A21 and A22 in the very first row of the dress circle in Regal Talkies in Bandra. We shouldn't really be sitting here. The tickets in my front pocket do not say DRESS CIRCLE RS. 150. They say FRONT STALL RS. 25. The usher was in a good mood today and did us a favor. He told us to go and enjoy the balcony because the stalls were practically deserted. Even the balcony is almost empty. Apart from Salim and me, there are no more than two dozen people in the rows ahead of us.

When Salim and I go to the movies, we usually sit in the front stalls, where we can make catcalls and whistle. Salim believes the nearer you sit to the screen, the closer you are to the action. He says he can lean forward and almost touch Armaan. He can count the veins on Armaan's biceps, he can see the whites of Armaan's hazel-green eyes, the fine stubble on Armaan's cleft chin, the little black mole on Armaan's chiseled nose.

I am not particularly fond of Armaan Ali. I think he acts the same way in every movie. But I, too, like to sit in the front rows, as close to the giant screen as possible. The heroine's breasts appear more voluptuous from there.

The curtain has now lifted, and the screen flickers to life. First we have the advertisements. Four sponsored by private companies and one by the government. We are told how to come first at school and become champions in cricket by eating cornflakes for breakfast. How to drive fast cars and win gorgeous girls by using Spice cologne. ("That's the perfume used by Armaan," exclaims Salim.) How to get a promotion and have shiny white clothes by using Roma soap. How to live life like a king by drinking Red & White whisky. And how to die of lung cancer by smoking cigarettes.

After the adverts, there is a little pause while the reels are changed. We cough and clear our throats. And then the censor certificate appears on the CinemaScope screen. It tells us that the film has been certified U/A, has seventeen reels and a length of 4,639.15 meters. The certificate is signed by one Mrs. M. Kane, chairman of the Censor Board. She is the one who signs all censor certificates. Salim has often asked me about this lady. He really envies her job. She gets to see Armaan's pictures before anyone else.

The opening credits begin to roll. Salim knows everyone in this film. He knows who is the wardrobe man, who is the hairstylist, who is the makeup man. He knows the names of the production manager, the finance controller, the sound recordist, and all the assistants. He doesn't speak English very well, but he can read names, even the ones in really small print. He has watched this film eight times already, and every time he memorizes a new name. But if you were to see the concentration on his face right now, you would think he was watching the First Day First Show with black-market tickets.

Within two minutes, Armaan Ali makes his grand entrance by jumping down from a blue-and-white helicopter. Salim's eyes light up. I see the same innocent excitement on his face as when he first saw Armaan, a year ago. In person.

Salim comes running through the door and collapses facedown on the bed.

I am alarmed. "Salim!...Salim!" I shout. "What's happened to you? How come you are back so early?" I turn him on his back. He is laughing.

"The most amazing thing has happened today. This is the happiest day of my life," he declares.

"What is it? Have you won a lottery?"

"No. Something even better than winning a lottery. I have seen Armaan Ali."

Bit by breathless bit, the whole story comes out. How Salim caught a glimpse of Armaan Ali while doing his daily round in Ghatkopar. The star was alighting from his Mercedes-Benz to enter a five-star hotel. Salim was traveling on a bus to deliver his last tiffin box to a customer. The moment he spotted Armaan, he jumped down from the speeding vehicle, narrowly missing being run down by a car, and ran toward the actor, who was passing through the hotel's revolving door. He was stopped by the tall, strapping uniformed guard and prevented from entering the hotel. "Armaan!" Salim called, trying desperately to catch the star's attention. Armaan heard the cry, stopped in his tracks, and turned around. His eyes made contact with Salim's. He gave a faint smile, a barely perceptible nod of acknowledgment, and continued walking into the lobby. Salim forgot all about the tiffin and came racing home to give me the news of his dream having come true. A customer of Gawli Tiffin Carriers went hungry that afternoon.

"Does Armaan look different from the way he appears on-screen?" I ask.

"No. He is even better in real life," says Salim. "He is taller and more handsome. My ambition in life is to shake his hand, at least once. I probably won't wash it for a month after that."

I reflect on how good it is to have simple, uncomplicated ambitions. Like shaking a film star's hand.

Meanwhile, on-screen, that hand is holding a gun and pointing it at a group of three policemen. Armaan plays a gangster in this movie. A gangster with a good heart. He loots the rich and distributes money to the poor. In between he falls in love with the heroine, Priya Kapoor, an up-and-coming actress, sings six songs, and fulfills his beloved mother's wish by taking her on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Vaishno Devi. At least, that's the story till the interval.

