

THE FINANCIAL EXPERT

R. K. Narayan

(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, Dr Pal, 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, Balu, 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.

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.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

MARGAYYA (Pecuniary)

Character Like many of Narayan's central characters, Margayya is both a type and an individual. As a petty money-lender he represents the small-town middle-men who operate outside the formal banking sector but provide banking and financial services to the public, usually the poorer classes who can't get credit with a normal bank. Indeed, Margayya's uncommon name, which means 'one who shows the way,' highlights his stereotypical character. At the same time, in Narayan's hands, this character-type acquires real flesh and blood, especially through his eccentric life-choices and obvious personal limitations. Fundamentally, he is money-mad, devoted to making a profit and raise himself in the world. In this ambition, he is driven by his knowledge that his grandfather and grand uncles were members of one of the lowest of low untouchable castes: those who bear a corpse during a burial. He does rise in the restricted context of a small town, and this makes his unbearably proud and arrogant. He treats bank officials and his family as if they are inferior to him, a status that is consolidated when some of his financial deals bring him great wealth. He is, however, not without some redeeming qualities, one being his great love for his son, Mali, although even that love becomes twisted by his pecuniary aims. At various points in the story, he makes strange decisions—to buy a manuscript of a manual of erotic love, to purchase a grove where another man can complete a religious sculpture and to hire an astrologer who will tell him what he wants to hear. Underneath all these financial shenanigans, Margayya wishes to achieve the Hindu ideal of bliss through self-renunciation. Here, we see, the central conflict in his life, between his ideology of money-making and his belief in the traditional values of Hindu society.

Activities Margayya's activities change as the novel develops, although nearly all involve money-making. First, he sits under a tree and gives advice and money to villagers. Then, he makes money from selling a book on erotic love and later from a complicated Ponzi scheme. At the same time, he also devotes time to the proper conduct of Hindu rituals and worship ceremonies. When he is not involved in financial matters, he is busy controlling his wife and son, trying to mould them into the paragons of society that he is not.

Illustrative moments

Pecuniary In early scene, Margayya sits under a banyan tree dispensing financial advice to illiterate villagers. When one of his 'clients' asks a question, he replies, 'Money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us naturally if we have money in our purse.' He does calculate all things in terms of money because, as the author tells us, '[m]oney was man's greatest need like air or food. People went to horrifying lengths for its sake, like collecting rent on a dead body — it left him [Margayya] admiring the power and dynamism of money, its capacity to make people do strange deeds.'

Cruel He charges excessive interest rates for the illiterate peasants who come to him precisely because they do not trust the bank officials, whom they feel look down on them. Margayya knows this but continues to exploit these vulnerable people.

Cold When his wife, after watching him eat and sleep little, suggests that he should be concerned with his health, he tells her to mind her own business and leave him alone. In the same scene, he tells her that his business affairs are his alone.

Proud When a servant tells him the bank manager wants to see him, Margayya is offended that a peon has been sent to summon him and sends back a message: 'I am the true manager of the bank. He [the manager] can come to me if he has any business to transact.'

Tragic When his son asks for his share of the business, Margayya gives him a pittance. The son says he will take his father to court, a dramatic rejection of the filial piety that Indian society demands. Margayya insults the boy, who then cries. Margayya gets tears in his eyes, puts an arm around his son and says that he must be under the influence of some corrupt lawyer. This dramatizes the tragic nature of Margayya's life: he loves his son, but his materialism forces him to mistreat him.

Discussion questions

Margayya's life is told as a moral tale about the evils of materialism. What nuances does the author introduce into this seemingly clichéd message?

To what extent can we understand, and possibly sympathise, with Margayya's financial ambition?

BALU (Spoiled)

Character Although Balu is a minor character, he plays an important role in the novel for he is a measure of Margayya's initial happiness and eventual downfall. Balu is Margayya's son, his only son, who is pampered by his parents. He receives the normal indulgent love while a baby, but when he gains admission to a selective school, we get some idea of the extent to which his parents will spoil him in later life. Rather than walk their child to the school gates on his first day, they arrange a motor cavalcade. They stand the young boy up in an expensive, hired car while the father walks in front, like a ritual procession. However, Balu is a poor and disinterested student, and later in life (once Dr Pal has entered his life) an unfaithful husband, a drunkard and a scoundrel. These failings and shameful behaviour are more a reflection of his father's fate, which has also become mysteriously coupled with that of the malevolent Dr Pal. In every respect, Balu is the direct opposite of his father: indolent, impetuous, lustful and disloyal.

Activities As a young child, Balu seeks constant attention from his mother. The moment she has finished feeding him, he wants to play. And when he is finished with that, he wants to go outside. At school, he shows no interest, and at home he sleeps or eats. Later, after he meets Dr Pal, who manipulates the horoscopes so that he can marry a girl he likes, he is a terrible husband. He comes home late, or not at all, stinking of alcohol. When his wife, Brinda, upbraids him, he beats her and then falls asleep.

