A serious biography is a huge feat: indefatigable, patient research must be synthesized and melded into a shapely and coherent narrative, involving thousands of tiny vital decisions about what should be included and what left out. If the biographer can also write with wit, compassion and understanding but avoid judging his subject, he is well on the way to producing a masterpiece of the genre. And this Patrick French has achieved.

French suspected when he was asked to write the biography (by whom? Presumably Naipaul himself, though he doesn’t say) that “it would be a big and potentially fraught project” (xiii). Whatever difficulties he may have encountered, however, obstruction from his subject was not among them. French demanded and was given free access and publication rights to the material in the Naipaul Archive at the University of Tulsa, and Naipaul himself granted lengthy interviews over a period of years. Naipaul stuck to his belief that “the truth should not be skimped” (xiii) in a writer’s biography, and for this at least, despite the many damning facts which are revealed about him in this book, we may honour him.

French refuses to be drawn into the arguments about Naipaul’s alleged loyalties to imperialism and political conservatism: “He was the man without loyalties, whether to India, the West Indies or to anywhere else, who would write the truth as he saw it. Contrary to the depredations that would be launched against Vidia with increasing force over the coming decades, his moral axis was not white
European culture, or pre-Islamic Hindu culture, or any other passing culture: it was internal, it was himself” (245). Naipaul’s well-known caution about subscribing to causes does not of course equate to a lack of prejudice. It only means that his prejudices are uniquely his own.

In his Introduction, French, though deprecating the plausibility of “the commonplace that a biographer has found the ‘key’ to a person’s life” (xviii), does point out that Naipaul’s propensity to behave badly in public is “a Trinadian trait. I noticed that when he was being rude or provocative in this way, Naipaul was full of glee. Creating tension, insulting his friends, family or whole communities left him in excellent spirits” (xiii). In interviews, “when academics berated him for his views, he responded in Trinadian street style, making it sound like British haughtiness” (410). This is an illumination, explaining much about the acerbic public persona, the fact that “Vidia’s response to the growth in his reputation as a villain was to stoke it,” and his “willingness to shift between profundity and picong”¹ (395). His school friend Lloyd Best noted that Paul Theroux’s book *Sir Vidia’s Shadow* “exposes Naipaul as a real Trinadian in every sense … All these little Trinadian smart-man things … Naipaul expects the responses that he’s going to get; I’d say that it’s second nature to him, performing in that way” (359). A certain amount of assertiveness stood him in good stead early in his career, in dealings with publishers and others who were in the market for his work. Offered eighty guineas by the BBC for a script about his visit to India in 1960, the 28-year-old Naipaul had his agent reply that he considered the offer an insult. It was increased by fifty per cent: “He accepted, and with his renown both as a writer and as a tricky customer well established, V.S. Naipaul was on his way”

¹ A Trinidad word “from the French ‘piquant’ meaning sharp or cutting, where the boundary between good and bad taste is deliberately blurred, and the listener sent reeling” (xiii).
From the time he travelled to India to research *India: A Wounded Civilization*, French says, “Using his literary prestige, the mad strength of his new personality and a rare ability to project himself as in mortal need of assistance, he was superb at persuading people to help him” (370). Many of these people appear in the books, and they are often but not always described sympathetically. Their portraits provide the fabric from which Naipaul’s travel writing, always about people rather than landscapes or buildings, is tailored. French has taken the trouble to seek out and interview many of these people to give their viewpoints on the encounter with the great man, most of whom found him “both stimulating and difficult” (373). This provides few surprises but some entertaining anecdotes.

The private man is harder to laugh off. One of the great achievements of French’s book is the rescue of Patricia Naipaul from the shadows. One could read every one of Naipaul’s non-fiction books without ever knowing he had such a thing as a wife. In press interviews, however, she exists in the background, a slightly servile presence who occasionally reproves him, and occasionally irritates him, “brings tea and slips away”.\(^2\) In his 1991 interview, Scott Winokur asked Naipaul what his wife did:

“She does nothing, nothing at all!” he replied, laughing, as if the question were ridiculous. But later he admitted that he leaned heavily on his wife, reading to her each day’s literary output.\(^3\)

Among the documents to which French had access were Pat Naipaul’s diaries, and from them we learn the cost this dependence exacted from her. Their courtship is

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\(^2\) James Atlas, “V.S. vs the Rest,” *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* ed. Feroza Jussawalla (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 100. In this book there is no index entry for Patricia Naipaul, nor any listing under V.S. Naipaul for marriage or wife.

