



## Five Star Billionaire

*Tash Aw*

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## Five Star Billionaire Tash Aw

An entertaining, expansive, and eye-opening novel that captures the vibrance of China today, by a writer whose previous work has been called “mesmerizing,” “haunting,” “breathtaking,” “mercilessly gripping,” “seductive,” and “luminous.”

Phoebe is a factory girl who has come to Shanghai with the promise of a job - but when she arrives she discovers that the job doesn't exist. Gary is a country boy turned pop star who is spinning out of control. Justin is in Shanghai to expand his family's real-estate empire, only to find that he might not be up to the task. He has long harboured a crush on Yinghui, who has reinvented herself from a poetry-loving, left-wing activist to a successful Shanghai businesswoman. She is about to make a deal with the shadowy figure of Walter Chao, the five-star billionaire of the novel, who - with his secrets and his schemes - has a hand in the lives of each of the characters. All bring their dreams and hopes to Shanghai, the shining symbol of the New China, which, like the novel's characters, is constantly in flux and which plays its own fateful role in the lives of its inhabitants. *Five Star Billionaire*, the dazzling kaleidoscopic new novel by the award-winning writer Tash Aw, offers rare insight into China today, with its constant transformations and its promise of possibility.

## Five Star Billionaire Details

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## From Reader Review Five Star Billionaire for online ebook

### Cynthia says

#### Six Degrees of Separation

There is so much in this book it's hard to know where to start. On the surface it's about several unconnected 20 and 30 something year olds who are trying to make a mark in Shanghai, China's capital city. Along the way Aw has lots to say about the modern day culture of that city and the ethics involved in getting ahead there. Everything seems to come down to appearances which are tricky for these characters since all of them are foreigners having grown up in Taiwan. Being outside the Shanghai culture means they have some catching up to do. Most of them take great pains to hide their outsider status because of the entrenched discrimination against them. Oddly they even hide it from one another. The Shanghai Aw shows us is vital with culture and color and it's seemingly ever changing even while it's entrenched in tradition. Its vastness can be overwhelming however. My favorite character was Phoebe a young girl who's willing to do anything to survive and get ahead, even steal, and she does survive and then begin to thrive. The price for her success is the need to hide her true self as she strives to emulate the behaviors of those around as well as trying to incorporate the advice she learns from self help books by dubious authors.

The world Aw portrays is full of equal parts hope, desperation, and despair. You'll sense disaster on the horizon even as you root for these characters... The nature of success is explored as is the nature of true friendship and family loyalty. The cost of keeping family secrets and keeping family shame at bay is crucial as well. Saving face is all. Most poignant is the theme of love. It's vital to get ahead, in part to prove your love and value to your family, but where does that leave the relationships between individuals? Phoebe's ties with her roommate, Yanyan, are touching. Throughout this story of competition these two stay true to one another and though they also have secrets one from the other there's a foundation of caring. Hope isn't something that's abundant in "Five Star Billionaire", at least not hope that's clean of desperation. Phoebe and Yanyan are a welcome bright spot. Lots of the other interactions between people are horrible and based on one sided or mutual exploitation. I'd give this book 4.5 out of 5 stars and the only reason I'm not giving it five stars is because it didn't give me a sense of enjoyable exhilaration because it's themes are so depressing.. I'm still pondering however and may still come back and adjust my rating upward. I loved the subtle interplay of how or whether the characters are connected.

This review is based on an advance reader's copy provided by the publisher.  
(Disclaimer given as required by the FTC.)

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### Darryl says

*Shanghai is a beautiful place, but it is also a harsh place. Life here is not really life, it is a competition.*

Shanghai is the world's largest city, with a total population of over 23 million. It can arguably claim to be *the* city of the 21st century, similar to 19th century London and 20th century New York, as it is a booming financial, commercial and entertainment center that attracts emigrants and visitors from every continent, and it is the leading symbol of the new China and its growing influence on Asia and the rest of the world.

Tash Aw was born in Taipei to Malaysian parents, grew up in Kuala Lumpur, was educated in the UK, and lived in London before he moved to Shanghai after he was chosen to be the first M Literary Writer in Residence in 2010. In this superb novel, he portrays five Malaysian Chinese who have moved to Shanghai to seek the wealth and prestige that the city seems to offer to each of its newcomers.

