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## A Note on R. K. Narayan

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By CHARLES R. LARSON

Often there is something disappointing about reading the autobiography of a major writer. The story is left unfinished; one suspects that much of what should have been said has been omitted; the thin line that frequently separates fiction from fact begins to blur. Indo-Anglian writer R. K. Narayan is aware of these limitations, as his recent memoir, *My Days* (Viking, 1974, 186 pages, \$8.95), clearly illustrates: “. . . how can an autobiography have a final chapter? At best it can only be a penultimate one; nor can it be given a rounded-off conclusion, as is possible in a work of fiction. The ending in a book of this sort must necessarily be arbitrary and abrupt.” This passage appears near the end of Narayan’s memoir, signaling—as I interpret it—a return to the writing of fiction, now that he has done his duty and gotten the autobiography out of his system. This is not, however, to suggest that there is something wrong with *My Days*. Far from it. It is simply that Narayan’s memoir is a lesser contribution to world literature than his ten novels or his several collections of short stories, though there are passages in it as fine as anything he has written.

R. K. Narayan has long been one of the most respected Anglophone novelists of India—winner of his country’s highest humanitarian awards, repeatedly mentioned as a possibility for the Nobel Prize, yet still relatively unknown in the United States. His first novel, *Swami and Friends*, was published forty years ago (after a difficult uphill struggle, as *My Days* so clearly illustrates), yet it was almost twenty years after that before Narayan’s works were available in American editions. In 1953 Michigan State University Press began publishing his novels here, since no trade publisher could be persuaded to publish them. In 1954 Michigan State brought out *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts*, Narayan’s second novel, in a combined edition, after publishing a later novel (*The Financial Expert*) the year before. (In the early 1960s Viking Press became his American publisher.)

There is much in these early novels that is typical of Narayan’s later work: the effete young men, indecisive, uncertain of their roles in society; the crisis of life, often one of spirituality; the symbolic conclusion, indicating a new maturity, coupled with a return to the traditional value system. This pattern is successfully repeated in Narayan’s most significant works: *The English Teacher* (published in the United States as *Grateful to Life and Death*), *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Guide*. Again and again Narayan gives us the account of an evolving consciousness, beginning in isolation and confusion and ending in wholeness (peace within the traditional Hindu faith); yet his stories always seem fresh, his characters always original.

What distinguishes Narayan from his contemporaries (Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and the younger novelist, Kamala Markandaya) is his comic vision coupled with the creation of his invented city, Malgudi, generally considered the literary synthesis of Mysore, where Narayan has lived much of his life, and Madras, where he was born. It is the creation of an entire fictive world (Malgudi and its environs)—perhaps best

characterized as William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County turned upside-down—that most strongly describes Narayan's literary achievement. As his readers become more enamored with his work, they slowly become a part of Malgudi itself: its streets, its smells, its colorful people. However, the comparison with Yoknapatawpha County should only be carried so far, for while Faulkner's vision remains essentially grotesque, Narayan's has been predominantly comic, reflecting with humor the struggle of the individual consciousness to find peace within the framework of public life. (As an illustration of this, consider *Waiting for the Mahatma* and the obstacles Narayan encountered simply by choosing to write a comic novel about Gandhi's followers.)

*My Days* contains much that is typical of literary biographies—especially the account of a young man's struggle to become a successful writer. The narrative begins when Narayan is a child, living with his grandmother in Madras. Narayan describes his school days in some detail and his later abortive attempts at carrying on the teaching tradition inherited from his father. There are comic incidents here, just as there are in his novels, though the tone is generally more subdued. Since his father was the headmaster of a distinguished secondary school, Narayan had access to the books in the school's library, resulting in his early addiction to English novelists: Scott, Dickens, Rider Haggard, Marie Corelli, Thomas Hardy.

The organization of *My Days* is not chronological but associative, successfully blending anecdote and reminiscence. Readers familiar with Narayan's masterpiece, *The English Teacher*—the story of the death of a young teacher's wife and his subsequent communication with her through spiritualism—may be startled to learn that of all his works, that book is the most autobiographical, based on his own wife's death in 1939. In one of the most moving passages of his memoir Narayan writes,

Perhaps death may not be the end of everything as it seems—personality may have other structures and other planes of existence, and the decay of the physical body through disease or senility may mean nothing more than a change of vehicle. This outlook may be unscientific, but it helped me survive the death of my wife—though I had missed her so badly while she was away at Coimbatore. I could somehow manage to live after her death and, eventually, also attain a philosophical understanding.

Narayan's memoir concludes with a description of his much more sedentary life as an established writer. A sense of humanity—the individual's turning outward toward the world around him—dominates the final sections of his autobiography just as it does all of his novels. (In the last chapter we see Narayan appealing to the civil authorities of Mysore to save the city's frangipani trees.) *My Days* is the fitting capstone to a brilliant literary career; yet, as Narayan hints, his personal story is far from being completed. Hopefully, Narayan's feelings about Malgudi are the same.

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