

column : Parisien Portrait

'Paris in August' by Adrian George

by Raana Haider

"I have known Paris through every season, in every month. The August days are distinct. Much of Paris closes down. Parisians take their holidays; the streets, away from the Grands Boulevards and tourist sites, empty. A sunlit, echoing, ghostly town ... It is always enchanting and consoling to walk these streets. Through this stone, lead and iron landscape, melancholy but beautiful, traced with the history of wars and revolutions and the extraordinary art, ideas and legends of the people who have lived here. Everyone of course, has their own Paris; this is a portion of mine. Reading it now I see how the moods of the days change, as do the pictures with their various methods and mediums. This book is a remnant of the larger, yellowing medium, time."

— Preface

If you want to doze off-pick up 'Paris in August'. High on observation and low on action, Adrian George leisurely strolls one through his account of Paris in the month of August 1993. In the form of a diary, British artist, Adrian George wrote this account of his month in Paris combining text and charcoal drawings "to portray the city that acts as his muse. He maintains studies in London and Paris.

"Paris with its filigreed lace iron balconies, is once again the most southerly of northern cities ... Paris is emptied. Parisians pack their cars with their views, children, grandparents, dogs and cosmetics and drive to the sea or the mountains or the great rich countryside. It is Sunday and one must make an act of faith. Mine is to go to the bookstalls on the banks of the river Seine. Lining the parapets and pavements above the river bank are the bouquinistes, second-hand booksellers, who have been there as long as printing... he (the Mayor of Paris) usually ties to prove his fitness to accede to the Presidency by his mastery of this old and crumbling city. (President Jacques Chirac was Mayor of Paris for many years.) Yet it is beautiful, one can see the architectural follies, the intricate inti-

Paris by night. Ah oui. Scores of writers have written of the sheer beauty and magic of it. The artist within George sees, "Paris by night, the city of light, red and white stripes of car lights run the length of the Champs Elysees. They should have blue street lighting to make a tricolour up to the Arc de Triomphe. What triumph is this?"

macies of the buildings, which are signed and dated with pride by their creators. There are mysterious de Chirico shadows and vanishing points, culs-de-sac... Walking is much the best way to move around Paris; one can cross the city in an hour, and have all senses delighted." Such are samples of his nuggets of observation of a city he is intrigued by and obviously loves.

An artist's verbal depiction of a canvas which visually presents itself to any discerning observer of Paris has been divinely captured by George. He writes, "I crossed the Pont des Arts in the morning sunlight. The prow of the island just upstream, Notre-Dame could be seen above the green candy-floss of trees on the Vert-Galant. Through the Pont-Neuf one could see the Pont au Change, through that, the Pont Notre-Dame evaporating in the yellow haze. The distressed golden dome of the Mazarine is topped by a little turret fit to contain a princess. The stonework of the Louvre is engraved with patterns like human brains. The Samaritaine department store as Deco as a glass liner, the fairytale towers of the Conciergerie that contain cruel memories of torture. A fly-blown bateau-mouche (a scenic cruiser), a barge like a suburban house, with germaniums, trees in tubs, washing lines, and a motorcar on deck...."

Adrian George in describing the Sacre Coeur church perched on top of the Montmartre hill notes, "The tarmac is melting on the rue Montmartre. It is silent, still, like a plague city. In the heat flocks of pigeons fly above, leaving moving shadows on the road as if of fish swimming in a grey river... The streets, once empty as a film set, are now crowded with extras dressed as tourists. The sugar-white Byzantine basilica of

Sacre-Coeur lies painted on the powder-blue sky." The only crowds to be seen in Paris in August are non-Parisians.

Following everyone's appetite for food, George has us drooling over his account of his visit to his neighbourhood marche (open market). "Food, the Buc market has glorious food. To step into the streets lined with these stalls is to enter into a living, bursting cornucopia. An enormous ratatouille of vegetables, a flocculation of poultry, chicken, quails, partridges, turkeys... An intricate collocation of cheeses from all those little farms all over France ... A patchwork of pates like house bricks ... overloads of country breads. A frivolity of fish, an ostentation of oysters, crabs and lobsters and an endless of fandango of fruit." The language is music to the ears.

His appreciation of the old and beautiful and a parochial sense of humour is apparent when he describes a hotel particulier (town house) on the island, Ile Saint Louis. "It is forever being repeated that when good Americans die they come to Paris. I think they would have to be very good indeed to live in the Hotel de Lauzun. The Hotel de Lauzun is a seventeenth-century town house on the Quai d'Anjou. Unpredictably opening to the public, it has been restored to wonderful effect. Floors, walls, ceilings, furniture, all carved and painted and encrusted with golden fruits and cherubs, with an Italianate sumptuousness. A fairy-tale, for once made real."