Phoebe is a naïve and uneducated young woman from the Malaysian countryside, who emigrates illegally to China on the suggestion of a friend, but soon after she arrives she finds that the dream job she was promised has suddenly vanished. Justin is the eldest son of a wealthy real estate tycoon, charged with purchasing a property in Shanghai that will save his family from ruin in the face of the Asian financial crisis. Gary is a pop mega-star who performs in front of thousands of adoring fans, while battling internal demons that threaten to destroy his career. Yinghui is the daughter of a prominent family in Kuala Lumpur who transforms herself from a left wing political activist into a hard nosed and successful businesswoman. Finally, Walter is a secretive and shadowy figure who has risen up from the ashes of his father's ruin to become a prominent developer and the anonymous author of the best selling book "How to Become a Five Star Billionaire". The first four characters are all interlinked with Walter, the only person given a voice in the first person in the book, in an intricately woven web that slowly tightens around each of them.

Through these characters, Tash Aw provides a fascinating internal glimpse into modern Shanghai, a city filled with ambitious but often lonely and desperate people from all over Asia whose singular focus on material goods and wealth outweighs the attainment of love and personal happiness. Anything and anyone is fair game for exploitation and deceit, and the widespread availability of counterfeit watches, purses and clothing mimics the superficiality of the city's high stakes capitalist culture. Self help books such as the one written by Walter are the bibles of the young up-and-comers, and traditional Chinese culture is viewed as outdated and stifling to young people like Phoebe.

Each one attains some degree of success, but several meet with sudden and spectacular failure, in the matter of a climber that reaches the summit of a mountain only to be blown off of it entirely by a sudden gust of wind.

*The city held its promises just out of your reach, waiting to see how far you were willing to go to get what you wanted, how long you were prepared to wait. And until you determined the parameters of your pursuit, you would be on edge, for despite the restaurants and shops and art galleries and sense of unbridled potential, you would always feel that Shanghai was accelerating a couple of steps ahead of you, no matter how hard you worked or played. The crowds, the traffic, the impenetrable dialect, the muddy rains that carried the remnants of the Gobi Desert sandstorms and stained your clothes every March: The city was teasing you, testing your limits, using you. You arrived thinking you were going to use Shanghai to get what you wanted, and it would be some time before you realized that it was using you, that it had already moved on and you were playing catch up.*

Five Star Billionaire is a captivating work about Shanghai and the new China, and the lives of five talented and determined people who seek wealth and fulfillment but find loneliness and misery instead. I read nearly all of this novel in a single sitting, and I was quite sorry to see it end. I also loved Tash Aw's previous novel Map of the Invisible World, and I look forward to reading The Harmony Silk Factory later this year.

I received Five Star Millionaire from the LibraryThing Early Reviewers program. It is currently available in the UK, and will be published in the US on July 2nd.

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## Antonomasia says

One of those novels about a set of tangentially linked characters in a city. It's a format I like, but it's been done a lot so each book does need to distinguish itself, and the settings are important: most American ones feel very tired indeed to me, London rather overdone though at least likeable. *Five Star Billionaire* is set in Shanghai which is, mindblowingly, bigger than London & New York put together [in population terms].

For perhaps the first half of the book I was swept away by the engrossing details of location and culture; and by the feeling of my mental map reorientating itself to a centre on the other side of the world - Japan's just over there and it's where rich people might go on skiing holidays, immigrants make hops from rural Malaysia to Kuala Lumpur to Taipei to Guangzhou to Shanghai as they look for progressively better wages, whilst those who've made it might try and emigrate to Australia or Canada. A slight increase in understanding of this burgeoning place and the smallness and oldness of *here* gave me that same sensation of relief and peaceful insignificance as does looking up at the stars.

Aw's Shanghai has immense buzz. It's similar to the sense of 'Rising Asia' in Mohsin Hamid's new novel, and the homeland of Xiaolu Guo's Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* which I also read recently. Shanghai though is so overwhelmingly glamorous, the place to be for young people on the make, that what I'm most reminded of is the mid-1960's Swinging London films, in which a country-fresh twentysomething (often female) arrives in the big city world of fun and dubious morality. Those films often had an underlying disapproving message...just as Aw doesn't present an altogether positive view of the brash new Chinese capitalism. This is a money-focused world which in that respect to the Brit or American feels more 1980's than 60's, but without the jadedness we might associate with 30 years ago.

Internet use, online relationships and internet addiction are dealt with better here than in most novels where I've seen them mentioned - and refreshingly (pun intended) without any use of screenshots or chat layouts. Several characters go through a cocooned *hikokomori* stage which was wonderfully done.

