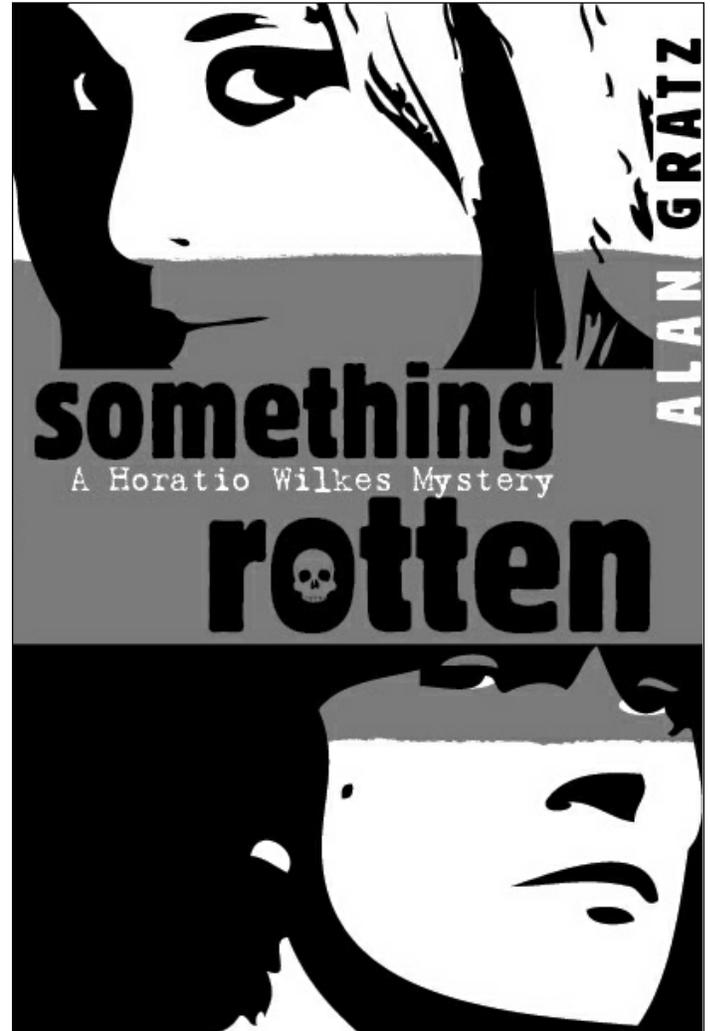


Something Rotten

DISCUSSION GUIDE

“One thing was for sure. Something was rotten in Denmark, Tennessee, and it wasn't just the stink from the paper plant..”

- Horatio Wilkes



About the Book

Denmark, Tennessee stinks. Bad. The smell hits 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.

Why? Because nobody believes Rex Prince was murdered. Nobody except Horatio and Hamilton. They need to find the killer before someone else dies, but it won't be easy. It seems like everyone's a suspect. Hamilton's hot, tree-hugging ex-girlfriend

Olivia Mendelsohn is determined to clean up the river-and the Prince family that's been polluting it for decades. Hamilton's mom, Trudy Prince, just married her husband's brother, Claude, and signed over half of the plant and profits. And then there's Ford N. Branff, Trudy's old flame, who's waging a hostile takeover of Elsinore Paper.

Motive, means, opportunity--they all have them. But who among them has committed murder most foul? If high school junior Horatio Wilkes can just get past the smell, he might get to the bottom of all this.

Pre-reading Activity

Pulp Shakespeare

The character of Horatio Wilkes is inspired by *noir* detectives like Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade. Before reading *Something Rotten*, read a few passages from Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* or watch *The Maltese Falcon*.

- ◆ What is *noir* fiction?
- ◆ What is so distinctive about the voice of *noir* detectives?
- ◆ What self-imposed ethical codes do *noir* detectives use?
- ◆ How and why do *noir* detectives walk the line between insider and outsider?



Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension

- ◆ Why is Horatio the main character in *Something Rotten*, and not Hamilton?
- ◆ Horatio is big on promises. Which promises does he keep, and which does he abandon? What are his reasons?
- ◆ Horatio isn't perfect, though he tries very hard to be. What mistakes does Horatio make, despite his best intentions?
- ◆ Why can't Horatio and Hamilton just go to the police with their suspicions?
- ◆ Who murdered Rex Prince, Roscoe Grant, and Gilbert Stern? How were they killed, and why?

Class Differences

- ◆ Why does Horatio bristle at Hamilton's use of the word "townie"? In what ways will class differences always separate Hamilton from Horatio and Olivia?
- ◆ Hamilton and Horatio comes from different worlds. Why does their friendship work? What does each have that the other needs?
 - ◆ Horatio tells Hamilton his help is "all part of the service." What connection does Horatio have to the Prince family servants?
 - ◆ Horatio and Candy begin as enemies, but eventually work together. How are the two characters similar?

Motivation

- ◆ What drives Claude's need to replace his older brother Rex?
- ◆ Why does Trudy marry her dead husband's brother?
- ◆ Why does Horatio continue to help Hamilton, even when Hamilton is a jerk?
- ◆ What makes Olivia drink poisoned river water? Beyond environmentalism, does this have anything to do with Hamilton?
- ◆ Why doesn't Horatio act on his feelings for Olivia?
- ◆ Why doesn't Horatio drink?

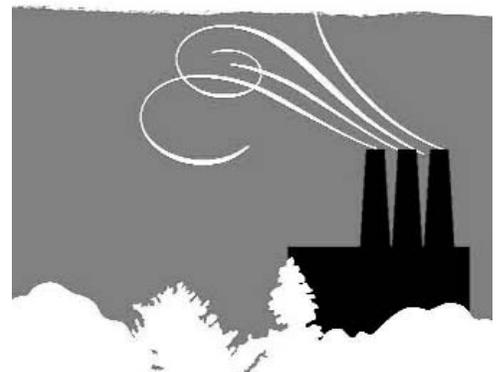
Questions for Discussion

Hamlet and Something Rotten

- ◆ Compare Horatio in the play and Horatio in the book. How are they alike? How are they dissimilar?
- ◆ Discuss dramatic irony. What assumptions can we make about the story of *Something Rotten* based on our knowledge of what happens in *Hamlet*? In what ways does the novel subvert dramatic irony?
- ◆ What scenes seem inspired more by detective stories than by Shakespeare?
- ◆ Besides the story and the characters, what other allusions to *Hamlet* can you find in *Something Rotten*?
- ◆ What famous scenes from *Hamlet* are not paralleled in *Something Rotten*? Why do you think those were left out?
- ◆ How does Horatio's play to reveal Claude's guilt at the community theater mirror the scene with the players in *Hamlet*?
- ◆ Though *Something Rotten* parallels *Hamlet* throughout, at a certain point the book goes a new direction from *Hamlet*. Where is that place in the story, and how do the book and play differ from that point on?
- ◆ At the end of *Hamlet*, most of the main characters are dead. Why doesn't *Something Rotten* end the same way?
- ◆ Shakespeare famously borrowed many of his stories from previous works by other authors. What are some of the earlier sources for *Hamlet*, and how does *Something Rotten* fit into this tradition of retelling classic stories?
- ◆ Drinking and alcohol play a much larger role in *Something Rotten* than in the play, although there is a reference to the drinking that goes on at Elsinore castle in *Hamlet*. Can you find it? And what role does Hamilton's alcoholism play in his translation from the character of Hamlet?
- ◆ Olivia plays a much larger role in *Something Rotten* than Ophelia does in *Hamlet*. How are the two characters alike, and how are they different? And how does Olivia's environmentalism in the book mirror her death in the play? Why does she get a happy ending here?
- ◆ The play the Denmark Players are performing is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, by Tom Stoppard--itself a pastiche of *Hamlet*. What cues and themes does *Something Rotten* take from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*?

