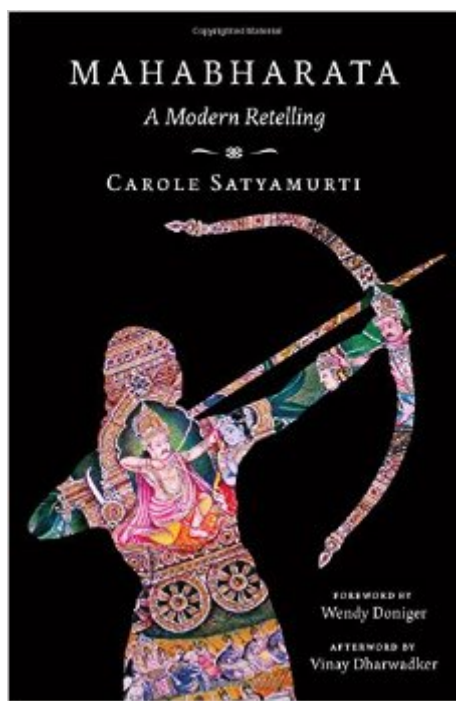


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Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling



Synopsis

“Astonishing. . . . [Satyamurti’s Mahabharata] brings [the] past alive . . . as though it were a novel in finely crafted verse.” • Vinay Dharwadker

Originally composed approximately two thousand years ago, the Mahabharata tells the story of a royal dynasty, descended from gods, whose feud over their kingdom results in a devastating war. But it contains much more than conflict. An epic masterpiece of huge sweep and magisterial power, “a hundred times more interesting” than the Iliad and the Odyssey, writes Wendy Doniger in the introduction, the Mahabharata is a timeless work that evokes a world of myth, passion, and warfare while exploring eternal questions of duty, love, and spiritual freedom. A seminal Hindu text, which includes the Bhagavad Gita, it is also one of the most important and influential works in the history of world civilization. Innovatively composed in blank verse rather than prose, Carole Satyamurti’s English retelling covers all eighteen books of the Mahabharata. This new version masterfully captures the beauty, excitement, and profundity of the original Sanskrit poem as well as its magnificent architecture and extraordinary scope. Map

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Customer Reviews

“What is found here is also found elsewhere; but what is not here is not found elsewhere.” • Because of its extraordinary length “the longest known epic poem in world literature, breaking the tape in its current full translation at just under 6,000 pages” the Mahabharata has always been problematic for English readers. The central kernel of plot “the rivalry of the Kourava clan for the Pandavas, leading to the huge, life-engulfing Kurukshetra

war” became, during the long period of its composition (roughly, 300 BCE to 300 CE), the backdrop for a vast variety of subplots, side tales, who-was-there recitations, genealogical listings (much like the Old Testament’s tangle of begats), practical advice on governing and, most centrally, innumerable disquisitions on the rights and wrongs of things. Unlike its companion work, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata is not just an epic but a dharma text, a work of moral instruction, and one in which, more often than not, the best choice available to its characters in any situation is the lesser of two distinct evils. And its scale is part of its message. In the Iliad, the scenes of violence tend to be man to man, warrior to warrior, but the battles in the Mahabharata are enormous, cataclysmic; the imagination-stretching numbers of the battlefield dead are part of its message of the pyrrhic nature of military victory. The text reached a size where pieces of it began to peel off and be read separately: the Bhagavad Gita, of course, to be read eventually by many Western readers who have little idea of its connection to the original epic, or the moving story of Nala and Damayanti, a redemptive version of the disastrous wagering that causes the Pandavas to be cheated of their kingdom, or the story of Sakuntala, which became the substance of a play by Kalidasa, one of the great pieces of the Indian repertory. The Mahabharata, touch it where you will, is the literary analogy of those Indian temples so elaborately, bewilderingly covered with sculptures that the mind boggles” and which in turn analogize the vastness of India itself. There have been decently readable earlier one-volume abridgments of the work, by William Buck, C. V. Narasimhan and Chakravarthi Rajagopalahari among many others, but they were workmanlike rather than inspired, and all of them erred in the direction of whittling the tale down to its central plot, with none of the curlicues and digressions surviving. But W. W. Norton has now published (2015) **THE MAHABHARATA: A Modern Retelling**, by Carole Satyamurti, 850 pages of blank verse, and a genuine astonishment and success. Working from older translations, Satyamurti has found an idiom for her tale; her verse carries us through not only the shock and tumult of the battle scenes but through the laments, the expositions, the side tales, the locales that range from the lush scenes of the Indian forests to the splendors of the Pandava court, even the two long books of political instruction, and including one of the most powerful and beautiful renderings of the Bhagavad Gita yet in English. So common is the Mahabharata in India” in its many translations and retellings, its stage and tv versions, its comic book and children’s book forms” that Ramanujan once wrote that no Indian ever hears the Mahabharata for the first time; but if you are an American reader new to the story, this is, simply, the best place to start. This is a version which allows us to possess the story emotionally, as we can possess Homer and Virgil and Dante only in versions which carry the mark of the artist in their translation; I find myself pairing it in my mind with Robert