But for all that there were certain things I loved about this book, it did quite often also feel like just yet another city novel. I don't know nearly enough about Shanghai or about Malaysian immigrants to China - as the four main characters are - to speak definitively, but there was a feeling of stereotype about these characters and the reiterated, yet for some true, idea of a city that will chew you up and spit you out if you're not careful.

It feels comfortable to have certain stereotypes addressed head-on: this and the Hamid & Guo books I mentioned above both include fake designer goods, shoddy manufacturing etc. But the human personalities in *Five Star Billionaire* could have been more original. Broadly, the two women are very ambitious, the two men who've already made it young want to drop out. They are all most likeable at their crisis points, when they have doubts. (Or does that simply say something about me?) When the action is trundling along they're just mannequins and archetypes. The fifth character, the "Five Star Billionaire", a shadowy private investor & author of a self-help book, works quite well within his own discrete first-person chapters. (The other four are all in third-person omniscient.) But when he interacts with the others he's effectively just a symbol, rather in the manner of one of Scrooge's ghosts, and I still can't decide how well all this gels.

The author's first novel *The Harmony Silk Factory* was for a few years ubiquitous in British bookshops, and mentions the Lim family in its synopsis; they also have a significant role here. This book does work as a

standalone story, though I sometimes wondered if I was missing anything by not having read Aw's earlier work.

*Five Star Billionaire* is perhaps a bit too long at nearly 450 pages. (Nevertheless it was a very fast read compared with my previous book, a 540pp Iris Murdoch; I read 95% of this in one 24 hour period despite feeling a bit ill.)

To borrow a phrase from a friend of a friend in a recent discussion, it hints at big ideas but doesn't do much with them. For my liking it's maybe too bland and stylistically unoriginal compared with the Hamid or Guo novels; I saw it described on a forum as a "literary soap" - IMO they were quite right. It's like a jumbo bag of prawn crackers: large but light and insubstantial. As a relatively undemanding book which still gives quite a bit to talk about, it seems like good book group material if people don't mind the page-count.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

This book was perfection. I was so wrapped up in the second half of it that I forgot to eat dinner!

*Five Star Billionaire* follows 4-6 characters (depending on how you look at it) in very modern Shanghai as they attempt to survive expectations and pull themselves up economically and socially through plain hard work - or through deception, if needed. It's like the "Protestant Work Ethic" without any time for religion, turbo speed.

I appreciated the portrayal of a very modern China. So much of what I read, even from living authors, feels somewhat traditional to the point of old-fashioned. This was a world where a girl might spend the last money on her copycat handbag in hopes that it will help her acquire the new job/boyfriend that will change her life, where people are sitting around eating matcha muffins, sipping lattes and talking on their smartphones. The characters believe in this China, and in their potential to do more, to be more.

"This was China, she told herself. The unfeasible had a habit of being true; she had to believe the unbelievable." (Yanghui)

"This was what life was like in China: Stand still for a moment and the river of life rushes past you. He had spent three months confined to his apartment, and in that time Shanghai seemed to have changed completely.... Everyone in this city was living life at a hundred miles an hour, speeding ever forward; he had fallen behind, out of step with the rest of Shanghai." (Justin)

"She had learned that the appearance of classiness in Shanghai was no guarantee of truthfulness, and she treated all approaches from men with the same caution as she would when shopping for counterfeit luxury goods. China was full of copycat products and people." (Phoebe)

"Shanghai is a beautiful place, but it is also a harsh place. Life here is not really life, it is a competition." (Walter)

The characters cover a wide span of experiences - Phoebe is a migrant worker from Malaysia who does everything she can to erase her past on her way up the ladder; Justin is the only person who can save his family's business; Gary is a pop singer pulled out of obscurity and into the perils of fame; Yinghui is a minorly successful businesswoman without a lot of practical sense. Their stories link together and aren't told exactly in order, but still everything leads up to the very satisfying ending.

I picked this up because it was on the Booker longlist, and I really hope it is included in the shortlist. Very deserving, highly recommended.

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### **Ruth Ozeki says**

I'm trying to read all the Booker longlist in the next month, and this was the first on my list. Full disclosure: I met Tash last month at a writers conference in Norwich, and he is a wonderful person, but that's not why I'm giving his novel five stars. It's an amazing book and I was drawn so quickly and deeply into the fictional world of these expat Malaysians trying to make it in Shanghai. The plotting is masterful and the narrative voice is so compelling. I couldn't put it down.