Illustrative moments

Pampered Balu is spoiled from the day he was born, not his fault, we might think, but the excess of his self-centredness is hard not to attribute to his own weakness of character. This imperfection is illustrated in some detail in a scene where Balu has run away from home and then returned. Narayan says that 'Balu devoted himself to the art of cultivating leisure. He was never in a hurry to get out of bed. At about nine o' clock, his father came to his bedside and in general reminded him; had you not better get up before the coffee gets too stale?' On this occasion, Balu sleeps for another quarter of an hour before dragging himself to the breakfast table. Having drunk his coffee, he demands rice cakes and coconut sauce. When he leaves the house, his mother thinks to herself, 'He'll come back for his lunch and after that he'll sleep some more. But he's a good boy and I won't bother him.' Indulged children, especially sons, are nothing unusual in Indian literature (and society), but in Balu, Narayan has created a narcissistic monster, a person of insatiable appetite, who takes his family down with him.

Impetuous Balu changes the course of his father's life, and kickstarts the novel, when his impetuous character is on display in the early part of the novel. His father is a money-lender sitting under the banyan tree, with little money but also few worries, a modest man and relatively content. This is all overturned when Balu, in a fit of rage against his father's discipline, takes his bookkeeping ledger and throws it down a street drain. This act has two layers of meaning. On the one hand, with one spiteful act Balu has ruined his father's business built up over many years: without the ledger, Margayya has no idea who owes whom what. On another level, Balu has taken the whole story 'down the drain,' into the muck of financial greed, sexual lust and betrayal.

Dr Pal (Scheming)

Character Dr Pal (whose medical credentials are never quite clear) is an opportunist, a man of many schemes who changes the life of the protagonist, Margayya. If Margayya is the financial expert, Dr Pal is the (self-proclaimed) sex expert, who tells his friend that these are the only two things in life: money and lust. As a cunning man, Dr Pal insinuates himself into Margayya's life and guides him into several lucrative-looking schemes that fail. Dr Pal is even responsible for poisoning the relationship between Margayya and his son, Balu. Despite his scheming personality, Dr Pal, who says he is a 'journalist and author,' seems to have wide connections in the little town of Malgudi. Whatever his true history, he is altogether mysterious, from his first meeting with Margayya by a secluded pond when he gives his friend a red lotus, to his deceptive generosity and his obscure motives. He claims to have been married and then 'lost' his wife (whether by accident, death or some foul play is not explained), which gives him the experience to write a best-selling sex manual. 'Not to encourage it among the young, mind you,' he tells Margayya, 'but only to help couples have a successful marriage.' His constant focus on sex, in contrast to Margayya's puritanical nature, makes one think he represents the latter's hidden impulses, his unacceptable desires, his id.

Activities Dr Pal leads a shadowy life, and we see him only three or four times in the course of the story, but he says that he spends a lot of time thinking and writing, about sex. At least, he has completed a long manuscript on the subject. He claims to be a journalist and he does appear to have contacts in the small town of Malgudi, although any interaction with those people remains hidden. In fact, he only appears when Margayya appears, like a dark shadow, looming over him.

Illustrative moments

Mysterious Dr Pal's slippery, ghost-like personality is brilliantly illustrated in his first encounter with Margayya. Margayya finds himself lost in a grove and comes upon a pond with dirty water. While he is wondering how to take a bath and how to wash his dirty clothes afterward, he hears someone in the bushes and 'feels a shiver of fear. "Is it a ghost or a maniac?" he wonders. Then, he shouts, "Who are you?" vaguely remembering that if it were a ghost, it would run away on hearing such a challenge. But the answer come back, "I'm Dr Pal." ' Then the eerie doctor wades into the pond and plucks a red lotus for Margayya and gives it to him. Why is he there, in the strange place? Margayya wants to know, and Dr Pal tells him he is there for the same reason that Margayya is there. Margayya nods but he has no idea what the other man means. And so Dr Pal begins to worm his way into Margayya's life, coming out of the shadows in a secluded place and presenting him with a red lotus for no understandable reason.

Scheming The quality underlying all Dr Pal's thoughts and actions is how to gain control over people for his own ends. In a word, he is a schemer. This trait is illustrated in the second meeting between Dr Pal and Margayya, which takes place some time after the first. On this occasion, Dr Pal just walks into Margayya's house uninvited and unannounced. He sees his old friend slapping his son in order to get him to learn his lessons. Immediately, Dr Pal sees an opportunity to insinuate himself into Margayya's life—through his only son, Balu. So, he says, 'You are evidently trying to teach this young man, but don't you know that in civilised countries it is prohibited for fathers to teach sons?' Margayya is stunned and remains silent. 'Now run off, my boy,' Dr Pal tells Balu. 'With your permission, of course,' he adds turning to Margayya. In these few seconds, Dr Pal gains control over Balu, whom he will eventually ruin by introducing him to prostitutes and alcohol, which in turn will destroy Margayya's happiness. Again, the motives for this remain obscure, although the sexual theme is present once more.

Vindictive Dr Pal is not only deceptive, he is also vindictive. He likes to punish people who oppose him or his ideas, or merely for pleasure. This characteristic is shown toward the end of the novel, when Margayya finally begins to withdraw from his advisor, Dr Pal, because he can now see that Dr Pal has ruined his life. As soon as Dr Pal gets the 'cold shoulder' from Margayya, he plots the downfall of his fragile friend. It is easy, he thinks to himself. I've set him up through an investment scheme and now I can take him down through the same scheme. Dr Pal begins a rumour that the scheme is underfunded and will fail soon. Within hours, all the depositors rush to the bank and withdraw their deposits. Margayya is penniless, and only because he dared to withdraw his own friendship from the scheming and deceptive Dr Pal.