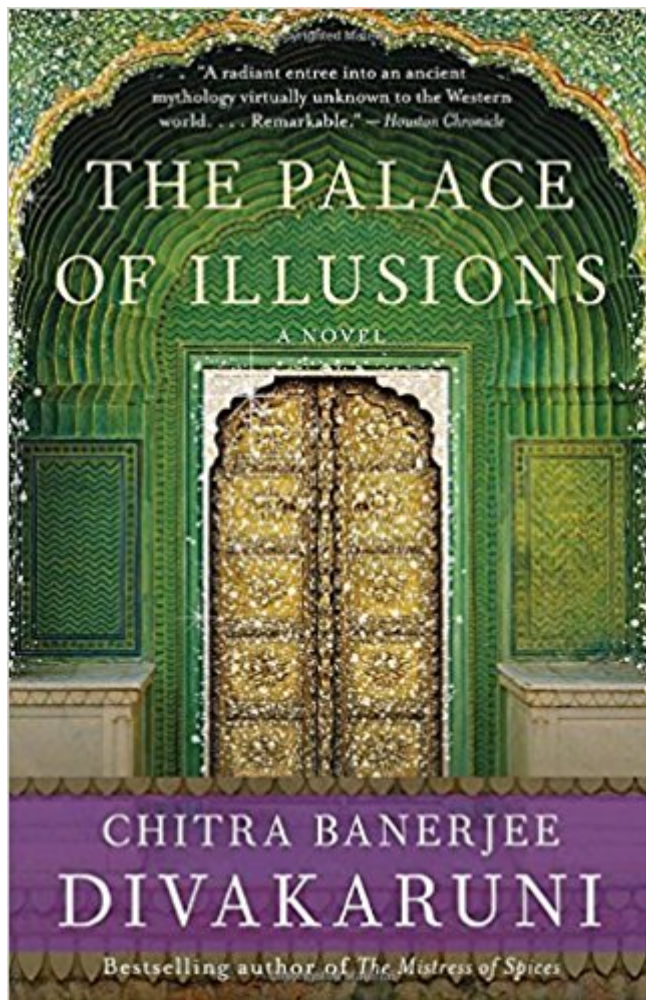


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# The Palace Of Illusions: A Novel



## Synopsis

Taking us back to a time that is half history, half myth and wholly magical, bestselling author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives voice to Panchaali, the fire-born heroine of the Mahabharata, as she weaves a vibrant retelling of an ancient epic saga. Married to five royal husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom, Panchaali aids their quest to reclaim their birthright, remaining at their side through years of exile and a terrible civil war. But she cannot deny her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husbands' most dangerous enemy as she is caught up in the ever-manipulating hands of fate.

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## Customer Reviews

Recasting the Indian epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Princess Panchaali, veteran novelist Divakaruni (Queen of Dream) offers a vivid and inventive companion to the renowned poem. Born from fire and marked with the prophecy that she will change the course of history, the strong-willed Panchaali declares early on that she won't spend her life merely supporting the men around her. Soon enough, she bucks tradition by simultaneously wedding all five famous Pandava brothers, who have been denied their rightful kingdom, and finds herself the happy mistress of the much-envied palace of illusions. Panchaali's joy is short-lived, however, when hubris, fate and the desire for vengeance in reclaiming the Pandavas' kingdom (all also prophesied) cause her and her husbands to make mistakes that have cascading political effects, shattering peace in the region. Devastation ensues, but spiritual remarks from the divine Krishna put life and death in a cosmic

