

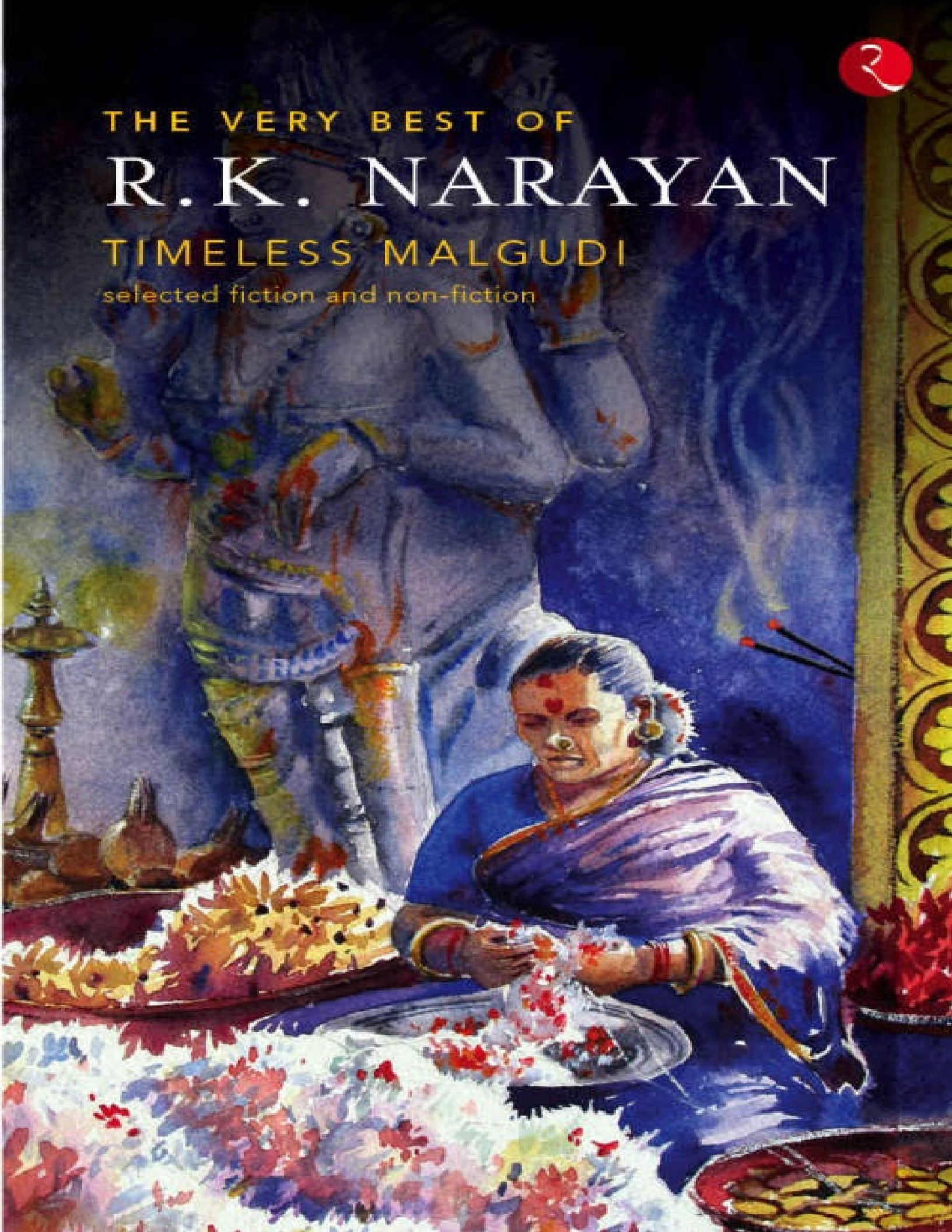


THE VERY BEST OF

R.K. NARAYAN

TIMELESS MALGUDI

selected fiction and non-fiction



~ Timeless Malgudi ~

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NARAYAN

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SELECTED FICTION AND NON-FICTION