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### **Randee says**

Gulp...I am disappointed. It was long listed for the Booker prize in 2013 plus it sounded so interesting. But, I found myself the opposite of interested for most of the read. The story concentrates on 5 different individuals of different backgrounds living in Shanghai. They all have dark fates to say the least and the author keeps reminding us that Shanghai is a hard city. As if Shanghai, itself, is to blame for the miseries experienced by these five people. My biggest hurdle that I never quite overcame is that even though the five stories are different from one another...male pop star, female business woman, poor girl from Malaysia with hopes to make a better life for herself, etc., none of them jumped off the page to grab my sympathy or interest. If I am being completely honest, I would say that this is a well written book with a bunch of sad sacks who bored me most of the time. I kept hoping that one of them would break out of the mold and make me care. Alas, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

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### **Jill says**

There's something universally appealing about becoming filthy rich. Earlier this year, Mohsin Hamid explored the topic in his book "How To Become Filthy Rich in Rising Asia." Now Tash Aw weighs in with Five Star Billionaire. Interestingly, each of these accomplished authors employ a "how to" self-help book conceit (in this case, How To Achieve Greatness, How To Manage Time and so on).

The problem -- or perhaps the point -- of this novel is, after a while, the strivers and the wannabes begin to blend together in a patina of sameness, threads in the fabric of Shanghai. Each of Tash Aw's characters is searching for success and wealth, which won't necessarily equate with happiness. Each arrives in Shanghai with an amorphous identity, looking to the city to define who they are. And each carries the seeds of self-destruction, with the inability to engage in deep introspection. Each, in a word, is false and self-deceptive. As one character says, "There is not one aspect of myself that I haven't lied about."

Phoebe is a factory girl in rural Malaysia, determined to reinvent herself and make it big in Shanghai. The way to a real success for her is to accumulate the fake accoutrements that Shanghai is known for: a fake LV (read: Louis Vuitton) purse, a fake "expensive" watch, and so on. In her recreation of herself, she becomes not "more than" but "less than." She is, for me, the most compelling of the characters and perhaps the one with the most to gain -- or lose.

Justin, the scion of a wealthy real estate family, is in Shanghai to salvage his family's disappearing prospects, but fears that he will not be able to live up to expectations. Leong Yinghui runs a highly successful high-end lingerie company but falls into the ultimate stereotype: the woman who does well in business but is a failure in her personal life (and oh, it would be great to retire that stereotype!) Gary is a pop idol who sabotages his own spiraling career through a drunken night club altercation. And finally, there's Walter Chao, the first-person narrative of the self-help book and the eponymous "five star billionaire".

All these individuals will rub against each other, testing fate and becoming intertwined in their quest to move ahead. Sometimes the interactions seem organic; sometimes they don't. I paused in several places to determine whether they - or the situations they were in -- passed the test of credibility.

Having said that - and in all fairness - I wonder if I'm criticizing the author for writing the book I want him to write instead of the book he DID write. And THAT book is done exceedingly well with a powerful depiction of Shanghai, a ruthless city on the make, a city that encourages dreaming but uncaringly spits the dreamers out at any opportunity. It's a city of fake luxury goods, iconic sites (such as the Leaning Tower of Pisa) carved from humps of snow, and false individuals who hide behind their created images and Internet exchanges to forge a tenuous sense of intimacy. Tash Aw writes, "This is what happens in Shanghai. People say it is the size of a small country but it is not: It is bigger, like a whole continent, with a heart as deep and unknown as the forests of the Amazon and so vast and wild as the deserts of Africa. People come here like explorers, but soon they disappear and no one remembers them; no one even hears them as they fade away." Tash Aw creates an exceptional sense of place...particularly a sense of place in a particular moment in time.

*Five Star Billionaire* - long-listed for the Booker prize - is an ambitious novel and it's well-written with what I suspect is a great deal of authenticity. I would not discourage anyone from reading it. Initially, I gave this book 3 stars but found I cannot get it out of my head and came back and re-rated it. I came to realize the fault may not be in the stars; it may be in me, the reader.

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## **Blair says**

*Five Star Billionaire* was not, unfortunately, a five star book. (Sorry.)

