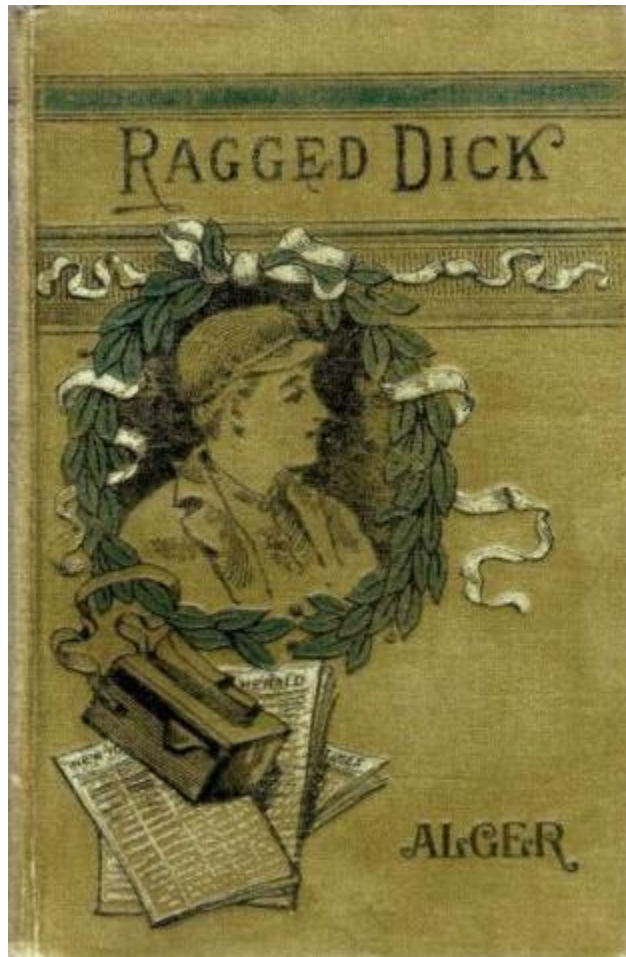


BOOK DISCUSSION KIT



Ragged Dick

or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks

by Horatio Alger

Summary

The novel follows the adventures of a 19th century New York City bootblack called 'Ragged Dick', as he rises from poverty to middle class respectability.

Author Information

Horatio Alger, Jr. was born January 13, 1832 in Chelsea, Massachusetts, the oldest son of a Unitarian minister. Alger was educated at home and attended prep schools, before being admitted to Harvard in 1848. He made his first professional sales, two essays and a poem, to a Boston magazine the following year. He graduated from Harvard with honors in 1852. He worked as an assistant editor at a literary magazine for a short time before taking a position teaching at a boy's boarding school, while continuing to write and publish poetry and other short pieces.



In 1860 Alger finished his post graduate degree at the Harvard Divinity School. He began writing stories for boys, publishing his first children's novel in 1864. That same year, he became the pastor of a Unitarian church in Brewster, Massachusetts. After being investigated for sexual misconduct and reports of "unnatural familiarity with boys," Alger left the post, promising never to serve as a church minister again.

Alger moved to New York City, where he pursued a career as a writer. After his novels for adults were poorly received, Alger focused on stories for boys where he found greater success. He published formulaic 'rags to riches' stories with an urban theme, until an 1877 trip out west, when he added a western theme to many of his tales. Alger avoided scandal for the rest of his life, supplementing his writing income by tutoring rich children. He also counseled street boys in New York, and worked with children's aid societies to better their lives. He formally adopted two street boys, and informally adopted many more.

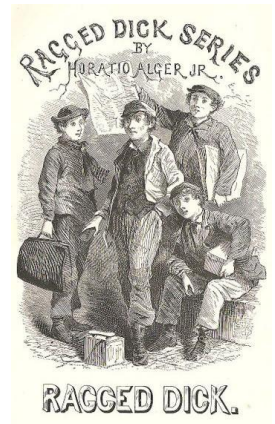
After suffering a breakdown in 1896, he moved in with his sister in Natick, Massachusetts. He suffered from poor health for two years before his death on July 18, 1899. His unfinished last novel, *Young Captain Jack*, was completed by the famous children's publisher and writer Edward Stratemeyer, and published in 1901.

About the Novel

Ragged Dick was first published as a serial in the boy's magazine *Student and Schoolmate* in 1867. It was published in an expanded novel version the following year. It became the first in a six-book series, including the direct sequel, *Fame and Fortune*.

The novel followed the 'rags to riches' formula Alger used in several subsequent books. His novels featured a standard set of characters including the honorable poor boy, the arrogant wealthy boy, the scheming thief or miser and the gentleman benefactor. The books promoted honesty, dedication and hard work as the only sure route to success.

The novel was a bestseller, requiring republication the following year. *Ragged Dick* remained in print for forty years, before dropping out of favor. Along with another of Alger's novels, it was resurrected as the basis for the 1982 musical *Shine!*



The Ragged Dick series:

- *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks* (1868)
- *Fame and Fortune; or, The Progress of Richard Hunter* (1868)
- *Mark the Match Boy; or, Richard Hunter's Ward* (1869)
- *Rough and Ready; or, Life Among the New York Newsboys* (1869)
- *Ben the Luggage Boy; or, Among the Wharves* (1870)
- *Rufus and Rose; or, The Fortunes of Rough and Ready* (1870)

If you like this novel, you may also like works by...

