

I N T R O D U C T I O N

A novelist of all humanity

R. K. Narayan's novels are like a box of Indian sweets: a highly-coloured container conceals a range of delectable treats, all different in a subtle way, but each one clearly from the same place. There are fourteen novels in the oeuvre – enough to create a world. Enthusiasts of his work will read them all and return to them time and again. The busy, or the less committed, may open the box and take out one at random – it does not really matter which order one reads them in. But be warned: the consumption of one leads to a strong craving for more.

Narayan's life spanned the twentieth century, which meant that he belonged both to an old world and a new. At the time of his birth in 1906, the British Raj, that astonishing imperial conceit, was firmly in place, as were those iron-clad notions of caste that were to prove so difficult to shrug off. The British presence in India had brought with it a large civil service, an educational system, and railways – to all of which institutions the people of the subcontinent took with enthusiasm. But it had also brought with it a language, and the literature which that language created, and it is this which proved a most productive legacy. The British took English to India and the Indians gave back a literary tradition which continues to delight and enrich us to this day. Contemporary writers such as Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, or Anita Desai, whose novels have given such pleasure to readers in Europe and North America, stand rooted in a tradition which R. K. Narayan, as one of the earlier Indian novelists to write in English, did a great deal to establish.

Although Narayan did not draw attention to his personal life, he did write a memoir, *My Days*, which tells us a great deal about his boyhood years and the inception and development of his literary career. His childhood was fairly typical of that of a middle-class boy of the time. His father was the headmaster

of a school, a somewhat stern figure in his professional life, and this connection with the world of education is very much apparent in the earlier novels, where schools, colleges, and the whole business of becoming educated play a major role. His father's job required mobility, and Narayan spent a number of childhood years living with his grandmother in Madras. Eventually, though, he joined his parents in Mysore, where he attended the school presided over by his father.

He became a voracious reader, wading through the books and magazines which arrived on his father's desk for the school library. As he wrote in *My Days*:

My father did not mind our taking away whatever we wanted to read – provided we put them back on his desk without spoiling them, as they had to be placed on the school's reading-room table on Monday morning. So our week-end reading was full and varied. We could dream over the advertisement pages in the *Boys' Own Paper* or the *Strand Magazine*. Through the *Strand* we made the acquaintance of all English writers: Conan Doyle, Wodehouse, W.W. Jacobs, Arnold Bennett, and every English fiction writer worth the name . . . Through *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*, and *American Mercury* we attained glimpses of the New World and its writers.

This sense of distance, of being a participant in a culture and yet not being of it, is a familiar feature of the literature of what is now the British Commonwealth and it is vividly portrayed in Narayan's novels. Colonialism hurt and damaged those subjected to it, but it would be inaccurate to portray the process as being a simple matter of subjugation and humiliation; it was far more complex than that. The writer in the colonized country tended to soak up the culture of the colonial power and feel a familiarity and some affection for it, even though the experience of colonialism may have demoralized and destabilized his own colonized culture. This damage, although it may later be seen for what it is, is passed over: in his mind he is a member-in-waiting of a broader community of letters. His aspirations, though, are likely to be dashed; his yearning unfulfilled. Although he may not realize it, the metropolitan culture is largely indifferent to him and his world: the literary circles after which he yearns are distant, impossibly out of reach. Of course, the conquest is feasible, and literary doors

INTRODUCTION

may open. Narayan himself made it, as did others, although some did so by leaving the culture in which they had been brought up. Narayan remained in India – an Indian writer who was happy to be read by those outside India but who remained firmly within the world into which he had been born.

The young Narayan was not a great scholar. Having failed his university entrance examinations, he spent a year reading and writing before he eventually succeeded in being admitted to the BA course at Maharaja's College. During this year he acquired a copy of a book called *How to Sell your Manuscripts* and started to send his literary efforts off to magazines in London. He met with no success, encountering for the first time those pieces of paper so familiar, and yet so devastating, to the aspiring writer – the printed rejection slip. In due course he completed his studies and graduated as a Bachelor of Arts. There then followed various attempts by his father and others to secure him a position. These were mostly unsuccessful, although they eventually bore fruit in the shape of a teaching post where he was immediately required to teach Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* to a class of burly and uncooperative boys who had no interest in poetry. His teaching career was a dismal failure and shortly afterwards he walked out of the school and returned home. That was that: he would become a writer.

