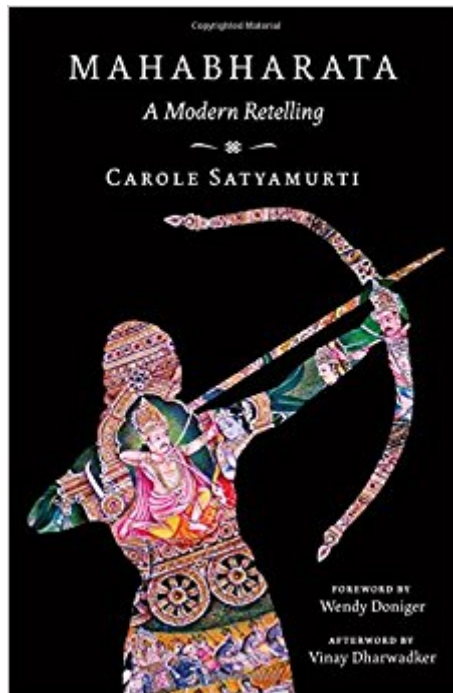




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# Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling



## 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

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A remarkable achievement.” —The New Statesman  
“An exquisitely crafted reminder of the power of the Mahabharata: how riveting a read it is, and how relevant it remains to our times.” —Manil Suri  
“A gift to be grateful for. It gives us, as all poetry should, access into a world we did not know or did not know well enough and which henceforth we will visit

again and again. – David Constantine – “A spellbinding reading experience and a magisterial achievement. – Eva Hoffman – “Like the Iliad, the Mahabharata has everything: love, war, family, gods, all the beauty and horror of life. I hope Carole Satyamurti’s compelling version will introduce this marvelous epic, still largely unknown in the west, to a whole generation of new readers. – Katha Pollitt – “A kind of miracle: a talented English poet has brought alive in blank verse an ancient Sanskrit epic for the contemporary ear and in a language that does not draw attention to itself but captures the weft and warp of the original thrilling tale, including its moral complexity. – Gurcharan Das – “[A] bold and masterful retelling . . . Satyamurti’s version flows with exhilarating clarity and momentum. – Donna Seaman, Booklist

Carol Satyamurti is a poet, sociologist, and translator. The author of many books of poetry, she has taught regularly for the Arvon Foundation and for the Poetry Society (UK). She lives in London. Wendy Doniger (Ph.D. Harvard University) is Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago. She first trained as a dancer under George Balanchine and Martha Graham and then went on to complete two doctorates in Sanskrit and Indian Studies (from Harvard and Oxford). She has taught at Harvard, Oxford, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and the University of California at Berkeley. In 1984 she was elected president of the American Academy of Religion, in 1989 a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in 1996 a member of the American Philosophical Society, and in 1997 president of the Association for Asian Studies. She has been awarded seven honorary degrees, and her book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Vinay Dharwadkar (University of Wisconsin-Madison) is the author of *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture* (2001) and a book of poetry, *Sunday at the Lodi Gardens: Poems* (1994). He is the editor of *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (1994) and *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan* (1999), and the translator of a collection of Kabir’s work called *Kabir: The Weaver’s Songs* (2003).

This is the version of the Mahabharata that I would recommend to those not previously familiar with it, or for those who want a nice, poetic version of the epic. The Mahabharata itself is, in translation, thousands of pages long, and contains within it several entire treatises and other works including the Bhagavad Gita, elaborations on governance, and an abridged Ramayana. It is therefore necessary for an single volume version of the Mahabharata to be an abridgment, adaptation, or

some sort of retelling. I am particularly fond of Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya*, but that book is more conducive to those who are already familiar with the epic, because it recounts several regional and folk versions of the story and works on the assumption that the reader is familiar with basic Hindu concepts. Carole Satyamurti's version of the *Mahabharata* is especially notable because it preserves the structure of the original epic. It is closer to an abridgment than an adaptation, and for the most part keeps the most important parts of the original content without extrapolations or changes. The content itself is poetically worded in an aesthetically pleasing manner that seeks to capture the original intent without cleaving too close to an exact word for word equivalence of the original Sanskrit; Satyamurti is a poet and not a translator. She is a great poet, and this is a beautiful and lively poem. I especially appreciate the effort she took to retain the structure of the original, keeping large parts of treatises on philosophical and political questions wedged between the main plot. The *Mahabharata* itself is so long because of this material. Most people familiar with the *Mahabharata*, Indian or non-Indian, are mostly familiar with the main story, the struggle between the Pandavas and Kauravas, and the workings of Krishna. This edition, however, includes all that along with dialogues about topics relevant to the human condition that could be relevant to people in the present. A final note: yes, this is a secularized version of the epic, intended to be read mostly for its literary and philosophical merits rather than its religious content, in the same way most people today read the *Iliad* without faith in the deities therein. This could be problematic for some, but there are literally hundreds of versions of the *Mahabharata* that take a more pious note, and since this version is aimed mostly at Western audiences, this really isn't an issue. In many ways, by taking a more objective, philosophical, and less reverent stance (that need not be exclusive with belief), this version of the epic does it great justice by allowing it to be seen in a new, more universal and contemplative light, as a meditation on the themes of human existence.

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 translator's 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.

The Mahabharata is a must read. It's been one of my favorite books for years.

A very readable modern translation.

This is such a beautiful edition! The book on it's own, as an object, is amazing.

Love this book as it translates verse by verse. Deeply engrossing.

a beautiful presentation in verse form.

Amazing retelling of an old tale..

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