The French respect for age and continuity manifests itself also in forms other than classical culture. What about the role of the magazine Paris Match? As so aptly observed by Adrian George, "Jeanne Moreau, Brigitte Bardot,

Johnny Halliday, the French never let go of their stars. The covers of Paris Match bear continuing witness to their lives, adventures, readers measure their own ageing against them. The British equivalents are of course the Kray twins, Myra Hindy and Ronnie Biggs." However, the British did have Princess Diana, an international icon. One can often see a 1950s copy of Paris Match displayed at the bouquinistes along the Seine. On the cover is a wedding picture of a radiant Grace Kelly (now deceased) and her debonair husband, Prince Rainier of Monaco (now portly and grey-haired). Paris Match vividly captures the passage of Time.

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On the day of his departure, 31st August 1993, as he closes his window shutters; he observes the return to normalcy and routine. "The shutters are being opened in other apartment buildings, brown paper is being stripped from shop windows, which are being washed and cleaned. Elaborate displays are made of the wares; Parisians are natu-

ral decorators. Fresh food and flowers are arriving from the countryside. All the people with normal lives return — tomorrow is the day that the new year begins, the new season, the new fashions." And in his last entry after his August stay in Paris is over, he writes, "And I feel the sadness, as I always do, because Paris, being feminine, always looks especially beautiful the day you leave her."

Tea and Tattered Pages, a tiny cavern of second-hand literary delights in the sixth arrondissement is where I came across 'Paris in August' by Adrian George. And at 40 francs a real buy. Tea and Tattered Pages is where one has a hard time locating an inviting read because of the resident wolf-whistling parrot. I am serious.

The lazy, hazy days of August in Paris are calm and still — warm days and long and balmy nights. The cobbled streets resound with the passing of few cars as compared to the bumper-to-bumper grind of in-season traffic. Parisien streets are cleaner as much of the dog population has accompanied the human population to la maison dans la campagne (country-home) or au bord de la mer (sea-side). Much of the canine population has migrated to the Franch Riviera. There are also fewer children in Paris; probably attending the vacationing dogs. France is officially on holiday.

The Lamartine Boucherie (butchery) opposite our apartment on Avenue Victor Hugo is close the month of August. A little note is posted on the door informing its valued clients of the shut-down. Our local restaurant, the Brasserie Stella with its delicious foie gras (goose-liver paste) and mouth-watering chocolate profiteroles dessert has all its

chairs perched on the tables. The deserted look is Paris in August. The inviting waft of French cheese — a runny brie or a strong-smelling roquefort blue cheese no longer permeates the air as one walks by the neighbourhood fromagerie. The nearest boulangerie and patisserie (bakery and pastry shop) has its shutters down. No more warm baguettes to munch the top off on the way home. No more temptations to resist in the windows — trays and trays of glazed strawberry and cherry tarts, inviting chocolate and coffee eclairs and feathery mille feuilles pastries. The few remaining open shops stock chic Parisien clothing and shoes. And all announce that this is the second or third mark-down or closing sale. Fortunate are those who are extra-petite or extra-grande.

The Mairie de Paris (Mayor of Paris) offers discounted film tickets for those less than twenty-five years old at 25 francs. All the informative and thus important French magazines, Paris March, Gala and Point de Vue which concentrate on the lives of jet-setters, media personalities, royalty and other such celebrities have on their covers and promising more inside, pictures of Les Bleus en vacances often in the French Riviera. The Blues are the 1998 World Cup football heroes. Media-coverage gratefully suggests that Les Bleus have earned their days in the sun and in the sea. Paris in August will always be remembered as the tragic site of the fatal accident which claimed the lives of Princess Diana, Dodi al-Fayed and Henri Paul, the driver. How will Paris remember the first death anniversary on 31 August 1998?

The digital display on the Eiffel Tower which is a countdown of the number of days left before the year 2000 (see 'Countdown to Year 2000') screened 500 days left on 19 August. It started in April 1997 with 1000 days till the year 2000. Five hundred days have just zoomed by. As we approach the autumn months of the year and into winter, so too does Paris in August announce that the twentieth century too is closing to an end.

books



Beyond Belief: A Return Visitor's Look at Four Islamic Societies

Beyond Belief is unusual travel writing in this willed semi-disappearance of this distinguished author, his determination to substitute for his own voice the voices he encounters.

by Richard Bernstein

BEYOND BELIEF
Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples.
By V. S. Naipaul.
408 pp. New York: Random House. \$27.95.

It has been 30 years now that V.S. Naipaul, born in Trinidad but of Indian ancestry, has been writing books about Third World civilizations in the postcolonial era, the books based on long travels to far-flung points on the globe.