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Historical Overview

Ragged Dick was written and published during a tumultuous period in American history, the beginning of the Reconstruction Era. In the wake of the Civil War, the U.S. government faced the task of reintegrating the Confederate states into the Union. The moderates, including Abraham Lincoln and his successor Andrew Johnson, wanted to restore normalcy as quickly as possible, forgiving Confederate leaders and allowing many to remain in government positions rather than risk a power vacuum. Their opponents, the Radical Republicans were intent on punishing the South, removing Confederate leaders when they had the chance, and imposing stiff penalties.

The political situation was further complicated by the issue of the Freedmen. Radical Republicans wished to enfranchise the former slaves, giving them immediate political power, while the Moderates preferred a slower approach. From 1865 to 1877, these two groups bitterly fought for control of both the federal and state

governments, each attempting to impose their agenda. The result was a region of the country still known today for poverty and a lack of education, where local practice was to ignore the legal protections the radicals had rammed through Congress. This situation came to a head in the Civil Rights Movement one hundred years later.

Despite the political turmoil, a feeling of optimism prevailed in many areas of the country. While the western Indian Wars were ongoing, many tribes had already been relocated to Indian Territory or other reservations, opening new areas for settlement. Though originally known as "Seward's Folly" the purchase of Alaska continued the U.S. policy of land acquisition started under the previous era of Manifest Destiny. At the same time, new advances in science, technology and transportation continued to shrink the world. By 1869 it was possible to cross the entire continent in a single train trip, send a message to Europe in a matter of minutes, and arrive across the ocean in person less than a week later. In such an environment, anything seemed possible, including the rags to riches rise of Alger's young heroes.

Historical Events of 1866-1869

- 1866 Feb 13 The first bank robbery by what became known as the James Gang takes place in Liberty, Missouri.
- May 16 The U.S. Congress approves a new coin, the nickel, replacing the earlier half dime.
- July 24 Tennessee is the first Confederate state readmitted to the Union under Reconstruction.
- July 28 The newly laid transatlantic cable begins sending messages between Europe and North America.
- 1867** ***Ragged Dick* first appears as a serial in *Student and Schoolmate*.**
 - Mar 1 Nebraska attains statehood.
 - Mar 30 The territory of Alaska is purchased from Russia by Secretary of State William Seward.
 - May 7 Alfred Nobel obtains a patent for dynamite.
 - Jul 1 Several provinces are united to create the Dominion of Canada.
 - Jul 2 The first elevated railroad in the U.S. begins service in New York.
- 1868** **An expanded version of *Ragged Dick* is published as a novel.**
 - Feb 24 Andrew Johnson becomes the first U.S. President to be impeached following his attempted dismissal of War Secretary Edwin Stanton.
 - Apr 29 General Sherman negotiates the Treaty of Fort Laramie with the Plains Indians, ending Red Cloud's War.
 - May 16 President Johnson is acquitted in his impeachment trial by one vote.
 - Jul 9 The 14th Amendment is ratified granting full citizenship to African Americans, as well as instituting both the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses.
- 1869 Mar 4 Ulysses S. Grant takes office as the 18th President of the United States.
- Mar 6 The modern periodic table of the elements is presented by Dmitri Mendeleev.
- May 10 The Transcontinental Railroad opens for service.
- Sep 24 The Fisk-Gould Scandal, or Black Friday, kicks off a financial panic in the U.S.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Alger present the social classes and the divide between them? How are Dick's experiences different in one part of the city compared to another?
2. How do the social classes interact in Alger's presentation of 19th century New York? How does it compare to today's society?
3. Female characters play very minor roles in the story. How do the boys in the tale interact with them? What do women represent in the male world of the story? Is it different for women in different social classes?
4. Alger presents two very different classes of boys, those represented by Dick and those represented by Frank. Were the street boys truly his intended audience as he claimed, or was his moral message aimed at both groups? If so, how is it different for each group?
5. Dick is determined to grow up to be a respectable member of society. Is respectability as highly valued today? Dick has a plan for achieving this goal. Would that plan work in modern society? What would he have to do differently now?
6. Alger gives Dick many fine characteristics, setting him up as a model for street boys to emulate. Which characteristic do you think was most important for Dick achieving success?
7. What do you think Dick's future holds? Has he lost anything in his evolution? What about Frank and Fosdick?
8. In Alger's world, social class, education and moral behavior are inextricably linked to externals such as locations, residences, clothing and overall personal appearance, especially a character's "look." How does he use these to show the status and nature of the characters? How can these details be used to chart the evolution of characters throughout the story?
9. Alger writes much about "noble nature." Are people born with a tendency towards good or evil, or is this behavior learned? How much does nurture influence nature, and vice versa?
10. Does Dick's story resonate with today's readers? Do the themes in the tale still apply in modern life, or is it all so much sentimental nonsense?
11. One critic, Nathanael West, argued that "Alger is to America what Homer was to the Greeks." Is that true? How does Alger's story define American culture and values? Does it represent an ideal for us?
12. Horatio Alger had a scandalous, possibly criminal, past. He appears to have spent most of his life trying to expiate his guilt for his unnamed actions. How important is his personal background to the reading of the story? Is it more important because the novel was written for children, or would it have equal importance with an author who wrote for adults?