

CITATION

The Nobel citation from the Swedish Academy

THE Nobel Prize in Literature for 2001 is awarded to the British writer, born in Trinidad, VS Naipaul, "for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories".

VS Naipaul is a literary circumnavigator, only ever really at home in himself, in his inimitable voice. Singularly unaffected by literary fashion and models he has wrought existing genres into a style of his own, in which the customary distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are of subordinate importance.

Naipaul's literary domain has extended far beyond the West Indian island of Trinidad, his first subject, and now encompasses India, Africa, America from south to north, the Islamic countries of Asia and, not least, England.

Naipaul is Conrad's heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in his memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished.

The farcical yarns in his first work, *The Mystic Masseur*, and the short stories in *Miguel Street* with their blend of Chekhov and calypso established Naipaul as a humorist and a portrayal of street life. He took a giant stride with *A House for Mr. Biswas*, one of those singular novels that seem to constitute their own complete universes, in this case a miniature India on the periphery of the British Empire, the scene of his father's circumscribed existence. In allowing peripheral figures their place in the momentousness of great literature, Naipaul reverses normal perspectives and denies readers at the centre their protective detachment. This principle was made to serve in a series of novels in which, despite the increasingly documentary tone, the characters did not therefore become less colourful. Fictional narratives, autobiography and documentaries have merged in Naipaul's writing without it always being possible to say which element dominates.

In his masterpiece *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul visits the reality of England like an anthropologist studying some hitherto unexplored native tribe deep in the jungle. With apparently short-sighted and random observations he creates an unrelenting image of the placid collapse of the old colonial ruling culture and the demise of European neighbourhoods.

Naipaul has drawn attention to the novel's lack of universality as a form, that it presupposes an inviolate human world of the kind that has been shattered for conquered peoples. He began to experience the inadequacy of fiction while he was working on *The Loss of El Dorado*, in which after extensive study of the archives he described the appalling colonial history of Trinidad. He found that he had to cling to the authenticity of the details and the voices and abstain from mere fictionalisation while at the same time continuing to render his material in the form of literature. His travel books allow witnesses to testify at every turn, not least in his powerful description of the eastern regions of the Islamic world, *Beyond Belief*. The author's empathy finds expression in the acuity of his ear.

Naipaul is a modern philosophe, carrying on the tradition that started originally with Lettres persanes and Candide. In a vigilant style, which has been deservedly admired, he transforms rage into precision and allows events to speak with their own inherent irony.

Source: The Guadian, London

NOBEL HISTORY

The famous and the forgotten

A century of Nobel Literature laureates

PETER SHARD

MORE than any of the Nobel Prizes, with the possible exception of the Peace award, the Literature prize is a highly subjective affair. The list of winners reveals that while some of the greatest writers of the past century have been honoured, they find themselves rubbing shoulders with many obscure and forgotten figures.

Alfred Nobel's initial intention was for the prize to be awarded to "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction".

But nowadays the Swedish Academy which awards the prize has established it as more of a recognition for a lifetime of literary achievement, and in some cases can be seen to have used it as an instrument for making a political statement.

This appeared to be the case in the award to dissident writers like China's Gao Xingjian last year, and most famously to Soviet writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn 30 years earlier.

Yet from the first award to French writer Sully Prudhomme in 1901, the Nobel has read like an A to Z of modern classics, with a fair sprinkling of unlikely names for good measure.

No-one would deny the justification of rewarding writers of the calibre of Samuel Beckett (1969), Saul Bellow (1976), Heinrich Boll (1972), Albert Camus (1957), T.S. Eliot (1948), William Faulkner (1949), Andre Gide (1947), Gunther Grass (1999), Ernest Hemingway (1954), Hermann Hesse (1946), Thomas Mann (1929), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1982), Francois Mauriac (1952), Eugene O'Neill (1936), Boris Pasternak (1958), Luigi Pirandello (1934), George Bernard Shaw (1925), John Steinbeck (1962), Rabindranath Tagore (1913) and W.B. Yeats (1923).

But there have been some distinctly "second division" choices, too, as well as a number which raised eyebrows at the time and have since been regarded as distinctly wide of the mark. At least three went to non-literary figures.

From the ranks of the more controversial laureates, some have singled out American writer Pearl Buck (1938), Anatole France (1921) and English master of the middlebrow, John Galsworthy (1932).