How many have made that decision, and how many have failed. And how many aspiring writers have written their first novel in the belief that it is fiction, only to discover that it is really about them, and, quite commonly, about their childhood. *Swami and Friends*, Narayan's first novel, is a novel of boyhood which draws heavily on his own experiences. Narayan sent the typescript to a series of publishers in London and became accustomed to having it returned at regular intervals. He experienced similar rejection with the short stories which he was now writing, although he eventually succeeded in his ambition to get into print abroad when a piece he wrote for *Punch* magazine in London was accepted and produced a handsome fee of six guineas.

Narayan was to use this small measure of success to persuade his future father-in-law that the financial prospects of a writer were not entirely gloomy. But he needed more than this: the

R. K. NARAYAN

unsuitability of his horoscope was seen by his intended bride's family as being a major drawback to a possible match, and it was only after lengthy discussions that the marriage was able to go ahead. Narayan's personal experience of the vagaries of matrimonial astrology was later reflected in the highly amusing account of astrological discussions in his second novel, *The Bachelor of Arts*.

Now married, Narayan began to earn a living as a journalist. *Swami and Friends* was still doing the rounds in London, with no success, and in desperation he wrote to a friend in Oxford, advising him that if the manuscript were to be returned to him from the publisher who was then considering it, he should weigh it down with a stone and throw it in the Thames. Fortunately the friend ignored this instruction and continued to show the manuscript to prospective publishers. Eventually he showed it to Graham Greene, who was then living in Oxford, and asked him to read it. It sat on Greene's desk for some weeks and then eventually, in one of those moments of great good fortune which occur from time to time in literary history, Greene was sufficiently excited by the book to recommend and secure its publication in October 1935.

The publication of a first novel is one thing, security in the literary world is another. *Swami and Friends* was well-reviewed, but was not a commercial success. In the years that followed, Narayan had to seek a variety of different publishers, and it was to be some time before his reputation was secured amongst a wide international audience. His personal circumstances were also sometimes difficult. In 1939 his wife, Rajam, died of typhoid. Narayan was devastated. In *My Days* he wrote:

I have described this part of my experience of her sickness and death in *The English Teacher* so fully that I do not, and perhaps cannot, go over it again. More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction . . . The toll that typhoid took and all the desolation that followed, with a child to look after, and the psychic adjustments, are based on my own experience.

After the publication of his fourth novel, *The English Teacher*, in 1945, Narayan's writing entered a period of greater maturity

INTRODUCTION

and confidence. The autobiographical element which had been so obvious in his earlier writing became less prominent, allowing him to develop his characters more freely. With the growing critical success of his novels in the West, he began to lead the life of the successful literary figure both in India and abroad. He travelled widely and, in time, was showered with honours. He did not leave his accustomed milieu, though, which was Mysore, where he built himself a house, went for rambling and talkative walks, and savoured the quotidian pursuits of life, including agriculture, which he studied with interest. In 1989 he was appointed to membership of the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the Indian Parliament. His inaugural speech there was on the subject of Indian children. Children, he said, were being deprived of time to play or to look at birds and trees. In 2001 he died. His mind was clear to the end, and on his death-bed he spoke of his desire to write another novel. This was the man who had confessed to friends: 'I have become lazy since I entered my nineties.'

Narayan's novels are sometimes described as simple. The prose is indeed limpid, the descriptions clear, and the emphasis is on direct and intelligible storytelling, invoking a cast of vivid characters. To the modern reader, accustomed to artifice and allusion, this may give the books a slightly dated feel, and yet it is this quality of simplicity and directness which makes them such fine works of art. Narayan is a storyteller first and foremost, a characteristic which puts him in the company of the great nineteenth-century novelists as well as those twentieth-century writers, such as Somerset Maugham, who believed that the novelist's business is to narrate. His storytelling, though, sometimes has a somewhat rambling flavour, with plots that can wander and which sometimes betray an absence of resolution. But this is not necessarily a flaw: real lives are often aimless and unresolved, and when we read of such lives in literature we are quick to recognize their authenticity. There is nothing false in the world which Narayan creates – quite the opposite, in fact: these novels convey the taste and texture of India with a vividness which strikes the reader as utterly true. Even those who have no first-hand experience of India will

feel that what they experience in reading these books is a taste of the real place.

