

MAJOR RECOGNITION

1973

Booker Prize

1990

Knighted in England

2001

Nobel Prize in Literature

Sir V.S. Naipaul

Born to an immigrant family, V.S. Naipaul spent his life writing of rootless people and cultures in crisis. "For having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories,*" **Naipaul was awarded the 2001 Nobel Prize in Literature**

IN HIS MEMOIR, *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway recounted the romantic lives of expatriate writers living in Paris in the 1920s—Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Escaping the past and embracing a new culture seemed to be a romantic and inspirational act.

V.S. Naipaul's entire body of work is affected by his expatriate life, and he offers a very different account of the experience. Without strong foundations of culture and nationality, the thrill of escaping is replaced by the search for a home. Naipaul has struggled to make sense of his own rootlessness through the characters of his books, who frequently suffer a similar fate.

Naipaul's Hindu grandparents migrated from India to Trinidad as indentured laborers. A British colony on the very outskirts of the Caribbean, Trinidad had an entire population comprised of immigrants from India, Africa, China, Syria, Lebanon, and Venezuela. Naipaul was raised in a large family with Indian traditions, though he would not visit India until he was 30 years old. Colonial life and schooling sufficiently inculcated the appeal of Britain. Naipaul won a scholarship to Oxford University in 1948 and England has remained his principal home since 1950.

Born to a colonial society and raised in an immigrant culture, Naipaul has often spoken of his life-

long quest to feel at home in the world. He traveled extensively through India, Africa, and the Muslim World, and both his travelogues and novels spring from these journeys. His books, colored as they are by his acerbic nature, pessimism, and his own colonial experience, form the basis of his own self-discovery. In gaining an understanding of different cultures, Naipaul hoped he might finally understand himself. As he stated in his Nobel Prize Lecture: "...everything of value about me is in my books. Whatever extra there is in me at any given moment isn't fully formed. I am hardly aware of it; it awaits the next book. It will—with luck—come to me during the actual writing, and it will take me by surprise."

VS Not PC?

The art, the artist, the difference

V.S. Naipaul's viewpoints have caused considerable controversy. He has biting criticism for third world cultures, labeling them directionless, self-defeating, and corrupt. Critics have long argued whether his pessimism and possible prejudices taint his analysis.

There is near-unanimous agreement among Naipaul's friends and acquaintances that he is a difficult man. He can be rude, display biting contempt for foolishness (which he sees everywhere), and can cut

* NOBLE PRIZE CITATION

off relationships with little remorse. He inspired Paul Theoroux to write an entire book about the development and disintegration of their friendship, *In Sir Vidia's Shadow*. Naipaul is also well-known for his indelicate and offending statements. For example, he wrote that the bindi on a Hindu woman's forehead means "My head is empty" and proclaimed a dislike for E.M. Forester because he was a "nasty" homosexual. Derek Walcott, poet and Nobel laureate, accused Naipaul of having an "abhorrence of Negroes." Naipaul doesn't help his case (not that he would deign to make one) when he calls Trinidadians "Monkeys [for whom] drumbeating is a higher activity."

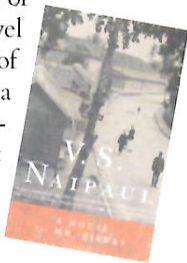
Is Naipaul a prejudiced apologist for imperialism? Or, is he one of the few who can see beyond first world guilt and third world posturing because of his personal history? The power, honesty, and perceptiveness of his writing have helped temper criticisms, and receiving the Nobel Prize has caused more positive reassessments of Naipaul (see "*In Praise of the Nobel*").

MAJOR WORKS

A House for Mr. Biswas (1961)

