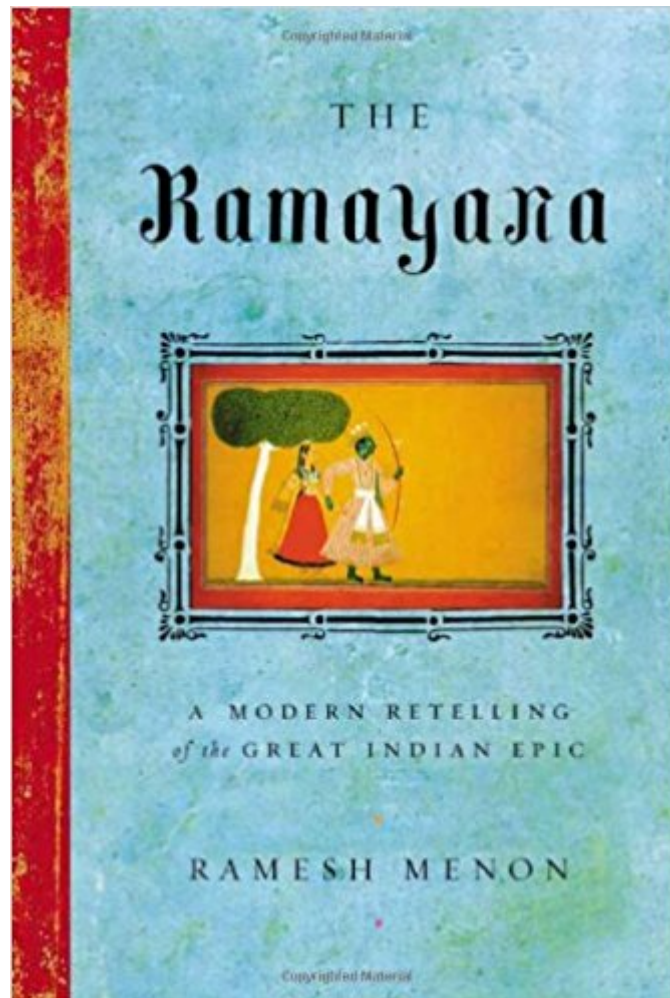




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The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling Of The Great Indian Epic



Synopsis

The great Indian epic rendered in modern prose India's most beloved and enduring legend, the Ramayana is widely acknowledged to be one of the world's great literary masterpieces. Still an integral part of India's cultural and religious expression, the Ramayana was originally composed by the Sanskrit poet Valmiki around 300 b.c. The epic of Prince Rama's betrayal, exile, and struggle to rescue his faithful wife, Sita, from the clutches of a demon and to reclaim his throne has profoundly affected the literature, art, and culture of South and Southeast Asia-an influence most likely unparalleled in the history of world literature, except, possibly, for the Bible. Throughout the centuries, countless versions of the epic have been produced in numerous formats and languages. But previous English versions have been either too short to capture the magnitude of the original; too secular in presenting what is, in effect, scripture; or dry, line-by-line translations. Now novelist Ramesh Menon has rendered the tale in lyrical prose that conveys all the beauty and excitement of the original, while making this spiritual and literary classic accessible to a new generation of readers.

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Customer Reviews

"A beautiful new rendering of an inexhaustible theme." Peter Brook, Film and Theatre Director
"Reverent, lyrical, and engaging, Menon's retelling is an impressive addition to the voluminous lore--oral, written, and performed--that collectively comprises the Rama story tradition of India and Southeast Asia. Combining the basic narrative of the ancient Sanskrit epic of Valmiki with strands from medieval devotional versions and hints of Western epic, folktale,

and scripture, it brings this great story to life once more for an English-language audience. — Philip Lutgendorf, Associate Professor of Hindi and Modern Indian Studies, University of Iowa — “This is a beautifully re-told Ramayana. Menon finds the perfect balance of detail and narrative excitement. It’s the best single-volume version of the Ramayana. — Ariel Glucklich, Associate Professor of Hinduism, Georgetown University, author of *Sacred Pain* and *Climbing Chamundi Hill* (forthcoming).

Text: English (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a beautifully written book. I urge potential readers NOT to be put off by strange names and the foreign vocabulary—think of how many odd names (certainly not in common use in contemporary culture) the fans of *The Lord of the Rings* had to absorb for instance. What saved that work, is precisely what saves this to my way of thinking—the writing is simple and compelling, drawing the reader into the plot of the story, and carrying him through to the end, despite the barriers presented by the names. While Tolkien, drawing on his extensive knowledge of languages, fashioned the beautiful names in his books, Menon has had to shoulder the burden of history and a culture at some remove from the English language, and accept the names as a given. Despite this, he succeeds admirably. It is a shame to let biases against strange sounding names act as a barrier to an appreciation of this timeless epic. As a fan of Tolkien—having read *The Lord of the Rings* many many times, I can honestly say that fans of fantasy will find this a very enjoyable read indeed. It is of course a timeless epic from an ancient and rich civilization that still has the power to enchant and move the reader—its great age alone should be enough to show that it is one of the great human epics. And here Menon’s rendering is the best that I have encountered—I have read several others in English. The scenes are told very vividly, and I will be forever grateful to Menon for rekindling my imagination! In a work like this, the original, which is plainly very old, can be very difficult to transcribe for a modern audience, and other attempts have tried to circumvent this difficulty by veering into caricature, or have tried to adopt a formal and stilted prose. This is a remarkable book in the sense that it strikes just the right balance—the author must have thought through these issues very carefully indeed. At any rate, he has succeeded admirably—at least for me! I can feel the events unfold in a very real way—the careful, precise, and simple use of language carries my thoughts into the heart of the events that unfold. (Isn’t informality and precision the hallmark of fine writing?). As for complaints about digressions from the main plot, I find these quibbles frankly absurd. Indeed a great virtue of Menon’s work is an attempt to flesh the whole epic out accurately and carefully. To me,

