

R. K. NARAYAN

A TIGER FOR
MALGUDI

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CLASSICS

A TIGER FOR MALGUDI

R. K. Narayan was born in Madras, South India, in 1906, 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 enchanting fictional territory of Malgudi. Other 'Malgudi' novels are *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* {1945}, *Mr Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1951), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* {1961}, *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) and *Talkative Man* (1986). His novel *The Guide* (1958) won him the National Prize of the Indian Literary Academy, his country's highest literary honour. As well as five collections of short stories, *A Horse and Two Goats*, *An Astrologer's Day*, *Lawley Road*, *Malgudi Days* and *Under the Banyan Tree*, he has published two travel books, *My Dateless Diary* and *The Emerald Route*; four volumes of essays, *Next Saturday*, *Reluctant Guru*, *A Story-teller's World* and *A Writer's Nightmare*; the retold legends, *Gods, Demons and Others*, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*; a volume of memoirs, *My Days*; and, most recently, a collection of three novellas, *The Grandmother's Tale*. In 1980 he was awarded the A. C. Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature and in 1982 he was made an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Many of his books are published by Penguin.

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To Charles Pick,
who, to my great joy,
brought me to the windmill again

[INTRODUCTION]

During the Kumbh Mela festival, which recurs every twelve years at the confluence of the three rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati in Allahabad, a vast crowd gathers for a holy bath in the rivers. Amidst that ocean of humanity also arrives a hermit with his companion, a tiger. He does not hold the animal on a leash since he claims they were brothers in previous lives. The tiger freely moves about without hurting or scaring anyone.

Such a combination seemed incredible when I read reports of it and saw the photographs. But as I got used to the idea, I began to speculate on its possibilities for a novel. Also I came across a few other instances of enduring friendship between tigers and human beings. This theme was on my mind in a general way, but it narrowed down to a specific issue about a year ago, when I came upon a bookmark, a four-inch-long strip of cardboard with the picture of a young tiger pleading, 'I'd love to get into a good book.' That sounded like a hint from the Muses (if they care for novelists too). I said to the young tiger, 'Surely you will get into my book, but the goodness of the book itself I can't guarantee.'

It also occurred to me that with a few exceptions here and there, humans have monopolized the attention of fiction writers. Man in his smugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures may also possess ego, values, outlook, and the ability to com-

municate, though they may be incapable of audible speech. Man assumes he is all-important, that all else in creation exists only for his sport, amusement, comfort, or nourishment. Valmiki, the greatest of poets, who composed the Ramayana, cried out when he noticed the agony of a bird whose mate was shot down by a hunter, 'Man, the destroyer, who'll not let innocent creatures mate in peace . . .' I wished to examine what the result would be if I made a tiger the central character in a novel.

'Why tiger? Why not a mouse?' asked a smart journalist who had come to interview me, when I mentioned the subject of my novel. I could only reply, 'So that the chief character may not be trampled upon or lost sight of in a hole.'

My story begins with an aged tiger lying in its cage ruminating on its past, beginning with its cubhood and wild days in the jungle, and later life in captivity as a circus star. It attains freedom when it breaks loose from a film-shooting camp and wanders into the town. The terror-stricken public attempts to get it shot but an ascetic who appears on the scene protects and adopts it as a companion.

'Who is he? Where is he from?' are naturally the questions that occur to everyone. But whenever he is asked 'Who are you?' he just says, 'What I am trying to find out.' This sounds like a mere metaphysical quibble, but it is a plain, literal answer to the question. When one is seized with a passion to understand one's self, one has to leave behind all normal life and habitual modes of thought. One becomes an ascetic; the terms *sannyasi*, *sadhu*, *yogi*, or *swamiji* indicate more or less the same state.

A *sannyasi* is one who renounces everything and undergoes a complete change of personality. Why one would become a *sannyasi* is not easily answered - a personal tragedy or frustration, a deeply compelling philosophy of life, or a flash of illumination may drive one to seek a change. Whatever the cause, when one becomes a