charted in letters, Naipaul’s wavering commitment to her prefiguring their fraught and difficult marriage. An intelligent woman who was just as highly educated as her husband, her own ambitions, to write or even simply to act in an undergraduate play, were squashed under the weight of the demands of her needy “Genius”. French has no illusions about his subject’s qualities as a husband: “Pat’s diary is an essential, unparalleled record of V.S. Naipaul’s later life and work, and reveals more about the creation of his subsequent books, and her role in their creation, than any other source. It puts Patricia Naipaul on a par with other great, tragic, literary spouses such as Sonia Tolstoy, Jane Carlyle and Leonard Woolf” (307). Naipaul’s reaction when she was diagnosed with cancer in 1989 was a revealing mixture of rage and irritation at the interruption to his work, and shame at his rage. She suffered a mastectomy and went into remission for some years, but the cancer returned and she died in 1996, all her defences destroyed by the revelations Vidia made in a 1994 interview about his sexual past. She knew already that there was a mistress, but she was unprepared for his announcement to the world that he had been, in the early days of their marriage, “a great prostitute man” (471). Too late he realized what he had done, and he told French, “It could be said that I had killed her. It could be said. I feel a little bit that way” (471).

The end of Pat’s life also spelled the end of his thirty-four year affair with Margaret Gooding, an Anglo-Argentine he met when travelling in South America in 1972. Margaret provided him with a sexual satisfaction he failed to achieve with Pat, and he often promised that he would leave Pat and live with her, but Margaret remained in the limbo world of the mistress. There was violence and passion. They would often travel together, although she would often be “sent home” when Naipaul

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4 She refers to him as “The Genius” in her later diary entries.
tired of her company. She left her husband and children for him but he offered no financial help; she aborted three pregnancies by him and he gave no emotional support. And upon Pat’s death, when she might perhaps have expected at last to be elevated to a more secure status in his life, she found herself rejected completely in favor of the new Lady Naipaul, Nadira.

French deals with the courtship and wedding – barely more than two months after Pat’s death – of Sir Vidia and Lady Nadira, but much further than that he has chosen not to proceed, preferring not “to come too close to the distorting lens of the present” (xiii) – and also, perhaps, preferring not to deal in depth with a current marriage: it would have been difficult to write this book during Pat’s lifetime. He ends the biography after evoking the cathartic scene of the scattering of Pat’s ashes: “V.S. Naipaul, the writer, Vidyadhar, the boy, Vidia, the man, was leaning against the car, tears streaming down his face, lost for words” (499).

To write the biography of a great writer is a particularly daunting task, but Naipaul has chosen his Boswell carefully. French’s prose is strong and idiosyncratic, bracingly ironic when required but also capable of considerable emotional force. His aim is “not … to sit in judgement, but to expose the subject with ruthless clarity to the calm eye of the reader” (xvii). Naipaul clearly felt an affinity with this approach, and may have recognised in French a writer whom he could expect to produce a biography which was also “a work of literature” (xiii).

This is a biography rather than a critical study of course, though the writing cannot be separated from the life in Naipaul’s case: the writing of Guerrillas was a particularly traumatic event for both Vidia and Pat. French is not shy about make his own assessments: he says that A Bend in the River is “V.S. Naipaul’s greatest novel,
with the conceivable exception of *A House for Mr Biswas*” (383). And towards the end of the book he quotes at length his own review of *Beyond Belief*:

> He has 23 books to his name – brilliant combinations of travel, fiction, history, politics, literary criticism and autobiography. It is a body of work of astonishing scope and subtlety, giving him a fair claim to be Britain’s greatest living writer … Although he often brings the reader to a moment of realisation elliptically, there is a candour to his writing, a constant precision at its heart. It is this quality of integrity – the close analysis of human conduct – that enables Naipaul’s work to transcend the peculiarity of his general theories, as he narrates the extraordinary lives of ordinary people from his singular perspective.

He goes on, “A decade later, I would not resile from this view” (480-1). His admiration for Naipaul’s work pervades the book, even when he is chronicling the most outrageous behavior. He understands that “the notion that an artistic creator should be expected to explain himself” is at best doubtful: “Anyone who has written imaginatively will know that the process remains mysterious, even to the author, however hard you try to unpick it” (xvii-xviii).

> After the harrowing scene of the scattering of Pat’s remains, there comes a single, final word: “Enough.” But this word is footnoted: “For the moment”. One can only hope that the next instalment will indeed be entrusted to Patrick French. It would be hard to imagine a better biographer for V.S. Naipaul.