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## **Something Rotten**

A young adult murder mystery  
by Alan Gratz

Denmark, Tennessee stinks. Bad. The smell hits seventeen-year-old Horatio Wilkes the moment he pulls into town to visit his best friend, Hamilton Prince. And it's not just the paper plant and the polluted Copenhagen River that's stinking up Denmark: Hamilton's father has been poisoned and the killer is still at large.

Was it Hamilton's hot, tree-hugging ex-girlfriend, hell bent on making the Prince family pay for decades of pollution? Hamilton's mom Trudy, who married her husband's brother and signed over half the plant and its profits? Or what about Ford N. Branff, Trudy's old flame, who's waging a hostile takeover of Elsinore Paper? Who among them has committed murder most foul? If Horatio Wilkes can just get past the smell, he might get to the bottom of all this.

One-liners crackle and intrigue abounds in this mash-up of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the mysteries of Raymond Chandler. "Call it 'Pulp Shakespeare,'" says Alan, "or maybe 'Hardboiled Hamlet.'" *Something Rotten* is the first in a series of young adult mysteries, all starring high school detective Horatio Wilkes and all riffing on popular Shakespearean plays. Next up are *Something Wicked (Macbeth)* in 2008 and *Something Foolish (A Midsummer Night's Dream)* in 2009, all from Dial Books for Young Readers.

Alan's first novel, *Samurai Shortstop* (Dial, 2006) was named one of YALSA's 2007 Top Ten Best Books of the Year and received starred reviews from *Booklist* and *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*. *Samurai Shortstop* was also selected as a 2006 Top Ten Novel for Children by *The Washington Post*, an ALA 2006 Top Ten Best Sports Book and an ALA 2006 Top Ten First Books for Youth. His work has also been published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and on television in episodes of A&E's *City Confidential*.

A native of Knoxville, Tennessee, Alan now lives in the high country of Western North Carolina with his wife Wendi and their daughter Jo.

For more information, please visit the author's web site at [www.alangratz.com](http://www.alangratz.com).

*Something Rotten* by Alan Gratz ■ published by Dial Books, an imprint of Penguin Putnam  
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## **Praise for *Samurai Shortstop***

**ALA 2007 Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults**

**2006 Washington Post Top Ten Books for Children**

**The New York Public Library's Books for the Teen Age 2007**

**Booklist's 2006 Top Ten Sports Books for Youth**

**Booklist's 2006 Top Ten First Books for Youth**

**CCBC Choices 2007**

**2006 Junior Library Guild Selection**

B “Fast moving, culturally respectful, and flat-out engrossing, this should lead off the next book talk on sports or historical fiction.”

*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, Starred Review

B “A memorable chronicle of boys’ inhumanity to boys, and a testament to enduring values in a time of social change.”

**Carolyn Phelan**  
*Booklist*, Starred Review

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## About the Author

Alan Gratz taught himself how to type on his grandfather's old Underwood typewriter, and in third grade used it to produce the *Blue Spring Lane News*, a weekly newspaper for his street. By fifth grade he had written his first book, *Real Kids Don't Eat Spinach*. By high school he had moved on to a word processor and was writing short stories and plays.

Born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, Alan went to his hometown University of Tennessee where he studied creative writing in a specialized College Scholars program. "I wrote the obligatory 'awful college novel,' sold some short stories to literary magazines, and graduated in three years to save money." Then began a series of writing-related jobs: publicist at an art museum, instructor at a Czech university, bookseller, writer of radio commercials, librarian.

Alan eventually went back to UT for a Master's degree in English education and taught eighth grade English for a time, but was always writing fiction. "I wrote a few regionally-produced plays and dabbled with book or two, but the more young adult novels I read the more I knew that's what I wanted to be doing."

In the fall of 2002, Alan finally took the plunge. "I quit my day job to become a part-time writer and part-time stay-at-home dad. I helped pay the bills writing freelance episodes of A&E's *City Confidential* while polishing old manuscripts and writing new ones. *Samurai Shortstop* was the first book I wrote as a full-time writer, and the first book I sold.

The idea for *Something Rotten* was born during Alan's undergraduate days at the University of Tennessee. "I developed the character of Horatio Wilkes in a Mystery and Detective Fiction class, but I never could find the right story for him. Finally I went back to my original inspiration for the character—Hamlet's unsung, down-to-earth friend Horatio—and saw he was already *in* the perfect story; he just needed to take charge and make the story his own."

Alan Gratz now lives in the High Country of Western North Carolina, with his wife Wendi and daughter Jo. *Something Rotten* is his second novel for young adults, and the first of a new series.

