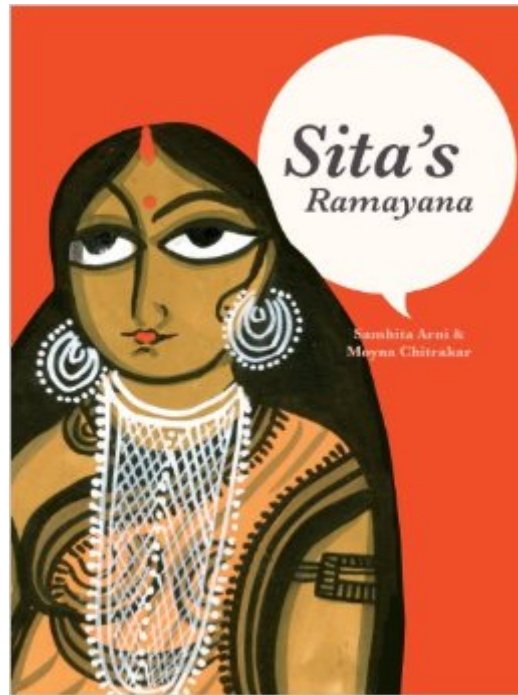


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Sita's Ramayana



Synopsis

The Ramayana is an epic poem by the Hindu sage Valmiki, written in ancient Sanskrit sometime after 300 BC. It is an allegorical story that contains important Hindu teachings, and it has had great influence on Indian life and culture over the centuries. Children are often encouraged to emulate the virtues of the two main characters – Rama and Sita. The Ramayana is frequently performed as theater or dance, and two Indian festivals – Dussehra and Divali – celebrate events in the story. This version of The Ramayana is told from the perspective of Sita, the queen. After she, her husband Rama and his brother are exiled from their kingdom, Sita is captured by the proud and arrogant king Ravana and imprisoned in a garden across the ocean. Ravana never stops trying to convince Sita to be his wife, but she steadfastly refuses his advances. Eventually Rama comes to her rescue with the help of the monkey Hanuman and his army. But Rama feels he can't trust Sita again. He forces Sita to undergo an ordeal by fire to prove herself to be true and pure. She is shocked and in grief and anger does so. She emerges unscathed and they return home to their kingdom as king and queen. However, suspicion haunts their relationship, and Sita once more finds herself in the forest, but this time she is pregnant. She has twins and continues to live in the forest with them. The story is exciting and dramatic, with many turns of plot. Magic animals, snakes, divine gods, demons, sorcerers and a vast cast of characters all play a part in the fierce battles fought to win Sita back. And in the process the story explores ideas of right vs. wrong, compassion, loyalty, trust, honor and the terrible price of war.

Book Information

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Age Range: 10 and up

Grade Level: 4 and up

Customer Reviews

This graphic novel is an interesting retelling of the Hindu epic The Ramayana from the point of view of Sita, the queen of Ayodhya. The words are written by Samhita Arni, who as a child wrote an absorbing retelling of another Hindu epic: The Mahabharata: A Child's View. The colorful, dramatic, appealing pictures are by Moyna Chitrakar, a folk artist who lives in West Bengal, India. Sita is not known for being particularly active or assertive. In fact, her obedience and devotion to her husband Rama are legendary. Yet by focusing on Sita's point of view, this retelling has something to say about a woman's perspective on war and justice. The story begins at the end, with the queen Sita entering the forest and begging the forest to shelter her. The forest wants to know why she was banished from Ayodhya, and she tells her story. This retelling emphasizes Sita's compassion for other women, including those who are considered enemies by the men. She believes that Lakshmana's rash decision to cut off the demoness Surpanaka's nose is the cause of her (Sita's) abduction and the war in Lanka. "Violence breeds violence, and an unjust act only begets greater injustice," Sita says. When she is Ravana's prisoner in Lanka, Sita becomes close to one of her demoness guards: Trijatha, who, unlike the other guards, feels compassion for Sita. It is Trijatha who tells Sita the story of the war between Rama and Ravana. As much as Sita is overjoyed that Rama won the war, she still feels compassion for Mandodari, Ravana's widow, as well as for all the other "enemy" women. "They would be queens no more, and their people had met death on the battlefield-for what? For one man's unlawful desire. . . . It was such a high price to pay.

I got this book for my twelve-year-old daughter to read as part of her study of Ancient India, because I was intrigued with the idea of a warrior epic re-told from a woman's point of view. Along with Sita's Ramayana, my daughter and I read a good, brief summary or two of the Ramayana and several of the cantos (particularly those dealing with Sita) in R.C. Dutt's translation (available on the web). I've come to love this book -- but it wasn't love at first sight. At first, I was rather put off by the illustrations -- definitely not my style and I found them difficult to "read." I often had trouble telling one character from another, or understanding the action. My daughter, who is quite accustomed to reading graphic novels and manga, read half the book and put it down in frustration, saying that it was hard to understand and then her favorite character was killed (I never found out who that was, but it must have been a bad guy!). However, as I read the book slowly and carefully (having first studied the portraits of the "cast of characters" at the beginning of the book), I got better at reading

the illustrations and found that I could understand the story quite well -- and it was beautifully told. And my daughter picked up the book again, finished it, and said she thought she understood it well enough. Then I read the book again, aloud, to my daughter (and we worked together on understanding the illustrations) and this time the poignancy of Sita's story struck me even more strongly.

Sita's Ramayana portrays Sita as the heroine of the epic Sanskrit poem - the Ramayana. Artist, Moyna Chitrakar, also depicts the story through beautiful illustrations. Together, both these elements create an alternate story to the commonly told Ramayana, a story in which is similarly portrayed in the Hindu movie - "Sita Sings the Blues". This story highlights the plight of women in the Ramayana, from Sita's unjust banishment, to the death of Tara's husband. The story stops the idolization of figures such as Rama in order to glorify the unsung heroes and heroines of the Ramayana. The story begins with a pregnant Sita wandering the Dandaka forest. Curious, the forest asked her why she was crying, and it is here that the Ramayana begins to be told. This version of the Ramayana highlights the theme that "violence breeds violence, and an unjust act only begets greater injustice" (Arni, 16). The mutilation of Surpanaka (Ravana's sister), spurred Ravana to take action against the Lakshmana's original bloodthirsty act. Sita is portrayed as a caring individual, wise enough to avoid bloodshed and violence. Her reaction to Lakshmana carving Surpanaka's nose off is shown when she thinks, "Rama should have stopped him" (Arni, 16). And Rama's vices are further highlighted through Sita's observation, "Instead, he spurred him on" (Arni, 16). This gives the sense that had it not been for Rama's original foolhardiness, none of the Ramayana would have come to pass. Sita wouldn't have been kidnapped, Rama wouldn't have been forced to choose between his people and Sita, and Sita would not have gone back into the Earth's womb. Sita image is further established through her reaction to the death of Jatayu, the king of the birds.

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