Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul has often based a novel on material he has previously written about in a non-fiction book. In *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) he interviewed radicals and terrorists. Now, in *Magic Seeds*, he takes his main character Willie Chandran to join the guerrillas in India.

Although this kind of connection between books is common in Naipaul’s work, *Magic Seeds* is the first actual sequel he has written. *Half a Life* (2001) took Willie Chandran to the age of forty-one: a life of belonging nowhere, wasting time. Seeking the purpose he has never had, he now allows himself to be persuaded by his sister, a well-heeled radical living in Berlin, to go to India, the birthplace where they had both found it impossible to live as adults, and make contact with the ‘freedom fighters’.

Naipaul has always been deeply suspicious of what he calls ‘the corruption of causes’ and it is no surprise that Willie soon finds that the struggle in which he enlists is futile, corrupt and destructive. He nevertheless is committed to – or entrapped in – the movement and stays for many years. Luckier than some, he manages at last to leave by surrendering to the police rather than by meeting a violent death at the hands of his fellows. After some time in jail he returns to London, where he had spent a few aimless years in his early twenties in *Half a Life*, and resumes his half-life there.

*Magic Seeds* is, like all Naipaul’s mature work, pessimistic, gloomy and somewhat misogynistic. Why, then, is it such a pleasure to read? He breaks all the rules. The dialogue is not natural: his characters make long speeches to each
other in complete sentences. The settings are often vague: we don’t know where he is in India. But this is part of his style. A setting or a character is drawn with a few strokes: a kind of roof, a paint colour, certain types of shoes or hairstyle, can all be made to signify much. The language of the narrative is simple, almost fable-like. Certain words and phrases are repeated, not for emphasis but as a kind of mnemonic device.

And always, with Naipaul, there is a freshness of perspective that takes one’s breath away. Nothing is taken for granted: the ground is always shifting. Friendship, sex, loyalty, politics – everything is changeable. Justice is meaningless and morality non-existent. The only thing which remains constant is Willie’s ‘understanding … that there was no true place in the world for him’. It could be said, roughly, that *Half a Life* is about sex while *Magic Seeds* is about politics. Willie explores both, and the only conclusion he comes to is, ‘It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world. That’s where the mischief starts. That’s where everything starts unravelling.’ The vision is bleak, but somehow cleansing.