

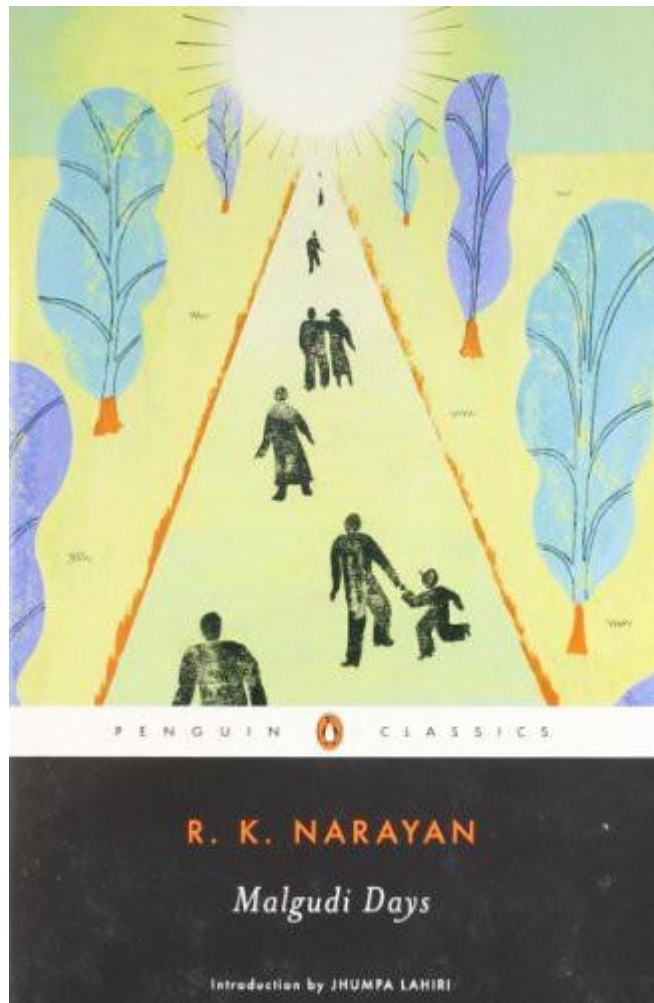


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MALGUDI DAYS

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 non-elective House of Parliament in India.

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

JHUMPA LAHIRI was born in London and raised in Rhode Island. She is the author of *Interpreter of Maladies*, her debut collection of stories that won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction as well as the PEN/Hemingway Award, and an acclaimed novel, *The Namesake*.

R. K. NARAYAN

Malgudi Days

Introduction by JHUMPA LAHIRI

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constructed by Dr James M. Fennelly of Adelphi University to illustrate his paper "The City of
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as an Expression of the Ordered Hindu Cosmos,” delivered at the American Academy of Religion International Region Conference, 1978. It is . K. Narayan.
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Introduction

Here is one way I propose that you read this book: one story per day, for thirty-two consecutive days, by the end of which you will have experienced *Malgudi Days* as a Malgudi month, more or less. Each day's reading, with only a few exceptions, will take about ten minutes. The vast majority of these stories are less than ten pages long, several are under five, and only one is more than twenty. "What a fine idea," you are perhaps thinking, "ten minutes a day, I can manage that." And if you are the type of virtuous person who is satisfied after just one piece of chocolate from a chocolate box, never tempted, until the following day, by a second, then perhaps you will be able to savor *Malgudi Days* in a similarly restrained, monthlong fashion.

If, on the other hand, you are like me, then you may find yourself, after the first ten minutes, reading on for twenty, then thirty, gobbling up one tale after the next, eventually looking up and realizing that a good portion of your day has passed. When I discovered this book, my own days were, much like these stories, intensely brief and full. I had recently given birth to my daughter, had a two-year-old son, and scarcely the opportunity to comb my hair in the mornings, never mind sit down with a book and a cup of tea. For some reason the first thing I did after opening the front cover of *Malgudi Days* was to study the table of contents and count the number of stories, as if they formed a long list of sums. Aha, I thought once I'd calculated the total figure, thirty-two, that's perfect, in a month I'll have finished.

With an infant in my lap and a toddler at my knee, I read the first story, "An Astrologer's Day." I turned the page once, then just once more—already, white space was signaling the finish. How could this be? I wondered, we're just getting started. I anticipated a sketch, a vignette at best. But in spite of their signature shortness there is nothing scant about Narayan's stories, no sense of feeling deprived as we are these days on airplanes, when we are handed Lilliputian meals in the name of dinner. In the course of four and a half pages, "An Astrologer's Day" erects, complicates, and alters a life, and this is the difference between mere description and drama. In the first sentence the title character is a faceless stranger to us; by the last, he is a man guilty of attempted murder with whom we nevertheless sympathize. The plot hinges on a suspenseful action. We hold our breath, fearing one thing only to discover another. The resulting effect is what novelists across the globe struggle, over the course of their lifetimes and in the space of hundreds more pages, to achieve. It is what R. K. Narayan quietly renders thirty-two times in this book.