This novel is set in Shanghai, and it deals with five main characters, whose stories are covered in alternating chapters. There is Phoebe, an ambitious young woman who has come from Malaysia to Shanghai to find love and get rich; Justin, the heir to a fortune who becomes a recluse when his family's business fails; Yinghui, a successful entrepreneur; and Gary, a teen pop star who suffers a painful fall from grace. Then there's Walter Chao, the self-styled 'five star billionaire' who acts as a link between the others - although it's never quite clear whether this is his real name (he writes books under a number of pseudonyms), or indeed whether he is truly rich. 'Fakeness' is a major theme throughout the novel: whether it's Phoebe's counterfeit designer bag or Gary's media image, the characters are all putting on some kind of front.

At the beginning, I was sucked into the atmospheric depiction of Shanghai. I tend to like books of this type - in which a number of vaguely linked characters within one city are studied separately - and I was reminded of Sam Thompson's *Communion Town* and some of David Mitchell's work. I was really interested in Phoebe immediately, and although the other characters didn't captivate me in quite the same way, I wanted to know

what would happen to them, and was interested to see how their stories would converge. However, I ultimately felt that rather than building up to anything exciting, the plot just slowly, quietly, petered out. A couple of fairly dramatic things happened towards the end, but they happened without much fanfare and it didn't even feel like the reader was supposed to care much.

The whole narrative is peppered with first-person interjections from the so-called billionaire, while the rest of the characters' stories are related in third person. It all reminded me a bit of Mohsin Hamid's *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (another one I started but never finished), particularly the self-help-book-style chapter titles. There's no doubt that Chao, or whoever he is, is an intriguing character, but I didn't feel the promise of this setup was fully exploited either. I know it's sometimes best for an unreliable narrator to remain unknowable, but I would have liked some resolution as to whether anything about Chao's story and how he presented himself was actually true.

This was my second attempt at reading a novel on the 2013 Man Booker Prize longlist: the first, *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki, was abandoned because although it had the bones of an interesting story and was well-written, I found it too dull and unengaging to continue past the halfway point. The same sort of thing could be said about this, really. It's another book I can't say anything particularly terrible about - but nor can I bring myself to get excited about any aspect of it. I liked the setup and the setting, but it was all a bit forgettable and it could have been so much better.

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### **Elaine says**

Another atmosphere driven book, but because I found this one more interesting than *Harvest*, 4 stars, not 3. The hero/antihero of this book is Shanghai, the epitome of the 21st century megalopolis, ever expanding, ever growing, glittering, energetic, and yet with pockets of an older life, a few remaining "heritage buildings." Aw shows us the incredible wealth that there is to be made in Shanghai, as well as how its poorer citizens live. Most importantly, he shows us a society constantly in motion where a meteoric rise is one step from a crushing fall, and people's lives and careers can have many such ups and downs in the space of a few years, just as old neighborhoods can disappear and new skyscrapers spring up seemingly overnight. The energy is giddy on the way up, but, with so many millions, any one can disappear, and be forgotten, if they pause or stumble even briefly. "Disappear" is a word that echos and repeats throughout the book.

I found Aw's depiction of Shanghai wholly absorbing -- I was both enchanted and horrified - he does that good a job of putting you there. He also makes Malaysia come vividly to life - whether it's the small northeastern villages and towns where each of his migrant protagonists hails from, or the more modern (but still small potatoes compared to Shanghai) KL, or even a rundown seaside estate. In Malaysia, as in Shanghai, the theme of landscapes changing - disappearing - as forest gives way to housing development, heritage building to skyscraper, is very strong.

Aw is perhaps less successful with people than he is with landscapes. He has 5 main characters (all from rural Malaysia, all seeking their fortunes in Shanghai) and while all were very interesting, some were more fully realized than others (Yinghui and Gary worked the best for me) and stereotype and caricature were sometimes a little too close at hand. For all the characters, the overriding theme is failure to connect - they grope towards each other - but fail to make true contact, and when they fail to connect, Shanghai swallows them up. Mostly that works, but some plots seem too neatly tied up, while others just leave you wondering. (I remained mystified by Walter and Pheobe's relationship - if anyone understood what Walter was up to, message me).

All in all, thoroughly engrossing - I really didn't want to put it down, and disagree with reviewers who found it too long. I have been to many places in Asia, but not mainland China, not Shanghai, partly because it seems daunting, and this book certainly did not lessen that feeling, but it also underscored that Shanghai - in energy, in wealth creation and destruction, in attraction for goods and labor from all over the world - is to the 21st century as my hometown, NY, was to the 20th. Think a visit is overdue!

