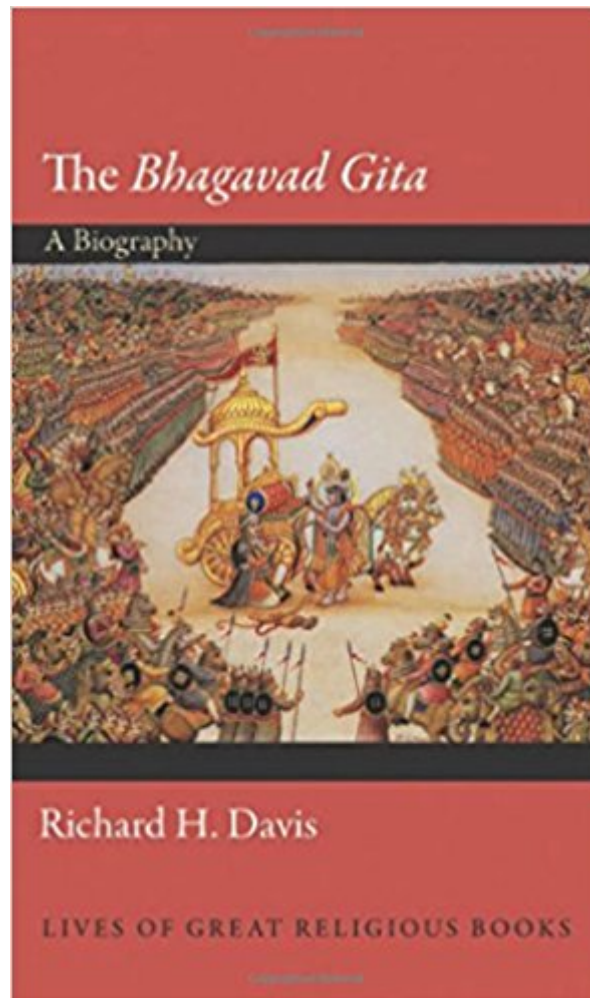




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# The "Bhagavad Gita": A Biography (Lives Of Great Religious Books)



## Synopsis

The Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the most famous of all Indian scriptures, is universally regarded as one of the world's spiritual and literary masterpieces. Richard Davis tells the story of this venerable and enduring book, from its origins in ancient India to its reception today as a spiritual classic that has been translated into more than seventy-five languages. The Gita opens on the eve of a mighty battle, when the warrior Arjuna is overwhelmed by despair and refuses to fight. He turns to his charioteer, Krishna, who counsels him on why he must. In the dialogue that follows, Arjuna comes to realize that the true battle is for his own soul. Davis highlights the place of this legendary dialogue in classical Indian culture, and then examines how it has lived on in diverse settings and contexts. He looks at the medieval devotional traditions surrounding the divine character of Krishna and traces how the Gita traveled from India to the West, where it found admirers in such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Aldous Huxley. Davis explores how Indian nationalists like Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda used the Gita in their fight against colonial rule, and how contemporary interpreters reanimate and perform this classical work for audiences today. An essential biography of a timeless masterpiece, this book is an ideal introduction to the Gita and its insights into the struggle for self-mastery that we all must wage.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Selected for WGBH News "Here are the books we read this year that we think you'll love"

2014" In his masterful new biography of the Gita--part of an excellent Princeton series dedicated to

the lives of great religious books--Richard Davis, a professor of religion at Bard College, shows us, in subtle and stunning detail, how the text of the Gita has been embedded in one political setting after another, changing its meaning again and again over the centuries."--Wendy Doniger, New York Review of Books

In the 21st century, The Gita continues to thrive. India's present Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, gives it out as a gift on his trips abroad. Discourses on The Gita by spiritual leaders are a part of the cultural life of every major Indian city. Some Indians disagree with its vision of ethics or consider it a relic of the past; but even they, too, must engage with it closely in order to refute it. Mr. Davis's book is an ideal introduction to the text, showing how the meanings of a book reside not just in its words but its life in history."--Chandrabhas Choudhury, Wall Street Journal

Like all the great religious books featured in this superb series from Princeton University Press, the Gita has transcended the circumstances of its birth. Rival schools of Hindu theology have risen from various turns of Krishna's phrases, while Westerners have seen echoes of their own traditions. In modern India, Gandhi thought the Gita reflected the eternal battle between light and dark in every human heart, and in the drive for Indian independence, even secular nationalists championed it as a patriotic text. The Gita and the moral issues it raises are still alive."--Brian Bethune, Macleans