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## **Six Questions with *Something Rotten* author Alan Gratz**

### **Where did you get the idea to mash-up William Shakespeare and Raymond Chandler?**

You remember those Reese's Cups commercials with the chocolate and the peanut butter? In my case, it began with a character—Horatio Wilkes. I created Horatio for a Mystery and Detective Fiction Writing class when I was an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee. I named him Horatio in honor of Hamlet's down-to-earth, practical friend from Shakespeare's play. He's one of the few people left alive on stage at the end of *Hamlet*, after all! My Horatio was originally a thirty-something forensic anthropologist. I didn't like that so I made him a newspaper columnist. Then I made him a movie theater owner. Nothing worked so I put him away. When I started to focus on writing books for young adults, it dawned on me that my wry, sarcastic Horatio would make the perfect snarky seventeen-year-old. I re-imagined him as a kind of teenaged Philip Marlowe, which put me in the mind of *noir*. But I still didn't have a story. That's when I went back to the original inspiration for Horatio and realized he was already *in* the perfect story. He just had to make it his own.

### **So what, you just stole Shakespeare's story and changed all the names?**

Well, not exactly. *Something Rotten* is a pretty faithful take on *Hamlet*—up to a point. Horatio isn't a major character in *Hamlet*, so at some point in my story he had to step in and say, "Enough is enough. I'll handle things from here." For me, the moment of no return in *Hamlet* is when he stabs Polonius through the curtain. As soon as Hamlet kills a man, the game changes. It's the same for Horatio's friend Hamilton. In my mind, that was the part of the story where Horatio had to take over, which meant going in a different direction with the plot. And of course, Horatio has to prevent the infamous body count at the end of the story. What kind of detective would he be if he let everybody die in the end? Finding a way to stay true to the story and yet make the story my own was the greatest challenge for this book.

### **Horatio's voice is distinctive and unusual. He doesn't talk like a real teenager would talk. Why did you write him that way?**

Horatio's voice is deliberately stylized—it's meant as an homage to *noir* detectives like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. Nobody really talked like that in the 40s and 50s either! Horatio is supposed to be the boy every teenage boy wishes he was: cool; suave; decisive; a ladies' man. Horatio still makes mistakes—he's human, not some perfect James Bond Junior—but he's the kind of guy who has just the right comeback at just the right moment, not minutes or hours or days later like the rest of us. (Or at least me.) He's speaks the language of the teenager in front of

the mirror practicing smooth lines. It's "aspirational fiction," in a way; Horatio has a level of coolness we aspire to, even if we know that ideal is impossible.

### **Where did the pollution angle in the book come from?**

The polluted Copenhagen River is an extrapolation from the play that took on a real life of its own. At first it was part of the joke—something is rotten in Denmark, Tennessee, and you can smell it. Having the character of Olivia drink from the ugly, foul-smelling river was also going to parallel the scene in *Hamlet* where Ophelia drowns herself. Then I remembered the Champion Paper/Little Pigeon River controversy in East Tennessee from when I was a kid. That led me to articles about how carcinogenic dioxin is created by modern paper-bleaching techniques, and I began to see a way to make the stinking, polluted river more than just a running gag and a cute parallel to Ophelia's death in the play. The dioxin created by the paper plant in the novel ends up playing a much larger role in the story, and the polluted river raised the stakes too—it made the story not just about catching a killer, but saving a community as well.

### **Do you see *Something Rotten* being used in schools with *Hamlet*?**

I think *Something Rotten* would make a great entrée into the teaching of *Hamlet*. I've taught Shakespeare to teenagers before, and one of the most difficult hurdles is getting them past the language. Sometimes I think kids get so bogged down trying to understand what's being said they don't see the bigger picture. By reading a contemporary take on a classic first, students can be introduced to the basic plot elements and characters, which in turn will make things easier when it comes time to read the original. When they can anticipate the action, they can then begin to intuit meaning from the words.

### **What's next for Horatio?**

Next up is *Something Wicked*, which is based on *Macbeth*. In *Something Wicked*, Horatio joins his friend Mac and his girlfriend Beth at a Scottish Highland Games festival in the East Tennessee mountains. The third book in the series will be *Something Foolish*, which turns *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a date-rape mystery at an all-night keg party. From there I'd love to tackle *The Tempest*, which is my favorite of Shakespeare's plays. In that one Horatio would intern at a Disney-like theme park, run by a Prospero-like animatronics "magician." I've also been working on a contemporary version of *Julius Caesar*, culminating in a fraternity house toga party. I don't have names for either of those yet. Their working titles are *Something Else* and *Something Completely Different*.

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