The favoured setting of Narayan's novels is Malgudi, an imaginary town which he describes as having 'swum into view' when he sat down to write *Swami and Friends*. Malgudi provides the strong sense of place which suffuses these books. This is India distilled – an urban India, but one in which a hinterland of jungle, of small villages, of wide plains is still present. When we read about Malgudi we feel we are there, and this powerful impression is created not by detailed descriptions of the countryside or buildings, but by the characters themselves and the suggestive nature of their thought and their speech. It is the voice which is distinctive here. It is a voice which is rooted in a world-view quite different from that which we will encounter in, say, a modern novel located in North America or Western Europe. This voice is sensitive to a distinctive tradition in which the accumulated beliefs and social practices of centuries inform the smallest act. It is a wholly different way of looking at the world.

The four novels in this volume form the first phase of Narayan's career as a novelist. In them we see the author working through a number of concerns which, as a young man, were very much on his mind. These include boyhood (*Swami and Friends*), education and the finding of a role in life (*The Bachelor of Arts*), and marriage (*The Dark Room* and *The English Teacher*). In these early novels, we also see the development of Narayan as a writer, as he makes his way to the more mature and confident vision of the later novels. *Swami and Friends* is episodic in nature, which is exactly what the life of a young boy tends to be. Boys on the whole do not to have a long-term plan; they live for the moment, act on impulse, they pursue new enthusiasms and abandon old. Boyhood friendships, though, can persist, even if they may be tempestuous and competitive. The portrayal of Swami's relationship with Rajam, the son of a senior police officer, reveals how posturing and social embarrassment can loom large in the dealings a boy has with his friends. So many of us can remember the strength of that childhood feeling that our friends have more impressive

INTRODUCTION

parents, houses, cars, than we do. Narayan paints a deft picture of that particular anxiety.

In *Swami and Friends* we are given an early sight of the humour which runs through Narayan's novels. One of the features of British colonialism was the export of cricket, a game which strikes North Americans as being opaque and slow-moving. But at the time that *Swami* was written, cricket was more than just a sport – it stood, quite absurdly, for the whole ethos of an empire. Thus although we see Swami raised to heights of indignation by a political orator who laments the passivity of his countrymen which has allowed them to be dominated by an alien power, when it comes to cricket the boy is sufficiently enthusiastic to spend some time trying to explain what the game is all about to his aged grandmother. This comic scene, like so much of Narayan's humour, has a strong poignancy to it. The grandmother represents the old India, a world in which cricket is not played. Her ignorance of the rules is a vivid metaphor for the extent to which the old and the new India are different worlds. The cricket episode also allows Narayan to portray the naive aspirations of the boys. This is a familiar theme in many of his works, where so many of the characters are striving for something which is often just beyond their grasp.

Narayan's second novel, *The Bachelor of Arts*, again contains autobiographical elements but is much more satisfying in its structure than *Swami*. Chandran, the protagonist of this novel, is a typical Narayan hero – he is modest, slightly at odds with his surroundings, and engaged in a search. The search in this case is for freedom, and it takes place in the face of all the constraints which the Hindu family and wider Indian society can place in the way of a young man eager to find himself. It is in this novel that we see one of Narayan's main preoccupations come to the fore. This is marriage, and the complexities that Indian marriage involved and, indeed, still involves. Contemporary Westerners are sometimes astounded by the sheer fuss involved in an Indian marriage. In particular, the elaborate negotiations and the very large sums of money spent on celebrations impress outsiders, especially those who are accustomed to relatively informal weddings. The traditional

Hindu marriage, however, is an altogether different thing from the typical arrangements of a Western couple: it involves the families on both sides, who are strongly interested in the suitability of the other side for a union. This means that the young man or young woman who nurtures hopes of a love-match, detached from considerations of social position or caste, may be heading for a major confrontation with family members who have very different ideas.