the side plots serve to situate the main events in a context that enables the reader to appreciate the beauty of this epic more fully. Those who find them boring are missing the more delicate nuances of this ancient classic. I find myself returning to the book often. I also read his two volume work on the Mahabharata. These books have rekindled in me an interest in the cultural history of the land of my birth! I would not have thought this possible before I encountered Menon's work. I have to say that I can never adequately thank him for this.

I found this epic to be by turns charming, thought provoking, and tedious. I don't know how accurate Menon's translation is--obviously, he turns verse into prose-but it is readable and vivid. The main story is intriguing to a western reader for its resemblances to stories I know better. As in the story of Christ, a god comes to earth as a perfect man in order to absolve the world of its sins--except that Rama doesn't do it by taking the sins on himself; he does it by kicking the bad guy's ass, eventually. As in the Iliad, we have the tale of a siege over a stolen woman (but not the story of the hero's sulk). There is even a subsection--in which Ravana seeks the secret of eternal life--that reminded me of Gilgamesh. And some of the fantastic adventures remind one of the marvelous sections of The Odyssey--there is a cyclops, for instance. This main narrative provides the occasion for much storytelling; the first and last books, especially, function as anthologies of Hindu myths that provide the backstory for the characters and actions of the main plot. Hindu cosmology is more prolific, picturesque, exuberant, and complicated than the Greek. (Hebrew monotheism by comparison feels utterly austere.) There is no keeping track of all the divine beings or all their transmogrifications. There seem to be myriad supernatural realms, all intermingling with each other and the early realm. Like the Greek gods, the Hindu gods are deeply involved in the human drama, sometimes, as in the Iliad, watching the battle almost like fans in stadium seats. The Hindus are more audacious with time; ages last 1000s of years, and human kings reign routinely for 1000 years. The Ramayana's cinematic descriptions of warfare prefigure our own reality. The warriors' supernatural arrows--called "astras"--behave like modern missiles, the most powerful of them described in terms that would fit a nuclear holocaust. Their aerial chariots behave like jet fighters. Rama has a special vehicle, the vimana, or "crystal ship," that resembles a flying saucer. As in our own day, below all the pyrotechnics, the grunts on the ground are still bleeding and dying in countless numbers. But just as on-screen razzle-dazzle soon bores me, so I find tedious the repetitive accounts of battle that form the core of Book 6. Not surprisingly, Rama and Sita--as ideal types--are among the least interesting characters in the book, only taking on a bit of flesh when they fall prey to their human weaknesses--jealousy, grief, pouting. If Rama and Sita represent the ideal, then the ancient Hindu

ideal--like that of the Hebrews and the Greeks--endorses the subjugation of women, strict class hierarchy, and wars of dynastic conquest. Rama banishes Sita, even though he knows she is pure, just because the people will talk. The obsession with female purity is mixed throughout the book with lubricious descriptions of rape and feminine sensuality. Back on the throne, Rama finds it his duty to kill a low-caste man for performing a rite of purification. Rama then cleanses himself of the killing simply by sacrificing a very expensive horse. Meanwhile, he is sponsoring wars of conquest, some involving genocide, assuring that his brothers and nephews all have thrones of their own. Again not surprisingly, the bad guy is more interesting. Like Milton's Satan, Ravana is at times grotesque, at times noble, at times a figure of fun. One moment he is citing ancient texts and seeming very professorial; the next moment he gets all worked up about Sita and his extra 9 heads pop out like little ids to chatter and contend with the ego. The citizens of Lanka seem strictly upper crust, with impeccable taste in landscaping and architecture--if only these cultivated, well-read demons would not make a habit of hosting orgies. Most compelling are the vanara, the monkey people. Sugriva, once Rama installs him on the vanara throne, goes on a three-month bender, drinking and whoring, forgetting his promise to help Rama find out where Ravana lives. (How is it that nobody seems to know where the world's most evil guy, living in what appears to be the world's most beautiful city, lives?) Hanuman is my favorite. A mixture of power, humility, wit, and charm--a good-hearted trickster--he is the hero of Book 5, perhaps my favorite section. Growing to Paul Bunyan proportions, he takes a flying leap across the sea to Lanka, where he then shrinks into a marmoset who scampers through the lovely city to the garden where Sita is being held hostage. He and Sita have an almost flirtatious relation--but only because Hanuman's virtue is never remotely in question. He allows himself to be brought before Ravana so that he can tell him what Rama has in store. The foolish demons give him a sendoff by setting fire to his tail, but grown into a giant again, he sets the whole town on fire. Suddenly he remembers Sita and is stricken with panic and remorse--has he in his fit of temper killed her? Sita, immune to fire (her purity, remember), laughs at his concerns and sends him off to give Rama a scolding for being so slow to fulfill his destiny.

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