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Contributor: ROBINSON, Andrew [56836]  
 Length: Text 1543+ Sources 139+ Profile 49= 1731 [word limit: 1500 ]  
 Status: final-mend finish (ff) 22/03/2016  
 Block: com ind [Work level: W]  
 RE: Dr Alex May[33786] AE: Revd Professor Judith Brown [614]

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Production: pw 07/12/2015 pc ..... edit ..... key ..... proof 24/02/2016 [37011]

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**Narayanswami**, Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer [*pseud.* R. K. Narayan] (1906–2001), author, was born in Madras, India, on 10 October 1906, the third of eight children of Brahmin parents, R. V. Krishnaswami Iyer, schoolteacher, and his wife, Gnanambal. His formative years were spent not so much with his parents and siblings as in the house of his maternal grandmother in Madras, with vacation visits to his immediate family, as a result of his father's official postings to schools far from the city. Grandmother Ammani, a woman of strong principles, oversaw most of Narayan's upbringing from the age of two until fifteen, when he finally moved to live with his parents in the princely state of Mysore. Unimpressed by her grandson's school education, she methodically tutored the boy at home, introducing him to the Tamil alphabet, the ragas of classical music, and Hindu mythological tales. Narayan, who had a lifelong aversion for formal education, was in later life grateful for her tuition but dubious about her methods: 'I felt sleepy within a few minutes of starting my lessons; but she met the situation by keeping at hand a bowl of water and dabbing my eyes with cold water to keep me awake—very much like torturers reviving and refreshing their victims in order to continue the third degree', he recalled in his enchanting memoirs (*My Days*, 11).

Narayan's love affair with English—the language in which he wrote all of his short stories, novels, essays, and journalism—began early. English was spoken, alongside Tamil, within his family, as in many educated Indian families of the time. During childhood and adolescence, he steeped himself in western literature in English, such as the novels of Sir Walter Scott, borrowed from the library of the Maharaja's Collegiate High School in Mysore, where Narayan senior was the headmaster and his son a somewhat reluctant student. He also had access through his father to the latest literary magazines published in Britain and the United States, which encouraged his fledgling ambition to be published outside India.

A further source of literary encouragement came, ironically, when Narayan failed the University of Mysore's entrance examination two years in a row—first in English, then in Tamil. This gave him two years of freedom, to wander about Mysore, to read widely, and to try his hand at writing, before he at last managed to enter the Maharaja's College in 1926. There he was fortunate to study English literature with the college principal, J. C. Rollo, a Scotsman with a flair for teaching Shakespeare. Regarding examinations, the professor was 'accessible, and amenable to reason and even to bargaining', Narayan recalled.

He would ask, 'What marks do you expect to get?'  
 '60, sir.' He would pick up the answer paper, glance through it, shake his head ruefully.  
 'I have given you the minimum, of course, but I'll raise it to 40.'  
 'Sir, please make it 52. I want at least a second class.'  
 'All right. I hope your interest in Literature is genuine.'  
 'Undoubtedly.'

(‘My educational outlook’, in *A Writer’s Nightmare*, 109)

Without this ‘noble’ professor, Narayan was certain he would never have passed in English.

Having graduated as a BA in 1930, Narayan was faced with a difficult dilemma. His family, never financially secure, needed him to earn, following his father’s recent retirement. An obvious career lay in school teaching, arranged by his father’s contacts. However, two brief forays into the classroom ended in Narayan’s ignominious flight from teaching.

Narayan already knew he wanted to be a writer, with absolute freedom to work as he willed, even though there was no precedent for an Indian novelist writing professionally in English. He began his first novel in September 1930 while staying in Bangalore with his grandmother, on a day selected by her as auspicious in the Hindu calendar. Completed in 1932, the manuscript was rejected by numerous London publishers before being accepted for publication as *Swami and Friends* (1935). An Indian friend studying in Oxford, Kittu Purna, had shown the dog-eared manuscript to Graham Greene, who enthusiastically recommended it to the publisher Hamish Hamilton. Greene became a lifelong friend and supporter of Narayan and his work, despite never managing to visit him in India. In 1978, Greene wrote of Narayan’s fiction:

he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian. . . . Sadness and humour in the later books go hand in hand like twins, inseparable, as they do in the stories of Chekhov. (Greene, v, x)

*Swami and Friends* describes the everyday existence of a schoolboy, Swaminathan, in a small, fictional, south Indian town, which Narayan named Malgudi. Most of his fiction would be set there. The town’s name came to him out of nowhere, perhaps influenced by two insignificant real places, Lalgudi and Mangudi. Although Malgudi was undoubtedly based to a great extent on Mysore, it also drew on elements from Madras and other places intimately known to Narayan.