context. Despite an intrusive retrospective voice (I didn't know then how sorely...love would be tested) and a sometimes heavy-handed feminism, Divakaruni's rich, action-filled narrative contrasts well with the complex psychological portrait of a mythic princess. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** The double bind that torques women's lives is Divakaruni's key theme in lambent novels and short stories about women who immigrate to America from India, and the curious ways the deep past seeps into the present. Divakaruni often weaves glimmering threads from the Hindu sagas into her fiction, and now, in her twelfth book, she goes directly to the source, the Mahabharat, India's most magnificent epic, and boldly retells this Homeric tale of a battle for supremacy between two branches of a ruling dynasty and dramatization of the internal war between emotion and reason from the point of view of its central female character. Smart, resilient, and courageous Panchaali, born of fire, marries all five of the famously heroic Pandava brothers, harbors a secret love, endures a long exile in the wilderness, instigates a catastrophic war, and slowly learns the truth about Krishna, her mysterious friend. By rendering the women characters as complexly as the men, and fully illuminating the "insanity of war" and the fragility of civilization, Divakaruni's historic and transporting variation adds new and truly revelatory psychological and social dimensions to the great epic's indelible story of sacrifice and spiritual awakening. Divakaruni has triumphantly fulfilled a profound mission. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I love the idea underpinning this novel: to retell part of the Mahabharat from the perspective of one of the women (specifically Panchaali). Indeed my greatest delight in this book was the insight it provided into the Mahabharat, a work that was already on my reading list, and is now considerably higher on that list. Having recently read "The Iliad," I was interested in parallels between the two books, or, more fundamentally, between "The Iliad" and the Mahabharat. Both deal with interactions between a pantheon of gods and humans. Both have flawed heroes whose destinies are ordained. Both have a war that causes grim and terrible slaughter. "The Palace of Illusions" is nicely narrated by its central character, Panchaali. The voice in which she tells the tale felt suited to its setting, and is at times quite beautiful. I especially admired the eloquent and moving closing chapter. I note, however, that I did end up wondering when and to whom Panchaali was telling the story. This is a

minor quibble, shared by many first person narratives. My one major problem with the book is that I didn't like Panchaali. I can see that other readers might differ. Aspects of Panchaali's personality are very appealing. Her independent nature. Her intelligence. Her strength. But, for me, these were not sufficient to offset negative traits, including her deeply vengeful nature and her deficiency of kindness. Since I'm the type of reader who strongly prefers likable protagonists, this substantially reduced my enjoyment.

Revenge, flawed characters, complex relationships, illegitimate children, riches-to-rags, long drawn climax in the back drop of a war ... Mahabharata is indeed the consummate drama - universal and timeless. It is indeed my favorite epic of all times - the main reason I picked up Divakaruni's book. In the 70's I read the abridged version by Rajagopalachari; in the 80's I watched the soap opera style serialization on Indian National TV. Yet my most vivid memories of the epic trace back to my school days. When I was in the fourth grade, every day after I returned from school, my grandfather used to tell me the story of Mahabharata, which has left an indelible impression on my memory! First, I commend Divakaruni for attempting what she did - presenting the epic from the perspective of the strong yet off beat Draupadi. Personally I have always been fascinated by Karan (Karna) - noble and brave yet somehow flawed- whose life is a series of mis-steps and mishaps. This book made me realize that Draupadi's character is equally complex, her story equally rich in a contorted way. Divakaruni succeeds in drawing out the pathos and immersing the reader into the mind of Draupadi, the wife of five husbands! Resolute, manipulating, ill tempered - dusky Draupadi sounds and seems very real and more importantly succeeds in retaining the reader's sympathy despite her machinations! Even when some writing liberties are taken with respect to the epic content, the result is not jarring. Some of the metaphors are novel. The irony of Draupadi's latent love for Karan while being married to his five brothers is very well captured with adequate attention given to the ancient times when depicting their encounters. Where Divakaruni falters is in telling too much too quickly - which gives the narrative a sense of rush - as if in a hurry to get to the end and over with it. Halfway into the book I started to feel the drama is somehow missing. Crisp scenes to depict the underlying conflict and showing the feelings of her husbands in interaction with Draupadi could have helped retain the dramatic quotient. While Draupadi's epiphany at the end is along expected lines, it lacks the punch to make it memorable. In one of the most crucial scenes in the book, Draupadi is forewarned by Vyaasa of three situations when her reaction would get her in trouble. Yet, when these events happen, Draupadi's reflections are weak or non-existent. A little disappointing that an opportunity for making a greater impact has been missed!

A very ambitious story and practically a retelling of the Mahabharata. Cleverly done in parts by putting episodes in dreams and visions. But a lot is lost by trying to get everything in one novel. However well written. The reader who is familiar with the original epic will not be too disappointed. From a novel woman's approach.

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