

The Financial Expert (1952)

Story This is another of R K Narayan's novels to be set in the fictional south Indian town of Malgudi (mostly likely a stand-in for Mysore). It is also another one of his comic masterpieces, combining gentle satire with biting social commentary. The novel tells the story of Margayya, a name that is itself a parody: it literally means 'One who shows the Way,' but he gets lost most of the time. Margayya is a small-time money lender who sits outside a bank, helping middle-class people to borrow money from the bank and lending money to poor people at exorbitant interest rates. He thinks his expertise deserves a bigger stage, and opportunity comes, unexpectedly when his son, in a fit of anger, throws away his father's 'office' (a box containing a ledger, pen, ink, etc.). Now the 'financial expert' must start again. He consults an astrologer, who advises him to worship Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, a recommendation he follows with fierce dedication. Then he meets a man who convinces him that he can make a fortune by selling a manuscript of erotica, which turns out to be true. Then Margayya sets out to gain control over the local school so that his unlikable son can graduate. Again, his son ruins his plans by destroying the school graduation certificates. Later, his son is reported dead in Madras, and Margayya hurries there only to find that this is not true. Now he decides to get his son married, finds the right girl (right kinship relation, age, etc.) and hires an astrologer to study their horoscopes. When the astrologer declares that the horoscopes are not compatible, he is dismissed with a derisory fee. Another pundit is engaged and paid a very high fee with the result that the horoscopes do match. Next, Margayya conceives of a financial scheme for borrowing and lending that makes him rich. Soon his house is filled with bags of cash, but he discovers that his son is visiting prostitutes and ignoring his wife. Suddenly, depositors in Margayya's Ponzi scheme demand their money back and he is ruined. Destitute, he returns to his original position, sitting under the banyan tree outside the bank, borrowing and lending to make a minor profit.

Characters

Margayya The dominant character in the novel, Margayya is a man of large ambitions and little moral guidance. While not entirely venal, he exploits poor people in order to make money and treats his wife with disrespect. He worships Lakshmi, but can only see her physicality and not the spiritual truths she stand for. He is a weak man, blown hither and thither by prevailing winds.

Balu Margayya's son, Balu, is more a projection of Margayya's failed life than a character in his own right. When Balu destroys his father's business by throwing his accounts book down a drain, we understand that this is not a rejection of materialism but rather a dramatization of the failed father-son relationship.

Dr Pal Dr Pal is a cunning man, who convinces Margayya that his 150-page manuscript on erotic love will be a best-seller. Dr Pal (whose medical qualifications are never clear) turns out to practice what he preaches and lures Balu into frequenting prostitutes. Dr Pal also arranges to 'fix' the horoscopes so that Margayya's son can marry the girl whom Margayya has chosen for him.

Themes

Transience As with many of Narayan's novel, *The Financial Expert* is a whimsical exploration of the mystery of life from a Hindu perspective. Margayya experiences several changes, ups and down, financial success and ruin. But on the final page, he ends up where he began: sitting under a banyan tree as a petty financial advisor to villagers.

Materialism As Margayya's life show, life is full of change, but these changes in material fortune do not affect the fundamental truth that material gain is superficial. Even the worship of gods and goddesses, such as Lakshmi, can be distorted if one focuses on the material physical presence and not the spiritual reality it represents.

Family At the same time, Narayan seems to be saying that family relationships can form a bulwark against disappointments in the material world. Margayya meets several people in the course of the novel—priests, astrologers, booksellers, police inspectors—who influence his bank balance. In the end, however, it is his disastrous relationships with his son and his wife that condemn him to failure.