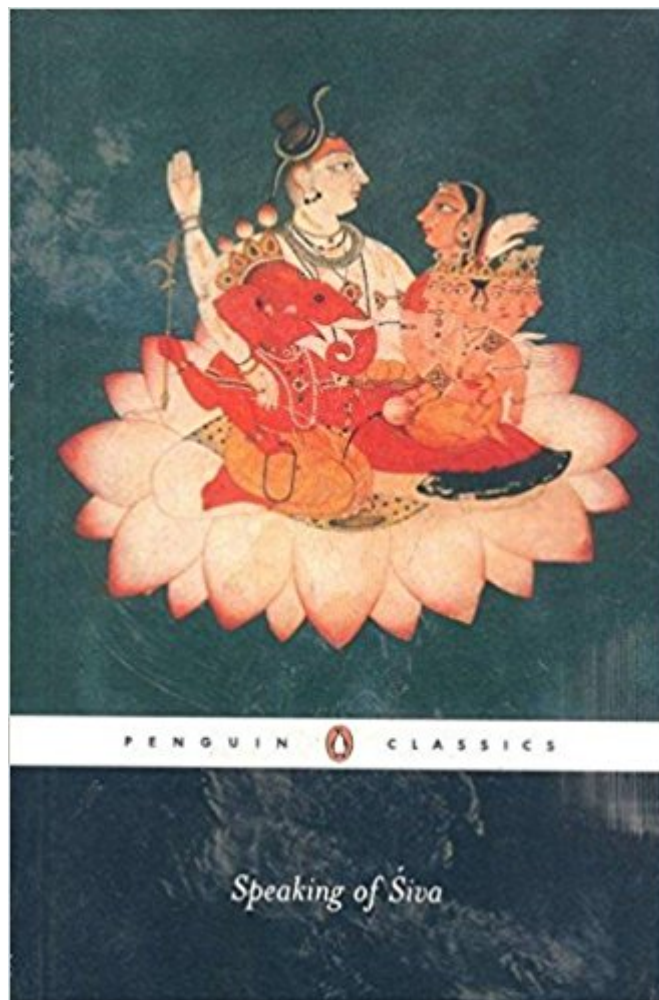


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Speaking Of Siva (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Speaking of Siva is a selection of vacanas or free-verse sayings from the Virasaiva religious movement, dedicated to Siva as the supreme god. Written by four major saints, the greatest exponents of this poetic form, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, they are passionate lyrical expressions of the search for an unpredictable and spontaneous spiritual vision of 'now'. Here, yogic and tantric symbols, riddles and enigmas subvert the language of ordinary experience, as references to night and day, sex and family relationships take on new mystical meanings. These intense poems of personal devotion to a single deity also question traditional belief systems, customs, superstitions, image worship and even moral strictures, in verse that speaks to all men and women regardless of class and caste. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation)

Translated with an introduction by A. K. Ramanujan.

What beautiful poetry! Four different poets writing about the same deity in completely different ways! This is a terrific example of how people view one deity! I love this book and there's writing all over the inside of it because I love taking notes about every bit! It's a wonderful read, in my library forever.

It is a really interesting view on south Indian Virasaiva movement in the 12th century. Very well explain the peculiarity of the poetic forms which developed out of this religious movement. Ramanujan has a clear way of writing . An illuminating reading !

A very inspiring book of poems from true saints and devotees of Lord Siva. I have been enjoying it very much.

A collection of poems from southern India at about 1200 AD from the Siva cult, these poems range from profound intellectual theology to the loveliest of devotionism. A find for readers from all traditions.