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The Genius of R.K. Narayan

In a house in a quiet Mysore neighbourhood, distinctive for the fire of red hibiscus blossoming against its boundary walls, I spent an afternoon, three decades ago, interviewing R.K. Narayan for a long profile I would write about him for a Bombay magazine. I remembered that meeting when I was trying to distil the essence of his genius for this foreword. I suppose the reason I picked that one meeting from our long friendship and association was simple—it was then that I had the clearest personal insight into what underpinned his writing. Like most others familiar with his work I had read a number of theories about what made R.K. Narayan one of the greatest literary writers of our time (or any time for that matter), I was aware of some of his own views on the subject (not that he was particularly forthcoming on his craft), but I was hoping that on this occasion he would finally uncover for me, here in his hometown, that was clearly the place that had inspired his greatest fictional creation, Malgudi, how his fiction was made. I knew the ‘what’ of his genius, and it was this—it was the particularity of the world he had created. A hundred years from now, you will not mistake Malgudi, that little South Indian town with its railway station, its Mempi Forest, its Sarayu River, its Ellamman Street, its Nallappa’s Grove, its Lawley Extension, its Krishna Dispensary, its bank, its little bazaar, the temple, Gaffur’s taxi, and its myriad other details, for anywhere else. Its colours will not fade, the yellow of the plantains in the shops on Market Road will gleam as brightly as ever and, the jilebis in its sweetshop will never grow stale... And these are, of course, the smallest part of its magic. Much more important are the dozens of immortal characters that Narayan created in book after book, the small men (and women) with big dreams whom V.S. Naipaul and John Updike and other great writers have marvelled at, the Margayyas, the Swamis, the Ramans, the Vasus, the Sampaths, the Rajus, the Rosies, the Daisys, who wandered the streets of Malgudi, scheming their schemes, living their lives, falling in and out of love, delighting us with their antics, providing us with all manner of insights into the human condition with the lightest of touches, each of them keeping the world of Malgudi forever alive, fresh and vital, even if the rupee in twenty-first

century India is a fraction of its value in Narayan's little town and the anna no longer exists. That, in short, was the 'what' of R.K. Narayan. Now all I needed to know was the 'how'. How had he managed to pull it off? What was the secret of his writing? Being the exquisitely courteous man that he was, who would never let a guest or a friend leave empty-handed, he did try to give me something for my efforts, though it may not have been exactly what I was looking for. First, after offering me some superb home-brewed filter coffee, he showed me around the house that he'd had constructed to his specifications, especially the many-windowed study on the top floor from which he could look out upon the town which had provided much of the raw material for his stories, novels and reports (Narayan had been a newspaper and magazine reporter— this was one among the jobs he had tried out before settling down into his career as a writer of fiction). In the course of that afternoon he told me that he didn't care much for theories about how fiction was made, all that he tried to do was capture in his work the endless possibilities for drama and entertainment that were offered by his fellow human beings in the town and in the countryside every single day, the moment he set foot outside the house. He said he loved watching people, and the endless theatre of human existence was an unending source of material for his stories. He said that though he couldn't or rather preferred not to explain exactly how stories materialized or how novels began, ideas seeped into his mind from the people and situations he had observed in the streets of Mysore from the time he was a young man and that's how it all began. And that, so far as he was concerned, was all there was to be said about the 'how' of his method and 'craft'. Elsewhere, he says much the same thing, in the introduction to one of his story collections: 'All theories of writing are bogus. Every writer develops his own method or lack of method and a story comes into being for some unknown reason anyhow.'

So my advice to you, the reader of his book, is not to waste too much time analysing the writer's method or craft but to just enjoy the stories and essays for themselves. Writing doesn't get much better than R.K. Narayan at his best.

New Delhi
September 2013

David Davidar