Dramatis Personae

- ◆ Horatio Wilkes: Amateur detective, and Hamilton's best friend (Horatio)
- ◆ Hamilton Prince: Privileged son of the murdered Rex Prince (Hamlet)
- ◆ Olivia Mendelsohn: Hamilton's ex-girlfriend, and a die-hard environmentalist (Ophelia)
- ◆ Claude Prince: Hamilton's uncle, and Trudy Prince's new husband (Claudius)
- ◆ Trudy Prince: Hamilton's mother (Gertrude)
- ◆ Ford N. Branff: Trudy's old college flame (Fortinbras)
- ◆ Candy: Ford Branff's right hand man (The First Player)
- ◆ Paul Mendelson: Olivia's father, and the Prince family lawyer (Polonius)
- ◆ Larry Mendelson: Olivia's bossy older brother (Laertes)
- ◆ Roscoe Grant & Gilbert Stern: Old friends of Hamilton's from town (Rosencrantz & Guildenstern)



Further Reading

YA Fiction Based on Shakespeare

- ♦ **Enter Three Witches** by Caroline Cooney (*Macbeth*)
- ♦ **Romiette and Julio** by Sharon Draper (*Romeo and Juliet*)
- ♦ **Romeo's Ex: Rosalind's Story** by Lisa Fiedler (*Romeo and Juliet*)
- ♦ **Ophelia** by Lisa Klein (*Hamlet*)
- ♦ **Son of the Mob** by Gordon Korman (*Romeo and Juliet*)
- ♦ **Othello** by Julius Lester
- ♦ **Pretty Things** by Sarra Manning (*The Taming of the Shrew*)
- ♦ **A Mid-Semester Night's Dream** by Margaret Meachem (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)
- ♦ **This Must Be Love** by Tui Sutherland (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)
- ♦ **Ariel** by Grace Tiffany (*The Tempest*)

Noir Detective Fiction

- ♦ **Double Indemnity** by James M. Cain
- ♦ **The Maltese Falcon** by Dashiell Hammett
- ♦ **Strangers on a Train** by Patricia Highsmith
- ♦ **The Big Sleep** by Raymond Chandler
- ♦ **Farewell, My Lovely** by Raymond Chandler
- ♦ **The Long Goodbye** by Raymond Chandler

Internet Resources

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hardboiled>
Learn more about hardboiled/noir fiction

<http://home.comcast.net/~mossrobert/>
The Raymond Chandler web site

http://www.philsp.com/mags/black_mask.html
A gallery of pulp fiction magazine covers

<http://www.miskatonic.org/slang.html>
A glossary of hardboiled slang

<http://www.geocities.com/gandrill/Laughshamlet.html>
A "Dick and Jane" version of Hamlet

About the Author

Born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, Alan went from private school to the University of Tennessee. There he was accepted into the UT College Scholars program, where he tailored a program specific to his independent study of creative writing.



Alan wrote the obligatory "awful college novel," sold a couple of short stories to literary magazines, and graduated in three years. Then began a succession of writing-related jobs: publicist at an art museum, instructor at a Czech university, bookseller, radio commercial writer, graphic designer, librarian. After earning a Master's degree he taught eighth grade English for a time, but his dream continued to be writing fiction for young readers.

In the fall of 2002, Alan finally took the plunge, quitting his day job to become a part-time writer and a part-time stay-at-home dad. While writing what would become his first published novel, *Samurai Shortstop*, he also wrote freelance episodes of A&E's *City Confidential*.

Alan now lives with his wife and daughter in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

Bibliography

Samurai Shortstop (Dial 2006)
Something Rotten (Dial 2007)
Something Wicked (Dial 2008)
The Brooklyn Nine (Dial 2009)
Nemo (Knopf TBA)

Learn more about *Something Rotten* and Alan's other books at www.alangratz.com