In *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*, the latest in the series *Lives of Great Religious Books*, Davis crisply summarizes this oft-quoted Hindu scripture, in which Krishna reveals his true identity as the 'imperishable Lord of All Beings.'"--Donna Seaman, Booklist

The Gita is one of the oldest and most fascinating texts ever written, and I love how its 'biography' comes to life in this new book. It's a living, breathing text that has constantly been in motion since its origin. . . . I should mention this book is part of a new series (*Lives of Great Religious Books*) published by Princeton University Press. Next on my reading list are the biographies of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *Augustine's Confessions*."--April Peavey, WGBH

Davis deftly traces the many reincarnations of this 700-verse poem over the past two millennia, both in India and in the West."--Fiona Capp, Sydney Morning Herald

[*The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*] appears in the worthy *Lives of Great Religious Books* series, which takes a novel approach to *great books*. Davis's execution of this approach is superb . . . Davis neatly organizes a great deal of material and he presents it in utterly accessible prose. This is an easy read - and a great one too."--Choice

Davis . . . provides a comprehensive, detailed and lucid account of the ways that the Gita has lived over the centuries."--Cover Drive

A comprehensive, detailed and lucid account of the ways that the Gita has lived over the centuries."--Sudhirendar Sharma, Speaking Tree

This is a fascinating work; so much is packed in its 243 pages. Being thoroughly researched and documented this serves as a primer on Gita. And also a template for those who would like to study the impact of religious texts on

the life and history of human race."--Paulson Pulikottil, Academia"So much in 243 small pages! Like the Sacred Books of the East in the nineteenth century, the Princeton series offers a fresh canon of global stature; thanks to Davis's superb retelling of the history of this powerful, influential, living classic, the Gita has its honoured place on that shelf."--Francis X. Clooney, Religions of South Asia"A highly enjoyable volume that will be of interest to a large educated audience, to religious specialists, and to historians of modern and colonial India, among others. . . . This volume will undoubtedly and quickly become a classic introduction to the Bhagavad-Gītā, or even more generally to classes on Hinduism."--Pierre-Julien Harter, Journal of Religion

"This is an exciting book about an exciting book, namely, the Bhagavad Gita, a text in which Hinduism comes closest to possessing a universal scripture. Davis traces the varying course of its semantic trajectory through history with erudite clarity. A must-read for anyone interested in the Gita."--Arvind Sharma, author of Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography"No work of traditional India needs a biography more than the Bhagavad Gita, for no text has had a more complicated life, from its birth in the epic world of the Mahabharata to its maturity in Indian modernity. Reading intelligently depends in part on knowing how others in the past have read, and for the Gita's past, Richard Davis has provided the best guidance available."--Sheldon Pollock, Arvind Raghunathan Professor of Sanskrit and South Asian Studies, Columbia University"This superb and beautifully written book represents a substantial contribution to the field, and will become a first-tier resource for anyone interested in the subject. Davis's authoritative voice is a dependable guide throughout. I cannot imagine this book being done better by anyone else."--John Stratton Hawley, author of Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours"I thoroughly enjoyed reading this biography of the Bhagavad Gita. Its uniqueness rests in its breadth and historical scope--each chapter opens new contexts and perspectives. Davis is a careful scholar who writes clear, straightforward prose, remarkably free of jargon."--Diana L. Eck, author of India: A Sacred Geography"Davis examines the Gita in its own time, in medieval and modern India, in its travels to Europe and America, and beyond--in other words, he presents the long view of this book's life. He is very learned and smart, and writes with a minimum of scholarly jargon, in a very accessible and interesting way."--Thomas R. Trautmann, author of India: Brief History of a Civilization

This book is called *A Biography*, as it examines historically the various ways the Bhagavad Gita has stimulated a large variety of responses and interpretations among its readers. The Gita has been considered the most sacred book in modern Hinduism and some scholars

