

R. K. Narayan, India's Prolific Storyteller, Dies at 94

Author, Publisher (1906 – 2001)

R.K. Narayan, the literary chronicler of small-town life in South India and one of the first Indians writing in English to achieve international acclaim, died yesterday in Madras, India. He was 94.

Long before writers of the subcontinent broke free of the passions and ideologies of the independence movement and Partition, Mr. Narayan explored the value of village traditions and the lives of ordinary people. In the 1930's, he created a town in South India that he called Malgudi and populated it with characters who could be fussy, tricky, harmlessly rebellious or philosophical -- but who were always believable. Mr. Narayan would return again and again to Malgudi in many of his 15 novels and many short stories.

Although Mr. Narayan's writing may strike many foreign critics as dated today, his books accurately portray an India that hovers between the unchangingly rural and the newly industrial and that is still filled with individualistic, often eccentric personalities that recall his imagined universe.

Mr. Narayan's biographers, Susan Ram and N. Ram, have noted that Malgudi "connects with a rural hinterland, and jungle and forest are never far away." They added: "This town teems with life, abounds with color. To wander any street, peer through a window or push open a door is to encounter a character."

As a fiction writer, Mr. Narayan preceded by more than half a century the current crop of Indian novelists writing in English about ordinary people living their ordinary, or sometimes extraordinary, lives.

Although he wrote exclusively in English to a relatively small audience in his homeland, Mr. Narayan did not deal, except indirectly, with the impact of Britain on India and the struggle for independence. V. S. Naipaul once observed that Mr. Narayan was interested not so much in the social changes that came to his archetypal Indian town as in "the lesser life that goes on below: small men, small schemes, big talk, limited means: a life so circumscribed that it appears whole and unviolated, its smallness never a subject for wonder, though India itself is felt to be vast."

In addition to nearly three dozen novels and several short-story collections, Mr. Narayan published a memoir and countless essays during his rich literary life. He was never short of causes, especially the environment. While in his 80's, he took on the plight of Indian children and made them the subject of an unusual inaugural speech in India's upper house of Parliament, the Rajya Sabha, to which he was named in 1985 for his cultural contributions to the country. Children, he said, no longer had time to play "or look at birds and trees."

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayanaswami was born in Madras on Oct. 10, 1906, one of several children in a middle-class family. He shortened his long South Indian family name to Narayan in 1935 at the insistence of Graham Greene and his

English publisher, Hamish Hamilton, according to the Rams. Mr. Narayan was a Tamil Brahmin, a member of arguably India's most intellectually gifted caste and of a community intensely devoted to education and the arts that has produced, in addition to writers, a number of renowned scientists.

Because his father was a headmaster in the government educational service who traveled frequently, and his mother was a frail woman, he was largely brought up by his grandmother, who arranged lessons for him in Tamil and fascinated him with her Indian tales and poetry. His grandmother also had a steady stream of visitors who stopped in her backyard to have their horoscopes read and to receive advice about their love lives. His childhood days with his grandmother and her visitors provided the material for much of his writing.

After his father was transferred to a school in another South Indian city, Mysore, Mr. Narayan studied at the Maharaja of Mysore's Collegiate High School. In 1930, he graduated from the maharaja's college, tried teaching for a short and unhappy spell and then plunged directly into writing full time, a profession almost unknown in India, then or now. His family was shocked but supportive.

"I chose to be writer," he later told a radio interviewer, "mainly because it is the only career which guarantees absolute freedom to live as one pleases."

In his long, productive life, Mr. Narayan became his own publisher, a step he took when World War II cut him off from Britain. He also wrote occasionally for newspapers and magazines. His work earned him a number of Indian awards, including the Padma Bhushan, the country's highest prize. He was an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and his papers and manuscripts have been given to Boston University and the University of Texas.

He was never much of a self-publicist. "Everyone thinks I am a writer with a mission," Mr. Narayan once told his biographer, "but I write only because I'm interested in a type of character, and I'm amused mostly by the seriousness with which each man takes himself."

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