These are fascinating medieval Bhakti poems by four Virasaiva saints, devoted to the Hindu god, Siva, translated from the Kannada language. I am in no position to judge the accuracy of the translation, but they read very well. I should point out that they were not polytheists but monotheists who worshipped God under the form of Siva, just as others, for example, would worship the one god under the form of Vishnu. These four poets, Dasimayya, Basavanna, Allamu, and my favorite, Mahadeviyakka, flourished in the tenth to twelfth centuries. They wrote short poems called vacanas, and according to the translator, A. K. Ramanujan, they are the greatest poets in that tradition. They are a selection of their works, and the identification by a number refers to other editions, and does not imply there are hundreds of poems in this relatively short book. The Bhakti saints often broke away from the Hindu caste system and the elaborate temples and ritual systems in the name of personal religion. Poem 820 by Basavanna illustrates this perfectly (p. 89): "The rich will make temples for Siva. What shall I, a poor man, do?" "My legs are pillars, the body a shrine, the head a cupola of gold." (820) These four religious poets were devoted to Siva and generally addressed their vacanas to him. They all give particular titles to their universal lord connected with their experience of him. Three of them use titles connected to particular places where they had their conversion experiences. Basavanna addressed his poems to the "lord of the meeting rivers," and Allamu

Prabhu to the "Lord of Caves." Devada Desimayya's village had a temple devoted to Ramanatha, Rama's Lord, and he used that. Similarly, Mahadeviyakka called her lord, Cennamallikarjuna, apparently related to the form of Siva worshipped in the temple of her village. Ramnujan translates this as "the Lord White as Jasmine," but points out in his introduction that it can also mean, "Arjuna, Lord of the goddess Mallika." (p. 111) The one I find most appealing is the young woman, Mahadeviyakka. She apparently had early devoted herself to Siva, but she was apparently more or less forced into a marriage with a king, which was not successful. She had already regarded herself as married to her "Lord White as Jasmine." Her poems sometimes refer to Siva as her husband and sometimes as her lover, reflecting the conflict. There are stories of her wandering naked, covered with her long hair, to Kalyanna, where Basavanna and Allamu head a school of devotees. Among other things, Allamu asked her about her contradictory behavior, that is, why, since she wears no sari, she then covers herself with the tresses of her hair (no. 183, p. 112-13). "Till the fruit is ripe inside the skin will not fall off. I'd a feeling it would hurt you if I displayed the body's seals of love." Anyway, they accepted her as one of their number. It is reported that she later continued her wanderings in search of her Lord. Tradition has it she died fairly young, in her twenties. For all her independence, we must not read modern attitudes into her work. This is particularly true of her ambiguous feelings about her body. "After this body has known my lord, who cares if it feeds a dog or soaks up water?" (117) I will offer a few phrases from Mahadeviyakka with the numbers of the vacanas: "Seeing the feet of the master, O lord white as jasmine, I was made worthwhile." (45) "loving my lord white as jasmine I have wandered through unlikely worlds." (69) "O lord white as jasmine filling and filled by all why don't you show me your face?" (75) "Since your love was planted, I've forgotten hunger, thirst and sleep." (79) "Take me, flaws and all, O Lord white as jasmine." (251) This book makes available some material which is rather hard to find elsewhere. The poems themselves, though they reflect the broad background of Hindu religious life, nevertheless can have in many respects a universal appeal for those devoted to the Lord.

If you are into Kannada vachanas (prose sayings) or would like to delve into the subject, this is the book for you. AK Ramanujan has beautifully brought out the intricacies of four great vachana composers in 12th century India and removes the veil from what might seem to be a formidable task for non-Kannada speakers. This book can be a great spiritual guide as well, if you are not particularly reading it for the vachanas' sake.

This poetry is of the 10th century Bhakti, or devotional yogic tradition, which eschewed academic

traditions of prosody and style ("...I don't know anything about meter/ I don't know anything of rhyme/ As nothing will hurt you, My Lord Siva, I'll sing as I love..." one poet writes). The book features excellent translations from Kannada (a Dravidian language), especially of the work of Mahadevi-Akka, a Godiva-like figure who left wealth, marriage, home, and ultimately, her would-be teachers behind to wander naked and homeless in worship of her "Lord White as Jasmine." As the destroyer of illusions, Siva is a purveyor of truth, here found in this devotional poetry.

This book became an immediate favorite of mine ever since I picked up a copy of it a couple of years ago. Stunning poems from the Shiva bhakti tradition of India. Basavanna, Devara Dasimayya, Mahadevi, Allama Prabhu. The commentary in the book, though a little academic, is genuinely insightful. Enthusiastically recommended!

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