

Sons of Darkness

Gourav Mohanty

About this book

A thousand years ago, a Muchuk Und made a pact: he would help Thorin, king of Daevas, defeat his sworn enemies in exchange for access to powerful magic. However, despite enduring ten years of grueling battles to hold up his end of the deal, Muchuk Und was betrayed.

In the present day, a varied cast of characters from all walks of life—Krishna, the farmer-turned-senator; Mati, the ex-pirate trying to do right by her future husband; Shishupal, the former royal ward who just wants to have a normal life; and more—converge in a desperate struggle over a small but valuable kingdom. Ancient elementals, haggard scholars, and warrior woodsmen all lend their talents to different sides of this of this battle, each with their own dreams, goals, and severely tested morals.

. . . and what actually *happened* to Muchuk Und, anyway?

The Mahabharata

Sons of Darkness is an epic fantasy retelling of the *Mahabharata*, a major epic central to Hinduism. The Mahabharata is one of the longest narrative works of all time, and is considered by many scholars to be the longest epic poem ever written.

The story of the Mahabharata primarily focuses on the war of succession between two sets of cousins: the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The Pandavas are five brothers who travel primarily with their mother and their collective wife; the Kauravas are a group of one hundred sons who live a more conventional princely life. The Pandavas are nominally the sons of one man named Pandu, but they were each fathered by different gods. Meanwhile, the Kauravas all share the same father: Pandu's older brother, Dhritarashtra, who took the throne only after the younger Pandu abdicated.

The Mahabharata is full of conflicting alliances and betrayals, epic friendships and failures, philosophical discussions, gods, marriages, miscommunications, and massacres. It has been told and retold (and translated and retranslated) time and time again, and has as many variations as any historical epic.

As you read *Sons of Darkness*, think about how it has been influenced not only by modern fantasy, but also by the rich history in and around this incredible epic.

For discussion

1. The world of *Sons of Darkness* is wide, with many nations and cultures. What are some key differences between the major nations in the book?
2. The arguably most pivotal nation is the nation-city of Mathura. What are your first impressions of Mathura? Is everything in Mathura as it seems?
3. *Sons of Darkness* is a story full of multifaceted characters, each of whom have their own virtues and flaws. For example, Krishna promotes an egalitarian society and recognizes skills in even the lowliest of his peers, but he can also be self-serving and dishonest. On

- the other hand, Shakuni is willingly cruel, but in service of a rigid set of goals. Do you think there are any “good guys” in the story? If so, who? If not, why?
4. In the original Mahabharata, Dhritarashtra is originally passed over for rulership due to his blindness—it’s against the rules of his nation to have a disabled king.
 - a. What forms of disability appear throughout the *Sons of Darkness*?
 - b. How do these disabilities shape the characters’ lives?
 5. Talk about Masha’s role in the narrative as both a character and a storytelling device. What purpose do Masha’s Auguries serve?
 6. Bhanumati (Mati) isn’t a prominent character in the original Mahabharata—she isn’t even named in the oldest recorded version of the epic!
 - a. What does including her perspective add to the narrative?
 - b. How might our take on the story change if Duryodhana was a perspective character instead of her?
 7. Nala changes a lot over the course of the book. Talk about these changes, from both the reader’s perspective (or how the reader sees the character) and Nala’s own perspective. Are these changes for better or for worse?
 8. There are several women who shape the story in *Sons of Darkness*, as both perspective characters and supporting characters (e.g. Asha, Satyabhama, Mati, Lady Rasha, Draupadi, the Silver Wolves . . .). How does the narrative treat women who adopt what we might think of as “masculine” roles? What about those who strive toward “feminine” roles?
 9. Many of the characters in *Sons of Darkness* (for example, Krishna and Parshuram) are based on Hindu gods. How are these characters portrayed? How are they different from characters who aren’t based on gods?
 10. Author Gourav Mohanty openly cites George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire series as inspiration for *Sons of Darkness*. If you’ve read or watched *Game of Thrones*, talk about the similarities between the two stories. Where do you see *Game of Thrones*’s influence in *Sons of Darkness*? What’s brand new?
 11. The Mahabharata is one of the longest stories of all time, at over 200,000 verses and 1.8 million words total. With that in mind, do you find the ending of *Sons of Darkness* satisfying? What do you think will happen next?

Recommended reading (or similar books!)

- ***18 Days: The Mahabharata* by Grant Morrison:** A reimagining of the Mahabharata in sci-fi comic form.
- ***The Priory of the Orange Tree* by Samantha Shannon:** A radical epic fantasy retelling of the story of Saint George and the Dragon.
- **The Mahabharata 3-volume set by Amar Chitra Katha:** The books that author Gourav Mohanty cites as his childhood introduction to the Mahabharata!
- **The Malazan Book of the Fallen series by Steven Erikson; The First Law series by Joe Abercrombie:** Epic fantasy that inspired *Sons of Darkness*.
- **The Pandava Quintet series by Roshani Chokshi:** A middle grade series influenced by Hindu mythology in the style of Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*.
- ***American Gods* by Neil Gaiman:** A modern fantasy convergence of gods from worldwide religions and mythologies.