France's Jean-Paul Sartre (1964), the only man ever to refuse the Nobel, was a better writer of philosophy than fiction.

It has to be asked, too, who still reads, outside of their own countries, Iceland's Halldor Kiljan Laxness (1955), of the Swedish joint-winners in 1974, Eyvind Johnson and Harry Martinson, or the equally obscure likes of Erik Axel Karlfeldt (1931), Czeslaw Milosz (1980), Odysseus Elytis (1979) and Jaroslav Seifert (1984).

Yet arguably the most arcane choice had to be Frederic Mistral (1904), a French poet who wrote in the dialect of his native Provence.

As for recipients of the award who were not strictly literary, one need look no further than Winston Churchill (1953), whose right to the Prize no one has ever satisfactorily explained. A wartime leader and a lifelong politician, Churchill's prolific written output consists of many autobiographical accounts and the four-volume non-fiction work "A History of the English-Speaking Peoples".

Similarly, French psychologist Henri Bergson (1927) never turned his pen to fiction, drama or poetry, nor did Bertrand Russell (1950), fine and eloquent philosopher though he might have been.

Occasionally, though, names leap out from the list as inspired choices even in their own time. Sweden's own Knut Hamsun (1920), long neglected but the author of "Hunger", a harrowing novel about poverty, is a case in point.

So, too, are a handful of writers whose work could be deemed parochial and yet extends beyond a closed milieu to offer insight and universal truths, among them: Sinclair Lewis (1930), chronicler of small-town America; Naguib Mahfouz (1988), who brings Egyptian society to life; and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1978), master of the American-Jewish short story.

Source: AFP

PROFILE

VS Naipaul : A singular writer

ONE of the literary world's more bizarre vendettas was resumed last week when Paul Theroux laid waste in the Guardian to VS Naipaul's first novel in seven years, *Half a Life*, as "clumsy, unbelievable, badly written, wilful and weird". Theroux's book *Sir Vidia's Shadow* (1998) portrayed his one-time friend and mentor as snobbish, miserly, unforgiving and blunt to the point of brutality. While many of Naipaul's supporters discount Theroux's critique as that of a jaundiced former disciple, it stokes a wider reassessment of Naipaul's oeuvre that has been smouldering for more than a decade.

Naipaul's reputation, as a novelist and travel writer, has always been split. For John Thieme, editor of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature, he is a "remarkable forerunner of displacement and migrancy as the late 20th-century predicament". Resident in Britain since 1950, he has won all the major literary prizes - including the Booker in 1971 - and was knighted in 1990. He scooped the first David Cohen British literature prize for a lifetime's achievement in 1993, beating such contenders as William Golding, Ted Hughes and Iris Murdoch.

With 26 books over a 45-year career, Naipaul has become the foremost literary interpreter of the third world for a British and American readership. Yet his pronouncements such as "Nothing was made in Trinidad" or "Africa has no future" have brought much hostility. The 1992 Nobel laureate, St Lucian poet Derek Walcott, who called him "VS Nightfall" in a poem, described him as "our finest writer of the English sentence", whose beautiful prose was "scarred by scrofula", by his "repulsion towards Negroes" and the "self-disfiguring sneer that is praised for its probity".

According to Edward Said, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, while Naipaul, in the west, is "considered a master novelist and an important witness to the disintegration and hypocrisy of the third world, in the postcolonial world he's a marked man as a purveyor of stereotypes and disgust for the world that produced him - though that doesn't exclude people thinking he's a gifted writer."

Increasingly, Naipaul's public attacks have been on targets closer to home. He likened Tony Blair to a pirate whose "socialist revolution" had imposed a "plebeian culture". He has said Dickens "died from self-parody" and EM Forster knew nothing of India but "the garden boys whom he wished to seduce", and states that he does not have the time to read Salman Rushdie.

Naipaul, whose humour is often facetious, has of late been seen as a worthy heir to Evelyn Waugh - a good writer and a reactionary - whose son, Auberon, was a close friend. On stage at the National Theatre in 1990, Naipaul described Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against Rushdie as an "extreme form of literary criticism", then threw his head back and laughed. A decade earlier, asked by Elizabeth Hardwick what the dot on a Hindu woman's forehead meant, he replied, "It means, 'My head is empty.'"