- ★ Harold Bloom's Western Canon
- ★ #72, Modern Library's 100 Best Novels

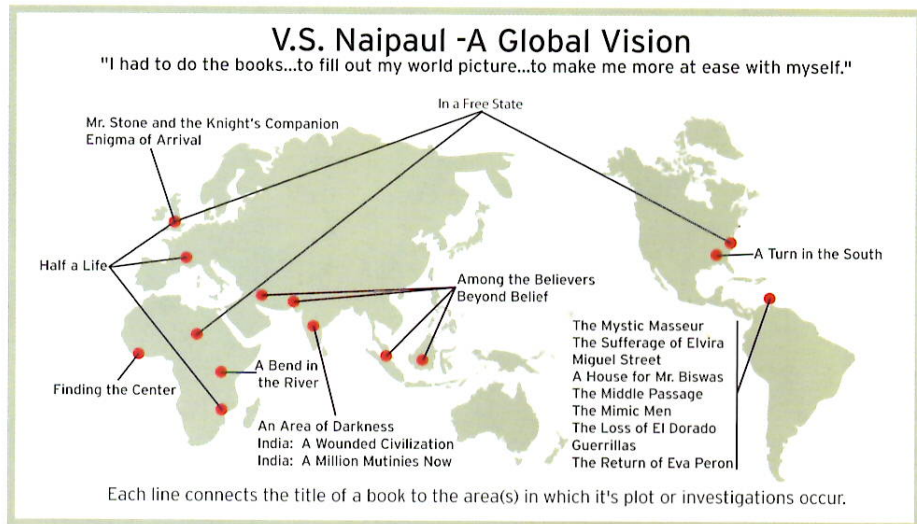
Naipaul's first acknowledged masterpiece and the last of four Trinidad-based novels. Mr. Biswas is affectionately based on Naipaul's father. A strong mix of comedy and tragedy, the novel works on two levels—as a story of an individual struggling for a meaningful life and as an allegory of a colonial society's quest for independence and identity.



THE STORY: The middle-aged Mohun Biswas has struggled for independence his whole life—to find satisfaction as a writer and solace in owning his own house. Yet he has married into a domineering family from which he cannot escape and life's events continue to conspire against him.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"The reader may find [the narrative] to be the unraveling of his own expectations, as finally unfulfilling as Christmas at [Mr. Biswas'] house—sprinkled with excitements and turning out at last 'to be only a series of anticipations.' [The reader] will come close, however, to an extraordinary medley of char-



acter and locale, sharp to the taste through description and idiomatic conversation." *Christian Science Monitor* 7/19/62

"Naipaul has a wry wit and an engaging sense of humor, as well as a delicate understanding of sadness and futility and a profound but unobtrusive sense of the tragic-comedy of ordinary living. He is particularly sensitive to the subtle changes which enduring relationships undergo beneath their surface continuity, particularly within a family." *New York Herald Tribune Books* 6/24/62

"Naipaul never allows the pitch of his book to vary from a high and serene monotone. This, along with Biswas's un-failing humor about himself and his world, preserves him from our all too ready pity, lending him just the proper pinch of nobility." *New Yorker*, 8/4/62.

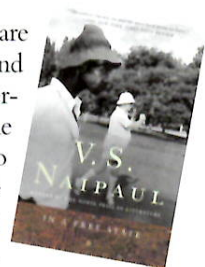
THE BOTTOM LINE: Naipaul's classic, from an early period when he wrote with humor and affection for his homeland.

In a Free State (1971)

- ★ Booker Prize

Here Naipaul explores rootlessness on a global scale, telling dark stories of expatriates and immigrants. Though it won the Booker Prize, this book received mixed reviews from critics.

THE STORY: Three fictional pieces are bookended by a nonfiction prologue and epilogue. In the first piece, an Indian servant becomes an illegal immigrant in the United States. In the second, two Trinidadian brothers attempt a new life in London. And in the third, two English expatriates are caught up in an African civil war.



CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"This book is not his best work: but it is part of [an] achievement that I believe in the end will show him to have been a great writer." *New York Times Book Review*, 10/17/71

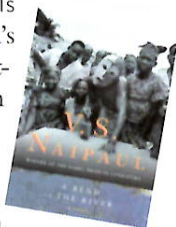
"Though he is a marvelous technician, there is something finally modest, personal, openly committed about his fiction, a frankness of personal reference, that removes him from the godlike impersonality of the novelist..." *New York Review of Books*, 12/30/71

THE BOTTOM LINE: Though a fine book, it is recognized as much for its place in Naipaul's body of work—moving past colonial themes and developing a fiction of rootlessness—as for the story itself.

A Bend in the River (1979)

- ★ Harold Bloom's Western Canon
- ★ #83, Modern Library's 100 Best Novels

This novel was written after Naipaul's return visit to Zaire in 1975. Some critics have compared it to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, though Naipaul's characters show none of the initial hope that Kurtz brought to the continent. Humane concern has little place in Naipaul's Africa.



