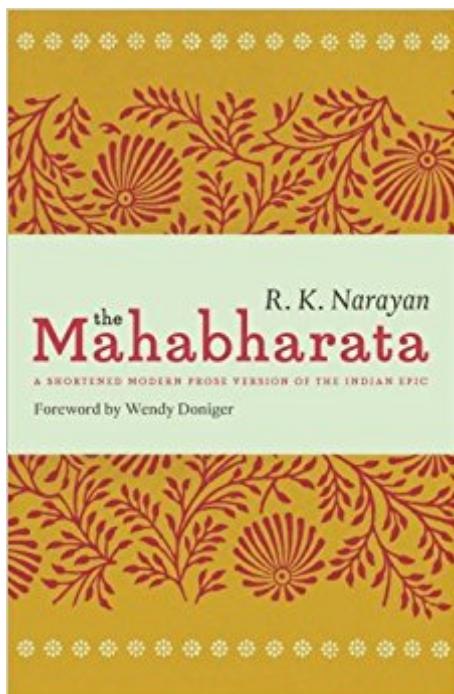


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# The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version Of The Indian Epic



## Synopsis

The Mahabharata tells a story of such violence and tragedy that many people in India refuse to keep the full text in their homes, fearing that if they do, they will invite a disastrous fate upon their house. Covering everything from creation to destruction, this ancient poem remains an indelible part of Hindu culture and a landmark in ancient literature. Centuries of listeners and readers have been drawn to The Mahabharata, which began as disparate oral ballads and grew into a sprawling epic. The modern version is famously long, and at more than 1.8 million words—seven times the combined lengths of the Iliad and Odyssey—it can be incredibly daunting. Contemporary readers have a much more accessible entry point to this important work, thanks to R. K. Narayan's masterful translation and abridgement of the poem. Now with a new foreword by Wendy Doniger, as well as a concise character and place guide and a family tree, The Mahabharata is ready for a new generation of readers. As Wendy Doniger explains in the foreword, "Narayan tells the stories so well because they're all his stories." He grew up hearing them, internalizing their mythology, which gave him an innate ability to choose the right passages and their best translations. In this elegant translation, Narayan ably distills a tale that is both traditional and constantly changing. He draws from both scholarly analysis and creative interpretation and vividly fuses the spiritual with the secular. Through this balance he has produced a translation that is not only clear, but graceful, one that stands as its own story as much as an adaptation of a larger work.

## Book Information

Paperback: 216 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; Reprint edition (February 12, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 022605165X

ISBN-13: 978-0226051659

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 26 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #74,340 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #19 in Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > Asian > Indian #36 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Hinduism > Sacred Writings #95 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Themes & Styles > Inspirational & Religious

## Customer Reviews

“Narayan makes this treasury of Indian folklore and mythology readily accessible to the general reader. It is an easy and pleasant introduction to a heterogeneous and complicated work. The language of Narayan’s translation is clear and direct; he captures the spirit of the narrative.” (Library Journal) “Narayan is a trustworthy guide to the heart and mind of India.” (Sunday Times)

The Mahabharata, together with the other great Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana, embodies much of the cultural and religious heritage of India. Based on the narrative of the great war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, it tells of warriors, kings, saints, and goddesses caught up in the romance and drama of family intrigue. With its diversity of plots and themes—including the philosophical teachings of the Bhagavata Gita—the Mahabharata has entertained and influenced Indian audiences for nearly two thousand years. R. K. Narayan’s abbreviated prose version provides a superb and elegant rendition of this great epic. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Having just been mesmerized by my exposure to Indian literature through Ramesh Menon’s outstanding version of the Ramayana, I looked to continue my journey through this corner of the literary world by reading the Mahabharata. Unlike the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita (which I intend to read next), no version of this tale jumped out at me on my perusal through reviews. I decided to give Narayan’s version a shot due to name recognition and popularity. Having just finished the tale, I have mixed emotions. On the one hand, I found the story itself to be interesting and Narayan’s prose to be quite readable; on the other, I felt like I just scratched the surface of this great tale. I typically avoid abridgments, and should’ve known better than to think that an epic could be reduced to a mere 190-some pages, but I was truly disappointed by the abbreviated nature of this version. After relishing the richness of Menon’s Ramayana, I felt like this version captured neither the rich grandeur needed to appreciate the scale of the epic nor gave the attention necessary to allow the reader to dwell on the deeper philosophical points. Because unlike the Ramayana, which was truly an archetypal “good versus evil” struggle, the Mahabharata is full of interesting moral wrinkles because it keeps the battle in the family. Brother fights brother and protege fights mentor, as several generations of this family are involved. Although the Kauravas (and Duryodhana in particular) are cast as the instigator and oppressor, I cannot fully disagree when Duryodhana gives his side of the story or when Yudhistira has his misgivings both before and after