Naipaul is never short of champions of what is described as his fearless veracity. Jason Cowley, in the Observer last month, said he was a "cold, clear-eyed prophet, a scourge of sentimentality, irrationality and lazy, left-liberal prejudices".

Naipaul, 69, has always sought to position himself as a lone, stateless observer, devoid of ideology or affiliation, peers or rivals - a truth-teller without illusion. As Said says, "He's thought of as a witness against the postcolonial world because he's one of 'them'; that there's an intimacy with which he can tell the truth about their pretensions, lies, delusions, ideologies, follies." Yet how convincing are these claims? And how far does the writer's vision transcend the prejudices of the man?

Alastair Niven, a judge of the David Cohen prize, sees Naipaul as a "man of great fastidiousness, who finds life quite painful and distasteful, and of great charm when he wishes to display it". Yet he is also given to contemptuous rage. " 'Credolised'? That comes from France. It has no meaning, like so many things that come from France... If ever you wish to meet intellectual frauds in quantity, go to Paris." A sense of beleaguering tips into bitterness, even malice. Claiming that a new book by his friend Farrukh Dhondy on the Trinidadian intellectual CLR James misrepresents his relations with James, Naipaul says: "All the time, it's false attribution, like Farrukh Dhondy on me sparring with James in 1950s London - it's a fantasy... Please speak about these absurd things that are attributed to me. This comes of too many interviews. You know, the monkey goes away and gets it all wrong, and no one corrects monkey."

Trinidad-born, he had a breakdown at Oxford but went on to build a reputation as a world-class novelist. More recently, his personal life has come under scrutiny, his views have drawn accusations of racism and homophobia, and he has found himself at the centre of a literary feud. Maya Jaggi on an outspoken author who now regards the novel as an outmoded form and sees his 'original' travel books as future classics

His second wife, Nadira Khan num Alvi, is on hand as spin doctor ("He has this image of being irascible but that really isn't true") and nurse ("Calm down, Vidia, drink some water"). Naipaul maintains that he has not read Theroux's book, which blamed Lady Naipaul for the breakdown of the writers' friendship. It was at her instigation, Sir Vidia's Shadow alleged, that Naipaul sold off the copies of Theroux's books that Theroux had inscribed to him in friendship; Theroux had chanced on them in a bookseller's catalogue ("the new spouse is a bridge-burner", he said). Naipaul will not speak about his former friend.

Half a Life, Naipaul's 12th novel, is set in 1930s India, 1950s London and a Portuguese colony in Africa resembling Mozambique around independence in the mid-70s. Its publisher, Picador, is also set to republish his entire back list. His fiction has become increasingly sparse, and he was believed to have turned his back on it. "I've never abandoned the novel," he says. "It's just disconcerting that when people talk about intellectual life they always talk about the novel, as though it were the highest form; it's a hangover from Bloomsbury. Great writing can be done in biography, history, art."

He also denies claims that his later fiction has been increasingly autobiographical. "I've used an autobiographical frame. I try to make my fiction as close to life as possible, leading the reader through deception into my narrative. It's an illusion." The sexual development of his latest novel's Indian hero, Willie Somerset Chandran, closely recalls Naipaul's own sexual history, as revealed in 1994 to the New Yorker magazine.

Naipaul was married for 41 years to Patricia Hale. Though she was always his first reader, he later described their marriage as "incomplete". During it, he confessed, he was a "prostitute man... the most unsatisfying form of sex", then in the early 1970s formed a passionate relationship with an Anglo-Argentine woman, Margaret, which lasted until his second marriage. His mistress often travelled with him while his wife remained in their Wiltshire home - in the grounds of an Edwardian manor house. He now lives in a cottage in the Avon Valley and also has "two places" in the Gloucester Road area of London. Naipaul has never had children, whom he has said "would have come between me and the work". He has also said: "I love privacy. I couldn't bear the idea of having children. I don't want a crowd," a view which he once ascribed to having grown up in the claustrophobia of an extended family.

In his new novel, the hitherto sexually inadequate Willie thinks of his mistress: "How terrible it would have been if... I had died without this deep satisfaction." "Please don't think that this is only about Willie," says Naipaul. "It's about really everyone I know. I know very few people who are totally fulfilled sexually, who are complete, not nagged by some feeling of 'might have been', or 'if only'. That's where we get into trouble: we start thinking, 'Everybody else is complete, fulfilled, and I'm not'. It's not like that at all. Everyone's just like us... The theme of sexuality [in the book] represents something of my own, but not my life; it's not a copy."