"An Astrologer's Day" contains an image that is a perfect metaphor for Narayan's artistry. The astrologer works cheek-by-jowl with a series of vendors plying their wares in relative darkness. Narayan writes, "The astrologer transacted his business by the light of a flare which crackled and smoked up above the groundnut heap nearby. Half the enchantment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop lights. One or two had hissing gaslights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lights and one or two, like the astrologer's, managed without lights of their own." In the story, a man comes up to the astrologer and demands his fortune after the neighboring flare has been extinguished, and so the astrologer must work under even more compromised circumstances, glimpsing his subject's face in the seconds it takes to light a cheroot. The glimpse gives the astrologer enough information to proceed with his work. It is that sudden outburst of intense light upon a character's world that Narayan provides again and again, in narratives that die down almost as soon as they begin, but in the course of which entire lives are powerfully illuminated.

Setting aside his plentiful and remarkable novels, Narayan firmly occupies a seat in the pantheon of short story geniuses who wrote slightly before and during his lifetime: Chekhov, O. Henry, Frank O'Connor, and Flannery O'Connor are some names that come to mind. Another kindred spirit is Maupassant, whose tightly coiled narratives share with Narayan's a mastery of compression, of events quickly unfolding and lives radically changing in paragraphs that can be numbered on two hands. With Narayan as with Maupassant there is that same purity of voice, the same realism and constraint. Both explore the frustrations of the middle class, the precariousness of fate, the inevitable longings that so often lead to ruin. Both create portraits of everyday life, and share a vision that is unyielding and un pitying.

The stories in *Malgudi Days* leave the gate running, at once assuming and securing the reader's interest. The concentration of Narayan's prose is astonishing. While other writers rely on paragraphs and pages to get their points across, Narayan extracts the full capacity of each sentence, so much so that his stories seem bound by an invisible yet essential mechanism, similar to the metrical and quantitative constraints of poetry. Narayan wrote many of these stories under deadline, within the limits of word count and column length for *The Hindu*, a Madras newspaper for which Narayan had a contract for a weekly submission beginning in 1939. At the same time there is nothing formulaic about them—if anything, they seem spontaneously and effortlessly composed. Each stands on its own, and while they are not linked in today's fashionable parlance, they are inherently intertwined while remaining independent from each other. Their binding agent is the town of Malgudi, a place we can safely assume is located in the southern part of India, in the general vicinity of Madras, where Narayan was born, and Mysore, where he lived for most of his adult life. Stepping back from the individual stories, one takes in the fictional equivalent of something resembling a village-scape by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, teeming with inhabitants in close proximity, fiercely realistic yet whimsically portrayed. We encounter specific characters and appreciate their specific predicaments while remaining aware of the broader community to which they belong.

Malgudi is on that wonderful map of places in the literary universe, either real or imaginary, that not only provide a setting but possess a soul. Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, García Márquez's Macondo, and Joyce's Dublin are just three examples of the way certain writers cling stubbornly to a single terrain, entering its countless doors and portraying the residents within. Narayan does so with the assiduousness of a census taker but with an artist's compassion and intimacy. Malgudi is the setting not only for the stories in this volume, but for practically everything else Narayan has written. It is a small, self-contained, bustling town that is neither fully cosmopolitan nor agrarian in spirit. There is a college, a train station, a tourist bureau, even a film studio. It is the sort of place that carnivals and expos pass through, the sort of energetic, idiosyncratic community that is increasingly rare not only in America but all over the world as suburbs take up more and more space. So vivid is Narayan's fictional epicenter that it has inspired the delightful map reprinted in this volume originally drawn by Dr. James M. Fennelly, a scholar of his work, depicting the physical attributes of the town. Narayan does not just give the town an invented name; he names its streets, its buildings, its temples, and its restaurants, injecting local color at every turn.

Perhaps Malgudi's most memorable and trafficked region is the marketplace, filled with fruit sellers and cobblers and snake charmers and knife grinders, all expertly and sometimes desperately cajoling the public for business. Narayan's descriptions of the marketplace are always fresh, always stimulating—like the person who goes each day into the heart of his or her community for daily provisions, he, and thereby his reader, always see something new. It is against this impersonal, importunate backdrop that so many of the adventures and