The Bachelor of Arts tells of a young man whose views of life, including marriage, are more 'modern' than those of his family. His relatives are immersed in the traditional beliefs of their religion: marriage is not a matter of personal choice, but something that is divinely ordained. As Chandran's mother points out to her son: 'It is all a matter of fate . . . You can marry only the person whom you are destined to marry and at the appointed time. When the time comes, let her be the ugliest girl, she will look all right to the destined eye.' And in a letter which he writes to Chandran's father, the intended bride's own father says: '... we can only propose. He on the Thirupathi Hills alone knows what is best for us.' When Chandran's horoscope is found to involve incompatibilities with that of the girl whom he wishes to marry, the full force of this fatalistic view of human affairs comes home to him. What can a young man do in such circumstances other than give in or defy the convictions of everybody about him? And the prospect of revolt defeats Chandran, who is ultimately drawn back into the world of family and tradition, even although he does succeed in negotiating for himself a certain freedom. This process of self-exploration, challenge, and finally reconciliation is a familiar theme in Narayan's fiction. In a sense it mirrors Narayan's own life as a man whose vision and understanding transported him beyond the rigid beliefs and practices of his society but never took him away from that society. And that central message – that we can be ourselves to an extent but that we all need to be anchored in society – is really a very attractive feature of these novels. Ultimately we feel comfortable and secure in reading Narayan because we detect in his work a resolution, an acceptance that we ourselves need in our own lives.

If there is a great deal of light and freedom in these two

INTRODUCTION

charming early novels, then in his third novel, *The Dark Room*, we enter graver, more disturbing territory. Marriage is the common theme of three of the novels in this collection, and in *The Dark Room*, which Narayan was to describe as an early women's liberation novel, we see how the traditional Hindu marriage could trap women in complete subservience. Savitri is married to a tin-god husband, Ramani, a man who runs a branch office of an insurance agency, who is prosperous enough to drive a car (remember that this novel was published in 1938), and who expects in his home-life to be danced attendance upon by his wife. The portrait of this domestic tyrant is a compelling one, and we are also appalled, but fascinated, by the coquettish Shanta Bai, with whom he starts an affair. The conduct of this affair is beautifully described as Narayan directs his gaze at the shoddiness and deception of the office romance. At the end of the day the patient Savitri, driven to an attempt at suicide as the only way out of her intolerable situation, returns to the matrimonial home and her unapologetic husband, defeated by centuries of custom. Hers is an awful fate, and although the position of women in traditional societies has improved, we might leave this book remembering that there are many women for whom this story would still ring very true.

Marriage again plays a central role in *The English Teacher*. Narayan lost his wife to typhoid, and that is what happens to the central character, Krishna, in this novel. It is very sad, and very painful – just as it must have been for him in real life. The grief here is described with great tenderness, in passages that are quite haunting in their simplicity. The prose is like a funeral bell: solemn and resonant. As in the earlier novels, the idea of acceptance looms large: ultimately the hero, Krishna, has to accept the fact of the loss of his wife and the loneliness that follows. He has fought against this brute fact by attempting to communicate with her through paranormal means, but this leads nowhere, in the same way as all the smoke and mirrors of the various mystic figures who parade through Malgudi seem ultimately to lead nowhere.

R. K. Narayan is a much beloved novelist, and for very good reason. Although the books in this volume were all written more than half a century ago, they are the freshest, the

R. K. NARAYAN

most sparkling of gems. The struggle of the characters against social restrictions, their struggle to be something other than that which social destiny appears to be forcing them to be, are struggles with which we can all identify to a greater or lesser extent. As Samuel Johnson observed, many people waste part of their lives trying to be something they are not. Eventually, of course, they may come to realize what they really are, and if that happens to be a citizen of a small town, rather like Narayan's Malgudi, bound up with neighbours and their concerns, sewn into a family and a nation, then there are very much worse fates than that.

Alexander McCall Smith

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH is a professor of medical law at Edinburgh University. He was born in what is now known as Zimbabwe and taught law at the University of Botswana. He is the author of over fifty books on a wide range of subjects, including the internationally bestselling novels of the No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series and the Sunday Philosophy Club series. He lives in Scotland.