



Harper Lee in 1961, already a Pulitzer Prize winner for her first, and hitherto only, novel. Now, with Lee aged 88 and reportedly infirm, a second book has been announced for July publication. Photo: Corbis

in 1960 by the town's then only bookshop, Ernestine's. (Lee's father, Amasa Coleman Lee, offered to reimburse the store for the many copies he was sure they would never succeed in selling. The global sales figure for *To Kill a Mockingbird* is now 40 million, and counting.)

And then came the greatest shock of all: a second novel in the offing. That had jaws dropping

around the world, most of all in Monroeville, where friends had heard Lee say repeatedly over decades that there would be no further production.

Sue Sellers, who lived over the road from Lee, recalls her husband asking the author at dinner one night when she would put out her next book. "Her reply was: 'Why would I go and do that when this

one is selling so great?'" That is a question that can now be heard on the lips of many of Monroeville's residents. As one of the world's most perceptive observers of the joys and perils of small-town talk, such comments might tickle Lee's sense of humour. Or maybe they wouldn't. Either way, it seems unlikely she'll ever hear them. Guardian News & Media

Heroic poem repackaged as tweets, now a book

It's the world's longest poem, with more than 100,000 couplets and running to 1.8 million words. *The Mahabharata*, held to be one of India's two great epics, has been told and retold in oral and visual form for centuries across the country. In July 2009, Chindu Sreedharan, senior lecturer in journalism and communication at Britain's Bournemouth University, began to narrate his version on Twitter (@chindu). Over 1,065 days and 2,628 tweets, he unfolded the story of two warring sets of cousins, and the moral discourses contained within the larger thread. Sreedharan's collection of tweets is now out as a book, *Epic Retold*. He talks to **Charukesi Ramadurai**.

Why *The Mahabharata*? What attracted you to that story?

Epic Retold is an experiment, actually. At that point, I was reading a fascinating retelling of *The Mahabharata*. So it was the story foremost in my mind. When I began seriously thinking about it, I became more convinced *The Mahabharata* was a great choice. To keep the readers interested across weeks and months, I needed a powerful story, one rife with drama, strong characters and conflict. *The Mahabharata* had all those. Also, war narration in the media is one of my research areas and, in a rather reductionist way, I had begun to think of *The Mahabharata* as a war story. So there was added resonance for me as an academic as well.

And why in Twitter form?

When I began this in 2009, Twitter was getting big. It was acquiring a variety of audiences, readers who engaged with it differently, more proactively. There were a few writers experimenting with fiction, mostly short stories in 140 characters – what have come to be known as "Twisters". The question that came to my mind was, could you actually tell a longer story here, in a stream of micro-episodes? This was already happening in Japan. People were writing fiction as text messages. If it could work as a series of texts, why not as tweets?

How did you plan this as a complete story? Did you have some kind of chapter plans or targets for each significant sub-story?

I was very excited about it, so I just started publishing straight away, without too much planning. It attracted some media attention, suddenly there were a lot of followers, and the commitment became firm. And I began thinking ahead. I did have an idea of where I wanted to end the story, fairly soon. I didn't think it would work if I faithfully followed the original all the way to the end. I didn't sketch outlines, though. I knew I had to find an entry point that was different and engaging, and I knew I had to end each episode with a cliffhanger. So when I began a new episode, I decided where it would start and where it would end – and then went

ahead connecting the dots. But this all came later, probably after the first few hundred tweets.

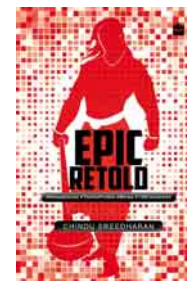
Is this faithful to the original epic? What kind of retelling is your version of *The Mahabharata*?

I think of *Epic Retold* as a realistic retelling. This is not the story of gods and demi-gods. It is a real-world story – of earthy characters, not unearthly beings. It is true to the classic in terms of the main characters and events, but the interpretation is different. It's a first-person narrative from Bhima (a main character from the righteous side), so it is his version. I am also tempted to say this Bhima is different. He's a reluctant warrior, who hates war. So this is an anti-war story.

What were the challenges of writing this – apart from the obvious one of containing each sentence within 140 characters?

Actually, the 140-character limit didn't trouble me that much. After some initial wrestling, I think I found it more liberating than limiting. It demands a level of directness that frees you from the pressure of writing a lot and allows you to just get on with the story. You are not quite writing conventional prose

here. You are writing for a new platform, with its own specific requirements. For me the main pressure was time. I was doing this in between other things, so it was difficult for me to be disciplined. I would disappear for days, weeks, and someone would tweet, "Hey, what's happening?" I don't think I would have finished this but for that.



In your author's note, you talk about the need for the "breathless urgency" expected of every tweet. Tell us a little more about it.

Twitter is a hyper-live publication platform. It's near real-time, and there is a certain immediacy about the interactions on it. To fit in as "Twitter text", and capture audiences used to its urgent stream of bite-sized publications, I felt my story needed to be told as not what happened, but what is happening. Twitter was sympathetic to "presentification"; it was made for what some literary scholars call "NOW moments".

Finally, do you see Twitter fiction becoming popular among book lovers?

There are many now who read fictional accounts on mobile phones and tablets. There are "Twisters", and longer narratives, serialised over time. London hosts a TwitterFiction Festival. There's a wonderful site called Nanoism, which not only publishes great Twitter fiction, but actually pays for it. There are academics studying it, journal papers and book chapters being written – so it already has made a mark.