Somehow, a Narayan reader is never disturbed that an ordinary Malgudi shopkeeper speaks to a rickshawallah, for example, in English—rather than his native Indian language. For Narayan’s language is mysteriously transparent. ‘I am never aware of any style when writing. I have to adopt an English which is neutral, which has no character of its own, and so anyone may have an illusion of his own language being spoken’, Narayan remarked (personal knowledge). This makes the precise flavour of Narayan’s writing hard to catch in quotation; it is neither ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (in Narayan’s phrase) nor the Indian English of Rudyard Kipling, nor the flawless pidgin of V. S. Naipaul, an early admirer of Narayan as a comic chronicler of ‘small men, small schemes, big talk, limited means’ (Naipaul, 19).

Narayan soon established a considerable literary reputation in Britain with *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), admired by E. M. Forster, and *The Dark Room* (1938), although all of his early novels were commercial failures. He also, in 1934, married—for love, rather than through a conventional Indian arranged match—Rajam Iyer, the daughter of a headmaster, who in 1936 bore a daughter, Hema, his only child. But in 1939 Rajam died suddenly from typhoid, throwing Narayan into a depression that lasted for several years and prevented him from writing another novel until *The English Teacher* (1945), based on Rajam’s death and his attempts to contact her through spiritual mediums. Not until the 1950s, with the appearance of *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *The Guide* (1958)—which established Narayan in the United States in addition to Britain and India—was he in a position to earn a living from writing fiction. In 1956, following his daughter’s marriage,

he began to travel abroad, meeting Greene for the first time in London and writing *The Guide* in California, while living on a Rockefeller Foundation travel grant.

Meanwhile, in 1947 India had become an independent nation. Politics held small attraction for Narayan, but he was always drawn to Mahatma Gandhi, whose intimate spell and complex personality Narayan sketched in his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955). Indeed Narayan, with his bald nut-brown dome and moral shafts of wit, somewhat resembled Gandhi. When the Indian government, beset by scandal in 1988, attempted to push a Defamation Bill through parliament aimed at severely curtailing journalistic freedom, Narayan told the press, in a quip worthy of Gandhi: ‘You should not knock down your physician for an embarrassing diagnosis’ (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 15 Dec 1997). The bill was withdrawn. At this time Narayan served as a member of the non-elected upper house of the Indian parliament (the Rajya Sabha). His maiden speech concerned the plight of Indian children forced to carry heavy schoolbags—echoing his own dislike of academic learning as a boy in colonial Madras.

As he aged, Narayan continued to publish novels, short stories, and essays, generally of high literary quality, often with inimitable illustrations by his youngest brother, R. K. Laxman (1921–2015), an admired political cartoonist, including prose retellings of India’s epics, *The Ramayana* (1972) and *The Mahabharata* (1978). Some stories were successfully adapted for television under the series title *Malgudi Days* (1986). Narayan was now widely, and justifiably, regarded as India’s greatest novelist in English. In 1980 he received the A. C. Benson award of the Royal Society of Literature, and in 1981 was elected an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. But despite being nominated several times for the Nobel prize, like his mentor Greene, Narayan did not receive this honour. His ninetieth year, 1996, saw the publication of a biography covering his life and work up to 1945. Pressed to define the ‘development’ of his writing, Narayan, who relished conversation but resisted discussing his own work, responded with a laugh: ‘I don’t know whether it is a development or a retrograde step—I’m not sure’ (Ram and Ram, xxiii).

In 1992, Narayan left Mysore and returned to Madras, where he lived with his daughter and her family. After her death from cancer in 1994, he was cared for by the family. He died in a private hospital in Chennai (as Madras had been renamed) on 13 May 2001.

Andrew Robinson

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**Text queries and comments:**

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## SOURCES SHEET

Article: *Narayanswami, Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer* pen name R.K. Narayan (1906–2001) [75884]

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2. V. S. Naipaul, *India: a wounded civilization* (1977) [S]
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6. *The Observer* (18 March 1990) [C]
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## ARCHIVAL DEPOSITS

### Named collections

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### Important deposits in other collections

Unknown

### Moving-picture archives

interview footage, *The South Bank Show*, season 6, episode 15, LWT, 13 March 1983 [U]

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## LIKENESSES

1. obituary photographs [CR]
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3. portrait, repro. in *The Observer* (1990) [W] [CR]

## WEALTH AT DEATH

Unknown

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