Priya Kapoor's entry in the film is greeted with catcalls from the stalls. She is a tall, good-looking actress who won the Miss World title a few years ago. Her body is sculpted like that of a classical beauty, with heavy breasts and a slim waist. She is my favorite actress these days. She pouts a lot in the film and keeps on saying "Shut up" to the comedian. We laugh.

"Your ambition is to shake Armaan's hand," I say to Salim. "But what do you think is Armaan's ambition in life? He seems to have it all -- face, fame, and fortune."

"You are wrong," Salim replies solemnly. "He does not have Urvashi."

The papers are full of the Armaan-Urvashi breakup, after a whirlwind romance lasting nine months. There is speculation that Armaan is completely heartbroken. That he has stopped eating and drinking. That he might be suicidal. Urvashi Randhawa has returned to her modeling career.

I see Salim crying. His eyes are red and wet with tears. He has not eaten all day. The heart-shaped glass frame containing a picture of Armaan and Urvashi, on which he had spent almost half his meager salary, lies on the ground, shattered into a hundred pieces.

"Look, Salim, you are being childish. There is nothing you can do about it," I tell him.

"If only I could meet Armaan. I want to comfort him. To hold his hand and let him cry on my shoulder. They say crying makes the heart lighter."

"And what good will that do? Urvashi will not come back to Armaan."

Suddenly Salim looks up. "Do you think I could speak to her? Maybe I could persuade her to come back to Armaan. Tell her that it was all a mistake. Tell her how sad and contrite he is."

I shake my head. I don't want Salim tramping all over Mumbai looking for Urvashi Randhawa. "It's not a good idea to poke your nose into other people's affairs, or make other people's troubles your own, Salim. Armaan Ali is a mature man. He will deal with his troubles in his own way."

"At least I will send him a gift," says Salim.

He goes and buys a large bottle of Fevicol glue and sets about sticking the shattered pieces of the heart-shaped frame back together again. It takes him a week, but finally the heart is whole, a grid of crisscrossing black streaks the only reminder of the fault lines on which it broke.

"I will now send it to Armaan," he says. "It is a symbol that even a broken heart can be put together again."

"With Fevicol?" I ask.

"No. With love and care."

Salim wraps it up in cloth and sends it to Armaan Ali's home address.

I don't know whether it reached Armaan or not. Whether it was broken by the postal department, smashed by the security guards, or trashed by Armaan's secretary. The important thing is that Salim believes it reached his hero and helped to heal his wound. It made Armaan whole again and enabled him to resume giving blockbusters, such as this one. Which I am seeing for the first time and Salim for the ninth.

A devotional song is playing on the screen. Armaan and his mother are climbing toward the shrine of Vaishno Devi.

"They say if you ask Mata Vaishno Devi sincerely for anything, she grants your wish. Tell me, what would you ask?" I say to Salim.

"What would you ask?" he counters.

"I guess I would ask for money," I say.

"I would ask for Armaan to be reunited with Urvashi," he says, without thinking for even a second.

The screen says INTERVAL in bold red letters.

Salim and I stand up and stretch our arms and legs. We buy two soggy samosas from the food vendor. The boy selling soft drinks looks at the empty seats mournfully. He will not make a good profit today. We decide to g...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Deborah Lake:

Why don't make it to be your habit? Right now, try to ready your time to do the important work, like looking for your favorite publication and reading a guide. Beside you can solve your condition; you can add your knowledge by the publication entitled Q & A: A Novel. Try to the actual book Q & A: A Novel as your pal. It means that it can to become your friend when you sense alone and beside those of course make you smarter than in the past. Yeah, it is very fortunated to suit your needs. The book makes you considerably more confidence because you can know almost everything by the book. So , we should make new experience and knowledge with this book.

Karen Wilson:

Typically the book Q & A: A Novel has a lot associated with on it. So when you read this book you can get a lot of help. The book was compiled by the very famous author. The writer makes some research before write this book. This particular book very easy to read you may get the point easily after looking over this book.

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Jenny Perez:

Is it you who having spare time then spend it whole day through watching television programs or just telling lies on the bed? Do you need something new? This Q & A: A Novel can be the answer, oh how comes? It's a book you know. You are therefore out of date, spending your spare time by reading in this fresh era is common not a nerd activity. So what these ebooks have than the others?

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