THE STORY: Salim, a Muslim of Indian descent, moves to a small African village and opens a small shop. After slowly integrating himself into the village's life, political shifts put everything at risk. The country is run by the Big Man, whose bizarre rule creates chaos and undermines hopes of a livable society.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"On the surface, *A Bend in the River* emerges mostly as a web of caustic observation, less exciting than its predecessor, *Guerillas*; but it is a much better and deeper novel, for Naipaul has mastered the gift of creating an aura of psychic and moral tension even as, seemingly, very little happens...A novelist has to be faithful to what he sees, and few see as well as Naipaul; yet one may wonder whether, in some final reckoning, a serious writer can simply allow the wretchedness of his depicted scene to become the limit of his vision." *The New York Times*, 5/13/79

WHERE TO START

Naipaul's two fictional masterworks explore different eras and themes—*A House for Mr. Biswas* presented Naipaul's examination of his early life in Trinidad, and *A Bend in the River* shows Naipaul expanded world view and captures the chaos of third-world Africa. Naipaul's travel writings offer insight for those with interest in specific cultures, including *Beyond Belief: Islamic Conversations Among the Converted Peoples, India: A Million Mutinies Now* (hard to find), and *A Turn in the South* (American South).

"Aside from being a good story, *A Bend in the River* provides what may be the most accurate available single account of what life feels like in parts of Central Africa..."

Choice, 10/79

THE BOTTOM LINE: A relentless work that displays little hope but uniquely captures this time in African history.

IN PRAISE OF THE NOBEL

NAIPAUL'S NOBEL PRIZE provided an opportunity for critics to revisit Naipaul's work. The announcement occurred just over a month after the September 11th tragedy, providing a new context for the award and for Naipaul's views:

"You don't have to be a neo-conservative, or a paleo-imperialist, to see that decolonization over the past forty years has been a tragic failure in many lands; that the victims of that tragedy have been those who live there, rather than complacent Western academics; and that the first step away from the wreckage, and toward true liberation, is to abandon evasion and denial. Naipaul is a good place to start." Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *The Atlantic*, 2/02.

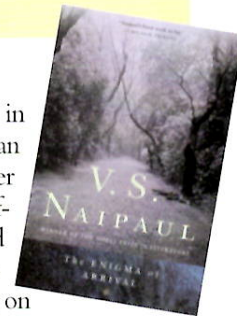
"Like many writers, Mr. Naipaul is often a better guide to the world in his prose than in his spoken remarks, which have resulted in accusations of homophobia and racism...Out of his close attention a sometimes profound pessimism arises, ameliorated by the scrupulous care with which he notices the details of the world around him." *The New York Times*, editorial, 10/12/01

"Choosing Mr. Naipaul as laureate at a time when Western civilization is under assault by the forces of barbarism is an explicit act of affirmation, a clear expression of preference for a particular philosophy...One may not like Mr. Naipaul's conclusions, or agree with them, but one cannot deny the ruthless geometry of his methods and skills in the arts of disconcertion." Tunku Varadarajan, *Wall Street Journal*, 10/12/01

"Rereading Naipaul now, in light of recent events, giving ourselves up to what the Swedish Academy called his 'incorruptible scrutiny,' is to hear a dry, wise and illusionless voice whispering, 'Welcome to the world.'" Malcolm Jones, *Newsweek*, 10/22/01

Enigma of Arrival (1987)

Enigma of Arrival was his first novel in more than eight years, as close to an autobiography as Naipaul may ever come. In the intervening time, Naipaul suffered from a serious illness and experienced the death of his younger sister and brother. The book is short on plot and long on meditations, particularly concerning loss.



THE STORY: The narrator is a tenant on an estate in England, having moved there from his native Trinidad. Alluding to colonial themes, the narrator never meets the absentee landlord, and the manor and its grounds are in a state of decay.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"As an account of the writer's romance with his cottage and the garden, it's principally a writer's confession of faith in the ordering and regenerative powers of his own 'walled garden,' his writing." *Christian Science Monitor*, 4/15/87

"...it did occur to me that a prodigious talent might be damaged by too much solemn self-scrutiny...However, if

you believe an author has real stature you really have to trust him, to believe that he chose to do it this way, after long meditation, because this was the shape that was needed if the writing of the experience was itself to be a valid experience." *The New York Times Book Review*, 5/22/87

THE BOTTOM LINE: Primarily for devotees of Naipaul. As Alan Brien wrote in *The New Statesman*, "I grew restive more than once reading it. But I was profoundly glad afterwards that I had read it." 5/13/87

A Way in the World (1994)

★ Best Book, Commonwealth Writers Award, Canada and Caribbean Division

A mixture of history, fiction, and autobiography, *A Way in the World* presents a rich examination of Caribbean colonization and its aftermath.

