

Horatio Alger, Jr.



Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832 -1899) was a nineteenth-century American novelist. Nearly all of his 100-plus books featured stories of impoverished boys— frequently orphans—rising from humble backgrounds to lives of middle-class security. Alger highlighted a familiar theme throughout his writings where the protagonist’s honesty, persistence, and courage are rewarded with success, generally in the form of a job, money, or increased social status.

While Alger’s hopeful formula seemed to suggest that anyone can make it in America with enough hard work, many of Alger’s works also suggested that ordinary people can become instantaneously successful through sheer luck, a happy accident, or by being noticed by a member of a higher class while in the act of doing a noble deed. This formula came to be known as the “rags-to-riches” narrative, a narrative device popular during Alger’s time that continues to be widely used today.

“FROM RAGS TO RICHES”

At the child’s scream, the father looked up, and, with a cry of horror, sprang to the edge of the boat. He would have plunged in, but, being unable to swim, would only have endangered his own life, without being able to save his child.

“My child!” he exclaimed in anguish,—“who will save my child? A thousand—ten thousand dollars to any one who will save him!”

Now Dick was an expert swimmer. It was an accomplishment which he had possessed for years, and he no sooner saw the boy fall then he resolved to rescue him. His determination was formed before he heard the liberal offer made by the boy’s father. Indeed, I must do Dick the justice to say that, in the excitement of the moment, he did not hear it at all. . .

Excerpt from *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York with the Black Boots* (New York: MacMillan, 1868)



DICK SAVING JOHNNY.