Fitzgerald's translation of the Iliad. Part of the issue with tackling the vast original is the glacial pace of the narration; the Mahabharata can take a very, very long time to say relatively little. "Tell me all in great detail," one of the interlocutors says, and it does, it does. Satyamurti has taken this huge agglomerated text and sculpted from it a version that moves with admirable pace and yet preserves much of the original's staggering welter of invention; she has taken a catchall text and made of it a work of art in proportion as well as content. Here is the Mahabharata made accessible to a Western readership in a way it has not been before. I am the brilliance in the brilliant," Krishna says in the Gita; "Have no more fear. Now I am the friend you know."--Glenn Shea, from Glenn's Book Notes www.bookbarnniantic.com

[I have revised my opinion pretty radically (see my comments below), but I have also kept my original review without revision: My favorite abridged/ abbreviated version of the Mahabharata (so far). Of course, one 'should' read the complete text.... Of course.... But its 8,000 or so pages...! I have the complete English version (the freebie from Gutenberg) and have read a bit of it. But it really helps to have the core story in mind while the complete version is drifting hither and thither. Some have complained that the author prefers to use a kind of free verse. If it bothers you perhaps you might prefer the version by Ramesh Memon. So far I've found none of the abridged versions completely satisfying. There is one that condenses the story and then has straight translation of sections in between the condensed version. It's not to my taste (for now...), but you might love it! In short: this version grabs my interest and it seems likely I will actually finish it! And that, I suppose, really is the key. UPDATE (28 November 2015): I've modified my evaluation a bit (quite a bit in fact since I dropped my evaluation from 4 stars to 3...). As I noted above, I liked this version - and the poetic aspect - and felt upon completion that I had a real feel for the basic story.... Then I went back to my Ramesh Memon, The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering, which I had previously stopped reading - believing it to be a bit... well, overdone might be the word I used at the time.... And discovered that Carole had utterly and completely omitted the magic from the book! She passes over the 12/ 13 years of exile with a quick poetic summary that left me happy at the time that I had read only her summary and not the 'boring' full version. Then..., I read the same section in Ramesh Memon's version...! And found that Carole had left out the entire mythic story! The flying saucers, magic weapons that seem straight out of Star Wars and humanoid creatures reminiscent of Tolkien's Immortal Elves - all utterly missing from Carole's text! So my present recommendation is to save your money and either jump into the complete translation (free on the internet and found on for no more than a couple of bucks) (although this is NOT what I suggest) OR you can pick up the

Ramesh Memon text (called The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering). OR you can go a different route and go with Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata by Devdutt Pattanaik who takes a completely different approach. The author of Jaya holds your hand as you try to pick out the basic story and just figure out who is who, how they relate (and often just how they are related!) to each other and what exactly is going on. Plus the author considers aspects of the story in context - for example: how is it that the heroes do such bad things! And what is going on (in the context of the story) in the Bhagavad Gita (considered a holy book, but only a chapter in the entire Mahabharata)....My suggestion is simple: begin with Devdutt Pattanaik, An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata - this will give you a basis for going deeper (and let you determine if you even want to go further!). Then grab a copy of Ramesh Memon, The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering. And finally, if you have a strong constitution, you may delve into the actual unedited translation(s)....

This is a fine, ambitious attempt to put a compressed version of the Mahabharata into what sounds like modern American" poetry. I have read other translations, in addition to prose retellings and commentaries, and appreciate the formidable task faced by Satyamurti. My hesitation in giving this book a higher rating comes from my disagreement with the choices she made to simplify and smooth out the flavor of the original. I also disagree with her decisions to omit certain episodes and to over-simplify others. Certainly, however, these were tough choices to make, and no one will agree with any translators decisions in this regard, given the vastness of the epic. The book will perhaps be an adequate (though misleading) version for some readers who are coming to the Mahabharata for the first (and perhaps the last) time. But for me, too much is lost, not least the horror, suffering, supernatural interventions, raw mysticism, spirituality, devotional love, motivations, and other elements that are unfamiliar and therefore challenging to English-language readers. Satyamurti has attempted the impossible, and she should be praised for that; and no translator can possibly get the Mahabharata "right." But this one left me feeling that too much of the intensity and "foreignness" had been left out in order to make the epic palatable to Satyamurti's presumed audience.

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