the war. Most emotionally and philosophically poignant are the doubts of the stoic and brave Arjuna as the families are at the brink of war. More so than the battle itself it was these moral and philosophical issues that I found most interesting. Fortunately, it is my understanding that the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna (which consists of only a paragraph or two in this version of the Mahabharata) comprises the bulk of the Bhagavad Gita, which I am immensely excited to read next. As for the Mahabharata itself, Narayan's version gave me a bare bones introduction ... but I will need to revisit this tale through a different version to truly feel well-versed in the epic. As other reviews state, read Narayan for a very basic introduction to the story. However, overall it felt a little "too abridged" to do either the story or the moral underpinnings of the story the justice they deserve.

Reducing the Mahabharata to a digestible narrative is VERY difficult (the poem being about 8 times longer than the Iliad and Odyssey combined). However, Narayan has done a nice job in his attempt, and a text that would otherwise be almost totally inaccessible due to its daunting size, is made thus accessible. So, job well done on that score. However, so much is left out, elided or smoothed over that it's hard to really make use of the text as a means of understanding the Mahabharata's epic style and points of interest. If you want to simply acquaint yourself with the overall basic (but still incomplete) narrative then this is a reasonable option, but if you want to enter the world of the Mahabharata on a level anywhere approaching its cognate Greek cousins - this is woefully incomplete. For that purpose I would begin looking at Narasimha's work and that of J.D. Smith. If you REALLY want to enter this world there is the still incomplete Chicago translation, the Clay Sanskrit Library rendering (also still incomplete and not based on the critical edition), or the, again still incomplete (but moving faster than the rest), rendering by Bibek Debroy.

Highly readable and tells the story well for a modern audience. However, its success is also its weakness, as the retelling shifts the weight of the storytelling to the events prior to the war itself, saving only a few pages for the actual battle, which takes up most of the Sanskrit epic. Also, Narayan tends to whitewash some of the Pandavas' more questionable actions, some of which Doniger points out in her Foreword. Narayan's effort at telling this story does not exceed his skillful retelling of Kamban's Ramayana. I use this version when I teach the Bhagavad Gita in my Religions of India course just to give students the basic context of the text in an easily digestable format. I would not use this version if my primary goal were to teach the Mahabharata itself because the whitewashing often means that complicated choices are not visible, and the complexity of the story

is somewhat lost. Also, Narayan has the tendency to summarize the story, rather than just tell it in concise form, which makes it expository in tone at times.

This is one of the best novelizations of the classic Indian Epic the Mahabharata. Narayan includes a great number of the major episodes (even though using only 190 pages out of 6,000 in the original!). I just wish Narayan had expanded more on the story of protagonist Yudhishtira's ascension near the end as I feel that story adds a lot of meaning to the entire epic.

I'm reading this for class, but I have to say that I actually enjoyed this novel! Usually, I cringe at the types of books required for each class, but this one was a delight. The characters are aplenty, but each one is unique and implicitly complex. The plot about two families fighting for rule will have you nonstop reading, waiting to find out who conquers!

The broad outline of this ancient epic is known to every Hindu born in India. The plot is complex and mixed with an exposition of all manner of philosophical thought. It is interesting to see how an outstanding writer of fiction simplifies the complexity and reduces the enormous length and detail to a more accessible and readable length.

And interesting prose version of the huge 100,000 stanza epic. Gives insights into the minds of those back then and their wondrous imaginations and perspectives. Good for those who are interested but do not want to read the long version. R. K. Narayan is excellent in his work to convert the stanzas to prose. Easily readable. A good primer as well.

Vyasa's Mahabharata is a book thousands of pages long with equal number of characters. In this little book Mr. R. K. Narayan has beautifully narrated the story. I loved the book when I read it first several years ago, so this is new copy of the same book.

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