I WAS IN BENGAL staying at a small village doing research several years ago, when one evening I decided to walk along a shadowy road. Like most foreigners, I was unaware of the dangers lurking in the dark. The sky was already a rich dark blue against the almost black trees, and the few people who were hurrying home gawked at me as if I had three heads. Being quite used to this, I continued to make my way to a grove I had discovered earlier in the day. Luckily, one of my little English students was passing by with her mother. They looked quite worried, despite my happy greeting.

"Don't go there," the girl warned when I explained my quest. "It is a place where jinn live. They will offer you anything your heart desires, but then your soul will belong to them."

I was most interested in meeting a jinni (genie), so I asked her if she had ever seen one. She had not, but she warned me, "You can recognize them by their feet—that's one thing they can't hide. Their feet look like giant bird claws."

I hardly had time to thank them as they scurried off. As for me, I went to see if I could meet a jinni, but they had apparently taken the day off. Jinn are the sometimes-demonic spirits that inhabited the Arab wastelands and deserts, howling on dark nights and often possessing a hapless passerby. How they ended up in Bengal, we will never know, but I suspect that the Muslim imagination that brought the other delightful stories of the Arabs was responsible.

It was in this way that I became fascinated with the things people consider evil. Evil is not always something to do with morality, as we in the West often think. When I once foolishly attempted to catch a large crab-like insect awkwardly scuttling across a temple floor in India, I saw the looks of horror people gave me. They warned me not to touch it, but their expressions told me that it was not just the poison they feared. They regarded the creature with a kind of awe they reserve for evil. Indeed, later I was told that it was an "inauspicious" creature.

When I started to study Zoroastrianism, evil ultimately hooked me. Evil, I found, was simple yet complex, disgusting at times, yet attractive. The sources available for the study of this tradition are scarce, however. I envy scholars of the Indian traditions for their rich sources, yet there were reasons for the scholar in the study of religion to revel in the fact that so few of their brethren have tackled the early Iranian material. I found the study of the Zoroastrian tradition to be the realm of the philologists, who were, and are, making val-

iant attempts to translate and make available the difficult texts. The study of the Iranian texts by scholars of religion has been hampered for several reasons. The most vexing is the corruption of the texts by scribes. The Avesta, for example, was an oral text passed down since perhaps the first half of the second millennium BCE. It was finally put into writing toward the end of the Sasanian period (224–651 CE), but the extant manuscripts date only from the thirteenth through fourteenth centuries. The priests who transmitted the texts orally and in writing, but who did not understand the original language, had corrupted these texts.

Most translations in this book are from the Avesta. In some cases, to avoid lengthy translated passages, I have paraphrased and shortened some translations from various works I have used, and I have given the English translation sources for the benefit of the reader wishing to investigate them further. I concentrate on the period of the Avesta and the earlier Pahlavi texts, with the exception of a few passages from the later texts, especially the Persian Rivāyats. With apologies to all of the learned scholars of Iranian traditions before me, I have had to lighten the text for print and have not been able to acknowledge all of the opinions that have been offered in the past in the understanding of the Avesta. I wanted above all to share my love of these fascinating myths with my students and with the public so that they too can enjoy the world of evil.