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### **Ayelet Waldman says**

I adored this.

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### **Ajay says**

Five Star Billionaire has a lot going for it. It has a very intriguing title. It is about contemporary China - Shanghai to be precise. Shanghai is this beautiful flower that seems to attracts bees from all over - in this case from Malaysia. The book follows the path of 5 immigrants from Malaysia to China and the turns that their life takes.

Tash Aw is a very capable writer. It is to his credit that he spins an intriguing tale of hope and disappointment in this rather humane tale. He uses multiple narratives to tell his tale but as the story moves to a close, he skilfully brings it all together. The denouement while not exactly happy is not tragic either. And that seems to make it feel very real. Shanghai like every big city comes across as a temptress that can be very cold.

There was something very personal and visual about the book. I felt like a fly on the wall witnessing all these events unfolding in the character's lives and it just did not feel right. It was as if I was intruding upon their private lives.

The writing is crisp almost journalistic -which is not necessarily a bad thing. Aw's writing reminded me of Aravind Adiga (especially Last man in Tower).

It is wonderful that Malaysians, especially the Chinese have taken to telling their stories in English. And after reading Tan Twan Eng (The Garden of the Evening Mists) and now Tash Aw, I can say the the literary writers of the Indian sub continent might be facing some formidable competition from Malaysia.

Long after I had finished this book, the characters were still lingering about in my mind. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

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Five Star Billionaire has been long listed for the Booker Prize 2013.

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### **Ruthiella says**

*"The city held its promises just out of your reach, waiting to see how far you were willing to go to get what*

*you wanted, how long you were prepared to wait. And until you determined the parameters of your pursuit, you would be on edge, for despite the restaurants and shops and art galleries and sense of unbridled potential, you would always feel that Shanghai was accelerating a couple of steps ahead of you, no matter how hard you worked or played. The crowds, the traffic, the impenetrable dialect, the muddy rains that carried the remnants of the Gobi Desert sandstorms and stained your clothes every March: The city was teasing you, testing your limits, using you. You arrived thinking you were going to use Shanghai to get what you wanted, and it would be some time before you realized that it was using you, that it had already moved on and you were playing catch-up.”*

I read this because I wanted to read some fiction about contemporary China by a Chinese author. The story takes place mainly in Shanghai and the major characters are all Chinese Malaysians who have ended up in Shanghai for one reason or another. The chapters are all taken from a self-help book, which is reminiscent of Mohsin Hamid's How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia, both in that aspect and in the way that many of the characters are ambitious, upwardly mobile types, but I liked this much more than the Hamid title because it dug in more to the characters and their backgrounds and personalities. It also reminded me a tad of The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga, but it doesn't have the full vibrancy and verve of that brilliant book.

I thought at first this was going to be a book of linked short stories, but really it is an intertwining of different story lines which mostly worked really well, but occasionally was a bit awkward. I thought it came together alright in the end and I liked the fact that it took me a long time to see where the story was going and to be able to determine whose intentions were true and whose were counterfeit.

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### **Susan says**

This exceptional and thought provoking novel intertwines the stories of five Malay emigrants to Shanghai, with all their different stories and experiences. There is Phoebe Chen Aiping, a recently arrived country girl longing to 'better' herself with a fulfilling job and, hopefully, a rich man. From a poor and remote region she relies on self-help manuals for advice about how to fit in and become upwardly mobile. Justin CK Lim is heir to LKH Holdings, a family insurance firm and a successful property developer. From 'old money' he feels trapped by the needs of his family and their reliance upon him. Then there is Gary, a singer who found success through a talent competition, but who begins to hate his fans as both his career and life spiral out of control. Yingui is a successful businesswoman, whose friends see only the fact that she is thirty seven and single. Lastly, there is the "Five Star Billionaire" himself, whose words of wisdom to help his readers become a success, intersperse the story.

The five characters lives unfold before us, with their tragedies and triumphs, as their stories begin to intersect. This exhilarating novel gives a real sense of how alone people can be in a large city and about the true meaning of success; it is about ambition, aspirations and the global world we live in, with people constantly reinventing their lives. Longlisted for the Booker prize, whether it is shortlisted or not, it is certainly already a literary triumph.

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### **Katia N says**

Five Star Billionaire

When I started reading the book I liked nonchalance and easiness with which the author writes. I could see his ambition and I hoped the story itself would develop from the style. But it did not happen for me at all unfortunately.