His penetrating, opinionated travel writing, added to his novels, makes up a remarkable running commentary on the clash of civilizations, or, perhaps more accurately, on the self-inflicted wounds of the countries emerging from foreign domination.

His new book, "Beyond Belief," is another in the wounded-civilization series, one that harks back almost two decades to another voyage and another book, "Among the Believers."

In the earlier work, Naipaul traveled to Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia, the major countries to which Islam was not a native religion but was imposed by what might be called Arabian spiritual imperialism.

"Among the Believers" was a portrait of a group of societies that turned to Islam partly to reject pasts, especially colonial pasts, that were deemed inauthentic by local revolutionaries. But in so doing, these societies adopted a foreign creed that was also inauthentic and that replicated the injustices that had motivated the revolutionaries in the first place.

Similar themes appear in "Beyond Belief," which is an account of return

visits Naipaul made to the same countries and to many of the same people of "Among the Believers." But while much of the writing in the new book is memorably Naipaulian, Naipaul himself is less present on the scene than he was in his earlier work. He writes almost entirely through the eyes of the numerous people in the four countries whose stories he tells.

"Beyond Belief" is unusual travel writing in this willed semi-disappearance of this distinguished author, his determination to substitute for his own voice the voices he encounters.

The result is often an extremely interesting, intimate and valuable set of portraits, even if "Beyond Belief" is also analytically vague, abstract despite the concreteness of its descriptions. In addition, the very large number of Naipaul's portraits, along with the considerable, seemingly unedited length of them, is sometimes wearying.

Still, there are numerous brilliant moments in "Beyond Belief," which represents a powerfully observed, stylistically elegant exploration of the four Islamic countries Naipaul visited.

He begins in Indonesia with a certain Imaduddin, whom Naipaul knew in 1979 as an Islamicist opponent of the corrupt Suharto regime. By the time of this return visit to him, Imaduddin has become an establishment figure, an avatar of an Islamicist future embraced by the authorities. "I felt in 1979 that the religion was under threat," he tells Naipaul. "Now I have my friends in the Cabinet. It's God's will."

Imaduddin represents the continued emergence of Islam not just as a set of religious beliefs but as the basis for government. The country where that is

clearest and where that trend has most conspicuously advanced is obviously Iran, about which Naipaul's reporting is especially nuanced and sharp.

His previous visit, he reminds us, came when Iranian students had seized the American Embassy in Tehran and revolutionary fervor was at its highest. Since then, the devastating eight-year war with Iraq and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini have intervened, and both have sharpened the contradiction that always lay at the heart of the Iranian revolution: that between the powerful forces of conservative theocracy on one side, and, on the other, the desire for respite, a fatigue with the revolution, and the emergence of various sorts of rebellions, especially among the youth.

What Naipaul does with great effect in his chapters on Iran and Pakistan is show this contradiction in very particular, personal terms. He meets the editor of an English-language newspaper he first met in 1979 and learns from him the fate of a Jaffrey, whom Naipaul also met in his earlier travels.

Jaffrey, a Muslim who yearned for an Islamic society that represented his religious values, moved from India to Pakistan and then from Pakistan to Iran in search of it. But the student occupiers of the American Embassy found payment receipts to him, which represented some part-time work he did for the Voice of America.

Since any contact with Americans was deemed to be the work of spies, Jaffrey, in the years since Naipaul last saw him, fled back to Pakistan, his dream of an Islamic paradise-on-earth obviously betrayed.

Naipaul interviews veterans of the

war with Iraq who express their disillusionment to him, their sense of being manipulated by the mullahs into a superstitious frenzy. He visits Ayatollah Khalkhali, the notorious hanging judge of 1979, and finds him partly broken and out of power but also arrogant, unrepentant and difficult. Naipaul finds the 19-year-old brother of an Iraqi war veteran named Feyredoun, who had filled in the Iranian void with a singular kind of rebellion.

"He was just five or six years younger than Feyredoun, but he belonged to a different generation," Naipaul writes. "While there were serious books on Feyredoun's side of the wall, on his brother's side there were photographs of football teams and a 'heavy metal' pop group, and a swastika. Feyredoun's brother was a Nazi. He said that as an Iranian he was Aryan; therefore he was a Nazi. And he took being a Nazi seriously."

In Pakistan, Naipaul tells, among others, the story of a frustrated lawyer named Rana, a former guerrilla fighter named Shahbaz and a journalist named Rahimullah Yusufzai, who attained considerable local fame reporting on the Afghan war and its aftermath.

Again, the theme of these encounters, how each of these figures and the others we meet in these pages illustrate Naipaul's concept of Islam among the converted peoples, is not clear. But the portraits are nonetheless vivid and concrete and add to the enormous and remarkable body of work by Naipaul — a record of intelligent observation that promises to be an enduring literary achievement.

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