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in 1922 in Chaguanas, Trinidad, a market town where his father, Seepersad, was a correspondent for the Trinidad Guardian. The island's sugar-cane fields were worked by impoverished Indians who had crossed the British empire as indentured labourers. Although Naipaul's Brahmin grandparents had "lost caste" as they crossed the waters in the 1880s, his mother Droapatie's family were landowners and pundits who bestowed "a caste certainty, a high sense of the self" in "our island India", as Naipaul wrote in *Finding the Centre* (1984), his "prologue to an autobiography". He adds: "We were brought up aware of this ancestry but there were other things around one - the African world, the American base, the British-style school."

When he was six, the family moved to Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain, the setting for his first novel, *Miguel Street* (1959). It was a "migration: from the Hindu and Indian countryside to the white-negro-mulatto town", where the family held itself apart. "In a ritualised society," says Naipaul, "their world is enclosed by ritual; they hardly know where they are. They're not like other people who wish to adapt."

Naipaul's father transmitted his

unfulfilled writing ambitions to his son, a "fantasy of nobility" along with a "hysteria", a "fear of extinction... a panic about failing to be what I should be", as Naipaul wrote in his essay *Reading and Writing* (2000). Seepersad had a nervous breakdown, and was often dependent on his wife's family. His failures helped make Naipaul aware that Trinidad could not support a literary career. As he wrote in a foreword to his father's book, *The Adventures of Gurudeva* (1976), talent was not enough "in a society as deformed as ours". Naipaul later wrote of Trinidad as "unimportant, uncreative, cynical... a dot on the map", a place he was determined to leave.

He won an exhibition to Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain, and, in 1948, a Trinidad government scholarship to read English at University College, Oxford, in 1950-54. It was a time of loneliness and penury, covered in *Letters Between a Father and His Son* (1999). (Seepersad died of a heart

and 60s, including the West Indians Sam Selvon, George Lamming and Edgar Mittelholzer, the Nigerian Chinua Achebe and the Indians RK Narayan and Raja Rao. But of contacts with West Indian contemporaries, Naipaul says: "My relationship was as a [radio] editor. There wasn't more."

"People reinvent themselves," says Phillips. "In the 1950s Naipaul was one of a group of writers from the Caribbean, India, Africa, with the emergence of what became Commonwealth literature - though he's always pretended this was not the case. Those writers were engaged not only in pursuit of their own careers but in building a national literature, hand in hand with a people finding a voice. Naipaul decided to reinvent himself as separate."

His next novel, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), contained only English characters. He also began his travel writing career when the Trinidadian prime minis-

figure, the "Big Man". The Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk admires Naipaul's "representing third-world people not with sugary magic realism but with their demons, their misdeeds and horrors - which made them less victims and more human". But Chinua Achebe dismissed A Bend in the River as "pompous rubbish", sensing that "although Naipaul was writing about Africa, he was not writing for Africans".

Naipaul has often been accused of pessimism. "I don't know what it means," he says. "I don't know if it means they adored Mobutu. Maybe it means just that, that in Argentina they adored Peron and his successors, who looted the country to its bankrupt state. I didn't make the world; I tried to record it accurately and without prejudice. To have a political view is to be prejudiced. I don't have a political view." However, Naipaul is a "profoundly political writer" according to Said, who adds: "He takes a dim