THE STORY: The book consists of a series of nine narratives, all thematically linked around encounters with Trinidad—from Sir Walter Raleigh's search for the land of El Dorado to a Trinidadian revolutionary leader to Naipaul's semi-autobiographical stories.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"Now, near the end of his days, Naipaul is clearly...deliberating over the question of whether he ever left home in the first place, for...[the book] is a beautiful lament to the Trinidad he has so often denigrated." *The New Republic*, 6/13/94

"[The book] is that fearsome thing, a book one doesn't enjoy, exactly, but feels improved by getting through. It's an annoying work by a writer of unique experience, sharp vision and intermittent eloquence." *Newsweek*, 6/13/94

THE BOTTOM LINE: A fictional history of colonialism—familiar themes for Naipaul, but now addressed by an older and wiser author.

Beyond Belief: Islamic Conversions Among the Converted Peoples (1998)

Naipaul's second book on Islam has received new attention in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. As with much of Naipaul's non-fiction, reaction was strongly divided—many valued his research, but Islamic people were deeply offended. His previous travel books are com-

AN OVERVIEW OF NAIPAUL'S WORK

The Mystic Masseur (1957)

Winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. In this farcical novel, Pandit Ganesh Ramsessar, a Trinidadian of Indian descent, struggles for success in multiple occupations—first as a masseur, then a mystical healer, author, and finally politician. Changing his name to G. Ramsey Muir, Esq., M.B.E. he assimilates into colonial life and abandons the colorful characters from his earlier days. Is he an earnest over-achiever or an accomplished con artist?

The Suffrage of Elvira (1958)

Mr. Habrans seeks a seat on the Legislative Council, in order to steer public works projects his way. However, he is not the only one to recognize profit in this new democracy. Each constituency and each voter, is out to benefit, and the price of the Council seat rises in favors and dollars. A darker commentary on the arrival of democracy to post-colonial Trinidad.

Miguel Street (1959)

Winner of the Somerset Maugham Award, 1961. This book of short stories and character studies was written prior to his first two nov-

els but released only after their success. An amused and detached narrator tells of poor characters on Miguel Street in Trinidad who struggle against poverty and for some sense of self-expression.

*A House for Mr. Biswas (1961)

The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies—British, French and Dutch—in the West Indies and South America (1962) [Nonfiction]

The first of many of Naipaul's travel books. His commentary on the colonial region contains scathing descriptions of immigrant groups, claiming they lack culture, pride, and achievement. Such are the effects of a displaced culture.

Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion (1963)

Naipaul's first book set in England. The lonely Mr. Stone is on the verge of retirement and discovers creative impulses long dormant. He marries and forms an altruistic group to assist retired employees of his company—people left behind by the modern world. Success in these endeavors, of course, is bittersweet. As with *Mr. Biswas*, this is a novel of

a man struggling against anonymity.

An Area of Darkness (1964)

[Nonfiction]

Written following Naipaul's year-long journey in his ancestral homeland. The book attempts to capture contemporary India—the culture, the people, the poverty—as well as Naipaul's personal reactions to the vast difference (the "area of darkness") between the myth of India in his mind and his first actual experience there.

The Mimic Men (1967)

Winner of the W.H. Smith Award. Ralph Kripalsingh was born in the West Indies, escaped to London, only to later return and attempt to reconnect with his birthplace through a business and political career. With each new book, Naipaul's criticisms of imperialistic and post-colonial life become increasingly overt.

A Flag on the Island (1967)

A collection of stories written between 1950 and 1962.