consider it as the best *compendium* of the prevalent philosophical theories of the [Indian classical] time (W. Doniger's review in *The New York Review of Books*, December 4, 2014, page 47). Professor Davis offers us a good introduction to this masterpiece and traces the various ways it has been interpreted to deal with the perennial struggle for self-control regarding our duties. He presents the context of the composition of the Gita, its historical and present relevance, and the central place that it has had, not only in India but also in Europe and the United States. The author is a professor of religion at Bard College, and writes about Indian religion. This volume is part of a series of *Biographies* of great religious books from Princeton University Press. The Gita is the best known piece of the Mahabharata, the longest poem ever written, which literally means "the great story of the Bharatas," the legendary first kings of India, although the poem also deals with the nature and forces that govern the universe, the way humans are organized, as well as about the duties and rituals to be performed. Probably, this epic poem was composed by several different authors. In the Indian culture it is usually stated that "everything in the Mahabharata is elsewhere [and] what is not there is nowhere," and a prominent scholar affirms that "it was like an ancient Wikipedia, to which anyone who knew Sanskrit, could add a bit here, a bit there" (W. Doniger, *The Hindus. An Alternative History*, 2009, page 264). The Gita was composed in the Indian classical period and although it has many references to historical facts, it is not an historical account, it is rather an epic poem; in his recent book, *Why Homer Matters* (2014, page 3), Adam Nicholson says that an epic is neither an act of memory, nor an historical account; its purpose is "to make the distant past as immediate to us as our own lives, to make the great stories of long ago beautiful and painful now." The book covers a large variety of subjects related to the Gita, and it provides a summary of the varied interpretations and influences. As an example of this wide variation, he shows how the Gita inspired both Gandhi and his message of non-violence, as well as his assassin, Nathuram Godse, who claimed that he was following Krishna and his teachings. Professor Davis develops the idea that the Gita forms part of what Aldous Huxley used to call "perennial philosophy," providing universal guidance to all humans; and this is the way this masterpiece has been received in Europe and America. Professor Davis also mentions how the Gita has been presented as a Hindu religious book, thus fostering nationalistic and far-right fanatical political views. He includes an interesting chapter about performances in our time, where he mentions poetic and operatic renditions, as well as "visual performances" and movies which found their inspiration in the Gita. In another chapter, he discusses the translations of the Gita; he mentions that it has been translated over 300 times into English as well as into more than 75

languages. From a select list of 20 English versions, he picks and analyses four exemplary translations from a scholar, a poet, a devotee, and a philosopher; unfortunately, the well-known versions from E. Easwaran, G. and B. Feuerstein, J. Mascaro, and W. Sargeant are not part of his list of 20. Wendy Doniger in her review of the book concludes that this is a masterful new biography of the Gita, but considers the book more than adequately respectful: he leans over backward to avoid offending Hindus who revere the Gita.

Excellent book which provides social, historical and political contexts that give valuable perspectives to anyone who wants to read and study the classic Hindu text. This book is one in the excellent series on great religious books. The author, himself a respected scholar, provides valuable background essential to a true understanding of this classic work.

This was a STOLEN LIBRARY BOOK. I contacted library which confirmed.

A master narrative of the life of a famous text by a master scholar. I would recommend this book for anyone interested not only in the Gita but in Hinduism topics generally. Davis is incredibly informative

Enjoyed it very much. It's part of a great series.

it has a wonderful insight of B.G

This is a worthy entry in this really fine series (I have four of them already), and one of the clearest and most straightforward. I enjoyed it a lot, as someone who has worked on the Gita for years. There is an excellent set of references and bibliography. It is, however, not an exposition or critique of the text in any detail: it is really about the history of the vagaries of the text and its influence. It is interesting in particular how much of the Gita was overshadowed early on by the stories/histories of Krishna as a child, cowherd, etc. as the "bhakti" movement gathered force in the medieval period. A chunk of the book is about the use of the Gita as a political force beginning in the late 1880s, in part as a Hindu "bible" to counter the prestige of Western "bibles". Towards the end of the text there is a discussion of a few recent translations into English (from Van Buitenen to Stephen Mitchell), and a glimpse of various settings where there are oral readings. My study of the Gita was influenced

strongly by Zaehner's old Oxford translation and Winthrop Sargeant's valuable word by word translation and exegesis (neither of which are mentioned here) and I have a fondness for Barbara Stoler Miller's elegant translation (which does get a mention).

This is really a wonderful little book. The author bends over backwards to be fair to the many different traditions of interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita. This includes not only medieval interpreters like Shankara and Jnanadeva; Richard Davis also interviews modern Swamis to hear their understanding of the text. Davis is a historian of religions, and this is a book focused on the reception history of the Gita--if you are looking for a spiritual guide to uncover the essential, timeless truth of the Gita, look elsewhere. But to understand the way the Gita has been transformed by its readers, including modern interpreters like Gandhi, Tilak, and Aurobindo, there is no better book for a general audience.

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