At the beginning of *Half a Life*, Willie Chandran asks his father why his middle name is Somerset. His father replies, ‘without joy, “You were named after a great English writer.”’ This phrase, ‘without joy’, could equally refer to the whole novel. It begins with an account of the dreary life of Willie’s father, a high-caste Indian sadhu married to a low-caste woman he despises, and continues with Willie’s own story as a foreign student in London and then husband of a ‘half-and-half’ Portuguese-African on her East African estate.

The title of Half a Life can be interpreted in several ways. Literally, the book takes Willy’s life to its mid-point of forty-one years, and its main characters are racially or socially mixed – half-in-half. On a deeper level, it is implied that Willy and his father have been stunted sexually by their upbringing in a ritualised society, where marriages are arranged and boys are not taught how to seduce. More than anything they lack the joy of satisfying sexual relationships. Willy, having married the first unattached woman who shows an interest in him, finds satisfaction for a time in an affair with a married neighbour, but eventually he finds that ‘some half-feeling of the inanity of my life grew within me, and with it there came the beginning of respect for the religious outlawing of sexual extremes.’ He subsequently discovers that his lover is deranged, and doubts the reality of what they had together, so that even his brief experience of sexual satisfaction is taken from him.

But the half life is not just sexual. It also includes the placelessness which is Willy’s lot. He is alienated from his Indian family home, and has no
wish to return there after leaving for London to study. His sister Sarojini, ineligible in the Indian marriage market because of her mixed-caste background, makes an international marriage and moves from place to place as her husband’s work requires. There is nowhere either feels is their home. At the end of the novel Willy joins Sarojini at her present home in Germany. No future is projected for them: half their lives have gone, the other half is unknown.

The lives this novel describes are mostly joyless, but the novel is not without its moments of rather sombre humour. Sarojini visits a reluctant Willy at his college in London, and insists on cooking for him in his room: ‘she lay the heater on its back and she set the pots on the metal guards above the glowing electric coils … Sarojini had never been a good cook, and the food she cooked in the college room was awful.’ A comic but rather appalling picture.

In this novel Naipaul has come back to pure fiction for the first time in more than 20 years. In the two books he has called novels during that period, his own presence as narrator is central. In this desolate tale of unfulfilled lives, however, he has used only fictional characters, perhaps to distance himself from its frank (although not explicit) treatment of sexual matters. It is of course beautifully written and well crafted, but I miss the joyfulness of the best of his earlier works.