All the characters, especially the male ones seemed to me morally damaged and emotionally mute. I did not feel sympathy to any of them. Phoebe is the most fake and the most off putting one. Male characters are so similar to each other as if they have been cloned from a single template. The most sympathetic and plausible as a human being is Yinghui. But at the end I think the author has overdone her character as well. I could not believe that any business woman with such long experience would not check the financial side of a deal before leveraging herself up to the head with the bank loan. It did not feel plausible enough even considering her growing emotional attachment to the man in the centre of it.

The pace of the novel as well was tiresome. It has started well, but slowed later and felt almost repetitive by parts until the final twist. The quotes from Walter's self help book as a chapter headings I found plainly irritating and meaningless.

Some reviews pointed out on the strong sense of place. The novel is set in Shanghai. There are a few fine descriptions, but overall I did not feel it. For me it could be Moscow, Rio or even New York some 20 years ago - any huge, busy, emerging metropolis will have similar characteristics. I've never been in China and I did not feel I got closer to know it based upon this novel.

Overall it created an impression of the relatively unsuccessful attempt of Chinese Monte Christo story in a modern urban setting.

If it would be factually based it might work as a piece of reporting in the FT Weekend or a similar publication. But it did not work for me as a fiction.

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### **Andy Baker says**

Meh.

This book plods a depressing route towards a rushed conclusion.

Does not deserve the praise it receives in my opinion.

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### **Marwa says**

The Five Stars Billionaire is a book that speaks of success. How to achieve it, how to not let it be the center of your life, a guide on what success is and how to deal with it, how to not let it consume you and change your world's views, and how to keep the shit going!

What I've been told most by people when they see this book in my hand is: pre-explanation "why are you

reading a self-help book?" Post-explanation "so.. Why are you reading a self-help book?" And they are correct in a way. No book or even a small piece of paper has no effect on your life, some positive and some negative, and this book might have that self-help book vibe cause it does make you change your thoughts about little matters, and reconsider some of your life choices.

I can't really explain what this book about, you'll probably find a better review than this. All I can say is that 500 pages taught me a lot about China and the struggles of people with no family. And maybe some Cantonese words.

Xie xie, Tash Aw.

I most certainly would pick a book by you again. (And not randomly this time)

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### **Steven Langdon says**

Tash Aw has written several fine earlier novels. But this book is an especially excellent work on at least three levels.

First it is a dramatic portrait of the energy, dynamism and ferment of China today -- particularly Shanghai, with its rapidity of change and its thrusting growth. The city lives with brazen vividness and fascinating contrasts throughout this novel.

Secondly this book captures with skill and human empathy the lives of those attracted to this new Shanghai frontier from the narrower economic constraints of rural Malaysia. Five people are probed -- from Phoebe, the poor young woman illegal migrant trying to rise by grit and scramble -- to Walter, the self-styled billionaire searching for respect. Aw's careful dissections of all of his major characters are sharply discerning.

What I found most powerful about this novel, though, was its overall thrust. For me this is a book about the power of the past. Countries and cities may be transforming and society may seem turbulent. But the legacies of childhood and origins remain achingly enduring. In the end, Tash Aw seems to say, there is no escape from your past even when you try to run away.

So Phoebe can learn how to eat fashionably and speak with a better accent -- but she cannot stop herself from confessing her real social resentments to her potential lover, even though that spurs herself then to flee in embarrassment. With similar inevitability, Walter drives himself forward shaped by the harsh history of his defeated father.

Despair, redemption, vengeance -- they are all there in this superbly structured book, in which a devastating plot is subtly but forcefully moving ahead without you actually realizing it. Perhaps in the end there may also be a measure of hope -- but only for those characters able to come to terms fully with their past.

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### **Judy says**

The best part of *Five Star Billionaire* is the end because of a surprise plot twist I did not see coming at all.

Getting to the end took a while but the slow build involved five complete life stories and skillful character development.

Most other reviews I have read are heavy on the five main characters as is the front cover blurb, so I won't spend my time retelling what you can find anywhere. The most brilliant character is a city: modern Shanghai with its frenetic rate of change and its contrasts between old and new. A city like New York or Paris or London where people come to make dreams happen.

Whether his story is set in Malaysia (*The Harmony Silk Factory*) or Indonesia (*Map of the Invisible World*) or Shanghai, Tash Aw always addresses the effects of politics, Western influence, and uprootedness on the individuals in his books. His mastery of these themes grows more sure-handed each time and *Five Star Billionaire* is as big and ambitious as Shanghai, taking the reader relentlessly and progressively deeper into the lives of those five characters. Instead of one protagonist, he gives us five of equal strength.

