

Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorised Biography of V. S. Naipaul* (Picador, 2008)

Sir Vidhiadhar Surujprasad Naipaul is, undoubtedly, a most compelling literary figure of the last fifty years. Naipaul's writing, which reflects largely his roots, background and travel experiences, is enhanced by his mastery of the English language. He expresses the ambivalence of the exile and the problems of an outsider, a feature of his own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England and an intellectual in a post-colonial world. Naipaul says that it is not talent but luck, and much labour, which enables him to write what is inside him.

Patrick French notes that Naipaul produced several masterpieces of both fiction and non-fiction, including *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), which was the turning point in his literary career. The novel, an unforgettable story, imbued with traces of colonial history and memories of coercive dislocation amongst the East Indian community in Trinidad from which Naipaul came, has a metaphoric resonance to his life: the unaccommodated man's repeated attempts to find a place in a ramshackle and a random world.

A similar resonance is seen in his first published book, *Miguel Street*, in which Naipaul fled from Port of Spain, Trinidad to what he perceived would be a culture of high tradition and custom. In the novel *The Mystic Masseur*, Naipaul draws his characters from a rural Indian Trinidadian community. In this novel, Ganesh, the protagonist, and Trinidadian society as a whole, are satirised by Naipaul, exposing the large gaps between modern English realities and their adaptations in Trinidad. Naipaul is able to identify with this inability to be genuine because he himself had mimicked different national cultures that contributed to Trinidad's population and culture.

With great feeling for Naipaul's formidable body of work, and exclusive access to his private papers, personal recollections and his wife's Patricia Hale's diary, French, in his authorised biography of V.S. Naipaul, *The World Is What It Is*, has produced a luminous and astonishing account of this enigmatic genius. As with William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, in which, in the opening scene, a funeral precedes a wedding, so too, in Patrick French's book, a funeral precedes a wedding, albeit in the final scene. What Shakespeare suggested more than 400 years ago, that death brings new beginnings, comes to reality in Naipaul's life. Life is never static. Naipaul scatters his previous wife's ashes in the presence of her replacement. He recites prayers, one from the Qu'ran; he cries. This is one of the most intimate and touching moments in the book. Intimate because it reveals another aspect of Naipaul's nature, that he was not entirely the callous philanderer that he was reputed to be, and touching because his feelings for his loyal Pat are expressed in that moment through his tears – a catharsis, a cleansing. Naipaul too had suffered as a colonial. He is now ready to move on. French's final word 'Enough' (499) is an appropriate and insightful ending.

Patrick French's biography is copiously detailed and largely sympathetic towards Naipaul, especially in the early part of his life in Trinidad. French devotes 219 pages to the first 29 years of Naipaul's life, which may seem excessive, yet provides details of his childhood struggles and familial history, to add spice and

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human interest to the narrative. The author also turns the stories of those years, especially Naipaul's English apprenticeship as a radio journalist, into a parable of the post-colonial writer's journey from a virtual unknown into a recognised and highly acclaimed writer.

His success as a literary genius did not come easily, yet, despite all adversities, he was a winner of many literary prizes, including the jewel in the crown, the Nobel Prize. *The World Is What It Is* chronicles Naipaul's life, his writings, and his phenomenal rise from a colonial reject to a distinguished living legend of literary genius.

French handles Naipaul's private life scrupulously showing how much Naipaul owed to the women in his life: his first wife, Pat, who, besides being infertile, failed him because she could not satisfy him sexually. This led him to have frequent recourse to prostitutes, an addiction he found necessary, but which shamed him. On a writing trip to Buenos Aires he meets an Anglo-Argentine woman, tempestuous, cynical, sexy Margarita or Margaret Gooding, Pat's opposite in that she was unhappily married with three children. For the first time in Naipaul's life he had full sexual satisfaction. The sensual release with Margaret opened up Naipaul's most creative period in the 1970s. Having sex with Margaret was good for his writing, leading to his full-bodied masterpiece *A Bend in the River* (1979), rated as among the top 100 novels of the twentieth century.¹ In it, through the eyes of a Muslim Indian shopkeeper, Salim, Naipaul chronicles the degeneration of the Central African Nation Zaire, from post-colonial disruption to New African corruption to utter chaos and hooliganism. Just as the Europeans displaced the Arabs, indigenous movements in Zaire are now ridding the country of the Europeans.

The third woman, Nadira Khannum Alvi, a divorced Pakistani journalist, caused Naipaul to abruptly end his affair with Margaret Gooding. Two months after Pat's death in 1996, Naipaul and Nadira were married. His books *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), and *Beyond Belief* (1998), its sequel, written after his marriage to Nadira, are described by her as testimonies to Muslim people's suffering.

In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul again ascribes elements of his own situation – as a post-colonial writer almost without a society and literature to call his own – to three of the novel's characters. Salim, the narrator, inherits the author's anxieties about racial and erotic differences; Indar, the foreign academic, for his claim, like Naipaul's own, of being 'a man without a side' (154); while Raymond, the court historian, represents Naipaul's anxiety about writing. Naipaul's conception of himself as an outsider is reflected in Salim's description of Raymond and summarises Naipaul's capacity to write about difficult material remarkably well.

Naipaul's literary authority in *A Bend in the River* and elsewhere is established in a contest with the reader by means of concealed information, cold jokes, satire, and political provocation. As the collapse of his society parallels the collapse of Achebe's society in *Things Fall Apart*, so in *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul parallels the collapse of political and literary authority. An inference may be made that in *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul records the conditions of his own career into the unstable circumstances and eventual collapse of post-colonial government.

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wik/A_Bend_in_the_River.

He was, however, caught in a dilemma, as he could not give up either Margaret or Pat. For 25 years he made them both miserable, but the details of his sexual affairs provides fecund material for French's narrative *The World Is What It Is*.

The turning points narrated by French reflect two moments of truth which made Naipaul the writer and the man he became. The first was a crisis which plunged Naipaul into a great depression verging on madness. This condition lasted for 18 months, when he found himself, after graduating from Oxford, alone and marginalised in London, with no job or even prospects of finding one. Desperately homesick and unable to get his first attempts at fiction published yet unwilling to admit failure, he refused to return to Trinidad even after his father died. He projects the panic he felt during that period of his life onto different young male characters in his books, or onto his biographical work which made him the writer he became.

The second defining moment was when he met Patricia Hale at the darkest time of his life. Quiet, intelligent, self-effacing, from an unhappy lower middle-class family, the young English woman saved him from drowning. She was the anchor of his life becoming indispensable to him in every way. He boasted to *The New Yorker* in the 1990s that he had a great appetite for prostitutes, shocking Pat into a relapse of the cancer which ended her life. In reality, he admitted to her in letters that she had saved him once and it was from that rescue that he had been able to keep going; that he loved her, and needed her. He pleaded with her not to let him down and begged her to forgive his occasional lapses. He asserted that at heart he was the worthiest man. Pat remained loyal to Naipaul throughout their marriage helping him to grow as a writer, and also as a man; the two inextricably interwoven.

Through the portrait of the many people involved in V.S. Naipaul's life, Patrick French in his biography, *The World Is What It Is*, has emotionally and truthfully exposed the facts of the great writer's life. French has achieved something extremely difficult by writing a biography of a living person that is brutally honest. He has been able to achieve this through the generosity and openness of Naipaul himself who allowed French to quote without restrictions from Pat's diary, which French reveals Naipaul had not even read himself. This is a mark of Naipaul's high regard, even reverence, for Literature. He told French that only a biography that is brutally honest is a true biography.

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