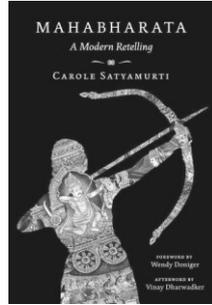


**ETERNAL AND INFINITE\***  
**ANNE STEWART ON CAROLE SATYAMURTI'S**  
**MAHABHARATA**

\* taken from Foreword by Sanskrit scholar, Wendy Doniger



Satyamurti's 'modern re-telling' of the ancient Indian epic story of the Bharata dynasty won the Roehampton Prize in 2015 and is a major work!

Coming in at nearly 900 pages, if you like a good yarn, and a long read, and would enjoy an immersing journey amongst the bewildering array of Gods and tales inherent in Indian culture, this book is definitely for you.

Hindu culture was a vague list of names and notions to me. Vishnu, Ganesha, Hari Krishna, Sita, Rama, Shiva 'and all that lot', the brahmin, our general perception of wise Indian sages; but these are the tales and concepts that Indians take in with oxygen and breast milk because they're inherently in the thinking, the language, the sayings and so on. Here's how this book 'grew on me':

- from dipping into a few pages of Satyamurti's blank verse: I knew I was going to love it.
- from the back cover, "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. A seminal Hindu text ... it is also one of the most important and influential works in the history of world civilization": I felt quite intimidated but, as I already knew I was going to love it, it was clearly a manageable challenge.
- from reading the Foreword and Preface and Afterword (to get my bearings): I was certain that this would probably be my best chance of ever finding my way in to some understanding within that tangle of tales. I was also intrigued with the concept, according to Wendy Doniger, that it had never been intended to be set in stone but that it was (is) considered 'an ongoing conversation' between generations across the ages, with each storyteller responding to the original in their own way.
- and, from reading the first 23 pages of the poem: I knew it would be a rollicking tale seeking to understand the wisdom and pitfalls of negotiating life as a human being and the paths of right and wrong. I was champing at the bit and I already knew that I wanted to review it.

It is educational, for me at least, but also a 'fun read' – I'd laughed out loud twice already by that stage, thanks to Satyamurti's brilliant wit and the gods exhibiting folly at man's expense right from the start.

The *Prologue* covers the point that the originator of the tale, Vyasa, had "conceived this masterpiece / not just for the high born, but for all. / Those of humble birth, laborers, women / should hear his poem and be enriched by it" and that "All should have access to the edifice / that was his narrative."

These quotes from the *Prologue* are spoken by the person about to narrate it to a particular audience and speak of the creation and intent of the poem, and it seems in keeping with what I understand the received original is aiming for. Dharma is 'righteousness, right conduct'.

"What the poem contains concerning dharma,  
pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and final freedom,  
may be found elsewhere. But you can be sure  
that what it does not contain is found nowhere."

“The poem was a map of the labyrinth,  
the moral maze, that is our life on earth”

“All the wisdom of the world is in it.” [this line quoting words spoken by Vyasa]

Satyamurti has also included several useful reference sections:

The Contents list includes a ‘briefing’ paragraph outlining what the poem addresses there. For example, 1. *THE BOOK OF THE BEGINNING*, item 2. *Dhritarashtra and Pandu*, begins ‘Bhishma, as regent, arranges marriages for the Bharata princes...’

A map of India ‘at the time of the *Mahabharata*’ is included, showing the major sites the book refers to, and, at the end, as well as the usual *Acknowledgements* and *Suggestions for Further Reading*, there are two *Genealogies* – one titled *The Older Generations* and the other *The Younger Generations*. Then comes a *Glossary* of principal characters and Sanskrit terms, including a short pronunciation guide. I found the *Genealogies* and *Glossary* particularly useful as I progressed through the book so that I could recap on who was what – and who had done what – to whom.

I would love to report some of the exciting tales and moral dilemmas, or even to give you the gist of some of them, but the space available for the review is limited, and it has seemed more important to offer the overall flavour. But rest assured that there is derring-do and there is wisdom and edification...

... right from the beginning the “gods and demons fought for supremacy”. Earth, personified, enlists the aid of the Lord of Creation to save her from destruction. There are heroes and promises, celestial chariots, snakes and horses and tricky liaisons and battles galore, as “the clouds rained blood. Desperate beasts / bucked and stampeded, breathing in great drafts / of burning air. Men’s cries were pitiful”; as the gods and man – and ‘the gods and gods’ and ‘man and man’ – and man and woman – try to keep a step ahead of each other – yes, despite being last in the list of the lowly who might be permitted to be enriched by the poet’s masterpiece, women are generally writ large and powerful.

You may have the impression that I recommend this book. It’s coming up for Christmas. A nice read for January?

*Mahabharata*, **Carole Satyamurti**, W W Norton & Company, 2015. ISBN 978-0-3933524-9-8. Paperback: found available in UK, new, from £12.99, also available as Kindle and in hardback.