The Loss of El Dorado:

A History (1969)

[Nonfiction]

Naipaul focuses on two historical periods of Trinidad—the early European search for the land of El

*Books are discussed in Major Works

NOBEL PRIZE LECTURE

"...I had to do the books...to fill out my world picture, and the purpose comes from my childhood: to make me more at ease with myself. Kind people have sometimes written asking me to go and write about Germany, say, or China. But there is much good writing already about those places; I am willing to depend there on the writing that exists. And those subjects are for other people. Those were not the areas of darkness I felt about me as a child. So, just as there is a development in my work, a development in narrative skill and knowledge and sensibility, so there is a kind of unity, a focus, though I might appear to be going in many directions."—V.S. Naipaul 12/7/01

prised primarily of extended analysis, and here Naipaul has focused on capturing unique stories of individuals.

THE BOOK: Naipaul journeys through the same countries he visited in *Among the Believers*, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Iran. The stories chronicle the ongoing effects of Islamic fundamentalism. A series of biographies, gleaned through interviews of residents, illustrate the initial hope of Islamic fun-

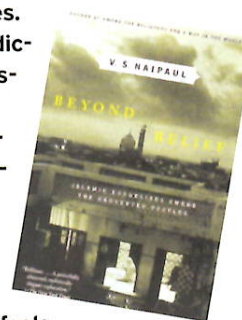
damentalism and the often damaging aftermath of conversion.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"...one wants a summary, a large idea, a conclusion, but [Naipaul] is stubbornly against getting in the way of ordinary people's stories. If the result is confusing and contradictory, shot through with a sense of dislocation, that is because, Naipaul seems to be saying, loss is the dominant emotion of global economic revolution." *The New York Times*, 6/7/98

"Naipaul's writing voice can sound like that of a peevish (and sometimes enraged) traveler in a world of fools. And yet his latest book is the product of a profound humility." *New York Review of Books*, 7/16/98

THE BOTTOM LINE: Many outside Islamic cultures found the book to be a valuable perspective and a source of understanding. Generally regarded as one of his best travel books.



Dorado and the later capture of Trinidad from the Spanish by the British. Outside these events, Naipaul argues that Trinidad has been "exempt from history."

*In a Free State (1971)

The Overcrowded Barracoon and other Articles (1972) [Nonfiction]
A collection of major essays from magazines and newspapers.

Guerrillas (1975)

A complex novel that helped solidify Naipaul's reputation in America. Jimmy has been deported from England and returns to his home island in the West Indies to set up an agricultural commune. He gets caught up with Jane, a liberal Englishwoman, and her boyfriend Roche, a freedom fighter who was imprisoned and tortured in South Africa. In the end the story is more about the dreams and disillusionments of the individuals rather than political and nationalistic machinations.

India: A Wounded Civilization (1977) [Nonfiction]

The second of his three books on India, Naipaul records his travels through India in 1971 which took place during a state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi. Naipaul's disappointment with his ancestral homeland is profound as he describes a culture

that celebrates destitution and lacks principles to support progress.

*A Bend in the River (1979)

The Return of Eva Peron: With the Killings in Trinidad (1980) [Nonfiction]
A collection of four in-depth essays written originally published in Britain and America.

Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey (1981) [Nonfiction]
Naipaul traveled through Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, chronicling the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. As many critics expected, the book contains the same harsh criticism that other postcolonial, third world societies previously received from Naipaul.

Finding the Centre: Two Narratives (1984)
Two essays on the process of writing—the first an autobiographical piece, and the second a tour of the modern-day Ivory Coast.

*Enigma of Arrival (1987)

A Turn in the South (1989) [Nonfiction]
Naipaul turns his eye towards the southern United States, traveling through Tennessee, Georgia, and the Carolinas. What begins as a book about race and the effects of slavery

mutates into an exploration of rural white culture. Southern reviewers in particular felt Naipaul's outside view brought a valuable perspective to the region's history and cultures.

India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990) [Nonfiction]

His third book on India ends on a more optimistic note than the previous two. Instead of focusing on the shortcomings of the entire society and of Hinduism, Naipaul writes of travels through the country and his encounters with a wide range of subcultures, each engaging in an active struggle for identity and meaning. Naipaul finds promise for India in the diversity and energy of these "mutineers."

*A Way in the World (1994)

***Beyond Belief: Islamic Conversions Among the Converted Peoples (1998) [Nonfiction]**

Between Father and Son: Family Letters (2000)

A collection of letters between Naipaul and his father.

Half a Life (2001)

Willie Chandran is the child of an ill-fated arranged marriage between his father and a woman from a lower caste. Willie escapes to London and endeavors to create a new identity, yet another "half life" is about to begin.