As they circle around one another it becomes clear that Walter Chao is the kingpin. He is wealthy and we learn from his own voice how he got there. His bestselling self-help book, written under a pseudonym and entitled "Secrets of a Five Star Billionaire," was intended to help others achieve success. Like many supremely successful businessmen, he has secrets though they aren't the ones he gives away in his book. The true motivations of Walter Chao, the reasons for the moves he makes, and what he wants from the other four, make up the mysterious flavor coursing through the novel.

Rereading the first few pages, I discovered the clue to that twist at the end. So brilliant is the storytelling, I was mesmerized, misled and unsuspecting. Once again an author has had his way with me. I love that! *Five Star Billionaire* has been long-listed for this year's Booker Prize. I hope Tash Aw wins.

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### **switterbug (Betsey) says**

Shanghai, the capital of the east, is potent and mythical, like New York or London in the west. Immigrants are attracted to the glitter and hustle, the urbanity and promise of remaking themselves and securing wealth. In Tash Aw's Booker finalist novel, four Malaysians with different stories and backgrounds come to Shanghai to score their dreams. Their interconnected lives are slowly revealed over the course of the story; on the way there, I was immersed in each one as the narrative alternates back and forth with finesse and a solid momentum. This is about characters--but the main character of all is Shanghai, who subsumes and sometimes devours a person and their dreams.

Phoebe is a young village woman who comes to Shanghai full of hope and hunger. Changing her identity to Chinese and buying knock-off designer garb, she is naïve enough to believe that material wealth is deserved and attained by her desires and the absorption of numerous self-help books. Gary was an abused child who became a sensation as a Taiwanese pop star, but due to some poor public conduct, has been reduced to obscurity and singing in shopping malls. Yinghui is an above-average success in business, but lonely in her personal life. She is about to embark on an exciting business venture with the elusive billionaire, Walter Chao, who is the author of the self-help book, "Five-Star Billionaire." Justin CK Lim is a lonely riches to rags gentleman who has become a recluse, enervated with depression. The links between all of them are disclosed in the course of the story.

Shanghai, for all its promise, can be an icy, unforgiving city. For all the earnest aspiration and optimism, there's a tint of grim foreshadowing in every chapter. There's no easy success; Shanghai provides a certainty

of doubt and facile exploitation to the willing and the desperate, the lonely and determined, wherever you come from and no matter your ambitions. Aw's silky prose and strong characterizations swept me up into its dangerous charm and universal themes. Ruin and revenge, doubt and trust, integrity and dissolution, and the capriciousness of affluence inhabit the story's heart. The prospect of love in an indifferent city reaches out like a fateful redemption.

“...a mixture of excitement and apprehension that people exhibited when still new in Shanghai, in search of something, even though they could not articulate what that something was—maybe it was money, or status, or, God forbid, even love—but whatever it was, Shanghai was not about to give it to them.”

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### **Amy says**

You know how you can really like a book even though you don't necessarily really "like" any of the characters? That's sort of how I felt about this book. It centers around about 4 different individuals and their lives in Shanghai. Each chapter covers one person, and gradually as the book goes on you see how the characters intersect. But probably the best thing about this book is the setting - Shanghai itself seems to be one of the main characters and the central focus on the book. Each of the other characters are originally from Malaysia, having moved to mainland China to try to "make it big" or escape something, or just try to make a life for themselves.

Asia in general is something I feel somewhat ignorant about. I have a very basic knowledge but I feel the culture is so different from our Western American culture that it is fascinating and almost difficult to put myself in that mindset. I haven't spent any time in China at all, unless you count the one-day/one-night quick stop in Hong Kong that I made on my way back from Thailand years ago. Just enough to take a quick look at some sights and right back to the airport.

So I loved this chance to get a picture of modern China - Shanghai specifically, a massive city teeming with people, but full of the glitz and glamour of those who have become wealthy, and those who are trying to become wealthy. I also loved the way the author wrote about Malaysia, the home country of most of the characters (whether they want to admit it or not) - which is another fascinating place, a muslim country in Asia, having a totally different culture and feel than China. Tash Aw's writing is wonderful, and though I didn't quite feel I could relate to that strong drive to be wealthy that so many of the characters have, I felt completely drawn into their world.

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