



## The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic (Penguin Classics)

By R. K. Narayan

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**The greatest Indian epic, one of the world's supreme masterpieces of storytelling**

A sweeping tale of abduction, battle, and courtship played out in a universe of deities and demons, *The Ramayana* is familiar to virtually every Indian. Although the Sanskrit original was composed by Valmiki around the fourth century BC, poets have produced countless versions in different languages. Here, drawing on the work of an eleventh-century poet called Kamban, Narayan employs the skills of a master novelist to re-create the excitement he found in the original. A luminous saga made accessible to new generations of readers, *The Ramayana* can be enjoyed for its spiritual wisdom, or as a thrilling tale of ancient conflict.

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**Editorial Review**

Language Notes

Text: English, Tamil (translation)

About the Author

**R. K. Narayan** (1906–2001), born and educated in India, was the author of fourteen novels, numerous short stories and essays, a memoir, and three retold myths. His work, championed by Graham Greene, who became a close friend, was often compared to that of Dickens, Chekhov, Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor, among others.

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## THE RAMAYANA

R. K. NARAYAN was born on October 10, 1906, in Madras, South India, and educated there and at Maharaja's College in Mysore. His first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), and its successor, *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), are both set in the fictional territory of Malgudi, of which John Updike wrote, "Few writers since Dickens can match the effect of colorful teeming that Narayan's fictional city of Malgudi conveys; its population is as sharply chiseled as a temple frieze, and as endless, with always, one feels, more characters round the corner." Narayan wrote many more novels set in Malgudi, including *The English Teacher* (1945), *The Financial Expert* (1952), and *The Guide* (1958), which won him the Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters) Award, his country's highest honor. His collections of short fiction include *A Horse and Two Goats*, *Malgudi Days*, and *Under the Banyan Tree*. Graham Greene, Narayan's friend and literary champion, said, "He has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian." Narayan's fiction earned him comparisons to the work of writers including Anton Chekhov, William Faulkner, O. Henry, and Flannery O'Connor.

Narayan also published travel books, volumes of essays, the memoir *My Days*, and the retold legends *Gods, Demons, and Others*, *The Ramayana*, and *The Mahabharata*. In 1980 he was awarded the A. C. Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature, and in 1981 he was made an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1989 he was made a member of the Rajya Sabha, the nonelective House of Parliament in India.

R. K. Narayan died in Madras on May 13, 2001.

PANKAJ MISHRA is the author of *The Romantics*, winner of the *Los Angeles Times's* Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*, and *Tempations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond*. He is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *Guardian*.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 1988 sanitation workers across North India went on strike. Their demand was simple: they wanted the federal government to sponsor more episodes of a television serial based on the Indian epic *Ramayana* (Romance of Rama). The serial, which had been running on India's state-owned television channel for more than a year, had proved to be an extraordinarily popular phenomenon, with more than eighty million Indians tuning in to every weekly episode. Streets in all towns and cities emptied on Sunday mornings as the serial went on the air. In villages with no electricity people usually gathered around a rented television set powered by a car battery. Many bathed ritually and garlanded their television sets before settling down to watch Rama, the embodiment of righteousness, triumph over adversity.

When the government, faced with rising garbage mounds and a growing risk of epidemics, finally relented and commissioned more episodes of *The Ramayana*, not just the sanitation workers but millions of Indians celebrated. More than a decade and many reruns later, the serial continues to inspire reverence among Indians everywhere, and remains for many the primary mode of experiencing India's most popular epic.

The reasons for this may not be immediately clear to an uninitiated outsider: the serial, cheaply made by a Bollywood filmmaker, abounds in ham acting and tinselly sets, and the long, white beards of its many wise, elderly men look perilously close to dropping off.

But it wasn't so much its kitschy, Bollywood aspect that endeared the serialization to Indians as its invoking of what is easily the most influential narrative tradition in human history: the story of Rama, the unjustly exiled prince. It may be impossible to prove R. K. Narayan's claim that every Indian "is aware of the story of *The Ramayana* in some measure or other." But it will sound true to most Indians. Indeed, the popular appeal of the story of Rama among ordinary people distinguishes it from much of Indian literary tradition, which, supervised by upper-caste Hindus, has been forbiddingly elitist.

There is really no Western counterpart in either the Hellenic or Hebraic tradition to the influence that this originally secular story, transmitted orally through many centuries, has exerted over millions of people. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are, primarily, literary texts, but not even Aesop's fables or the often intensely moral Greek myths shape the daily lives of present-day inhabitants of Greece. In contrast, *The Ramayana* continues to have a profound emotional and psychological resonance for Indians.

## Users Review

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#### Raymond Harris:

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