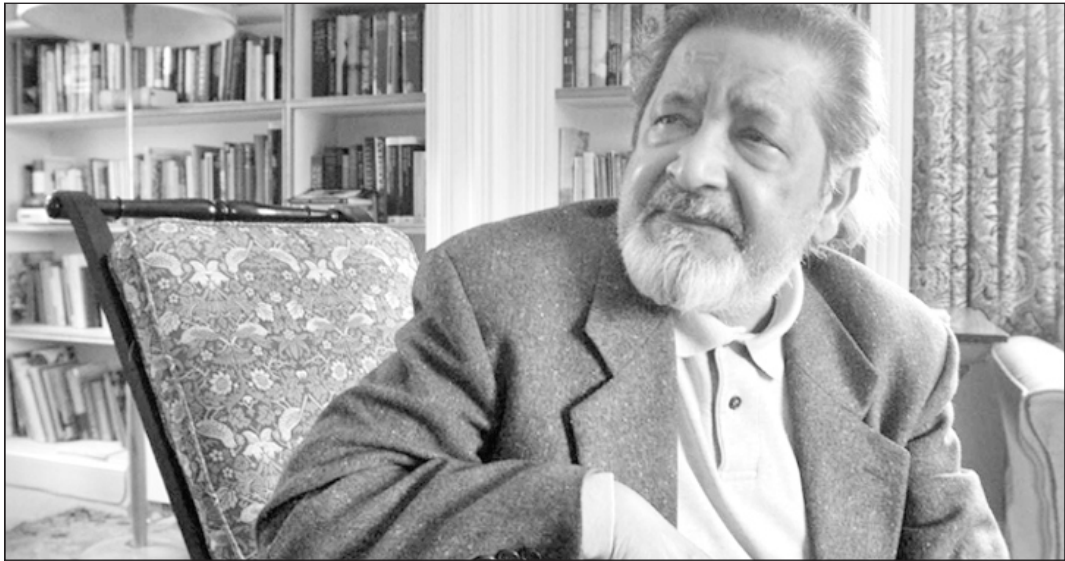


PHOTO: AFP

British author V.S. Naipaul at his home near Salisbury, Wiltshire, 11 October, 2001 after it was announced that he has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

attack in 1953.) VS Naipaul himself had a nervous breakdown that lasted 18 months, and made a suicide attempt - thwarted when the gas meter ran out. Yet he now professes "intense boredom... intellectually, Oxford was a disappointment to me. There were a lot of working-class people who'd been given special grants... They were not all fine. Some were; most were not. But they'd disappeared. Most people who go to Oxford disappear - dross." His tutor, Peter Bayley, reportedly said years later that Naipaul had "not quite forgiven us for giving him a second-class degree".

In 1955 he married Patricia Hale, whom he had met at Oxford. While editing a weekly radio programme for the BBC Caribbean Service, he wrote *Miguel Street*, his third published novel. It was followed by *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Sufrae of Elvira* (1958) and what many still believe to be his masterpiece, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), based on his father's life, and with a character, Anand, who resembles the young Vidia. All these novels were set in the Caribbean, where he found his material in "the city street from whose mixed life we had held aloof, and the country life before that, with the ways and manners of a remembered India".

Naipaul says of his early works: "I adore them. They're very original. Miguel Street remains rather wise. I'm slightly amazed." Caryl Phillips, who wrote the screenplay for a Merchant-Ivory film of *The Mystic Masseur* to be released this autumn, admires in them "the humour of Caribbean patois, captured in funny, accurate dialogue".

Yet Naipaul's vision darkened. Twenty years after *A House for Mr Biswas* was published, the author heard it abridged on the radio and was in tears. "It affected me," he says, "the emotions of the work itself, of discovering one's talent, the two or three years of great excitement writing the book - because life wasn't so easy afterwards; it was full of ups and downs." Those early books won prizes, yet he insists they had "no critical success - that's a myth". Proud to have had only brief non-literary jobs (one as a copywriter for a cement company), Naipaul says he lived by journalism and reviewing. "I made no money from the books. They were hard to place in paperback. That's important to know. There's an idea that people were falling from them, but no, no. One always had to just pick oneself up and begin again, always. That's become my nature. To be a writer one has to be extraordinarily tough."

Other writers of the receding British empire were beginning to be published in London in the 1950s

ter Eric Williams commissioned what became an account of the Caribbean, *The Middle Passage* (1962). Its often perceptive criticisms were couched in the tone of aloof disdain that became his hallmark, from its first sentence, "There was such a crowd of immigrant-type West Indians on the boat-train platform at Waterloo that I was glad I was travelling first class to the West Indies," to his admission that "the steel band used to be regarded as a high manifestation of West Indian Culture, and it was a sound I detested". He returned to Trinidadian history in *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969).

"I didn't know how to travel when I began," says Naipaul. "I loved the idea of being on the road, with money in my pocket and introductions, going to people's houses and having dinner. But the problem is how you make a narrative out of that... It's important to remember that to be a colonial writer about colonial societies was new. There'd been no one doing it before."

An Area of Darkness (1964) was more difficult. "Again, that was a new kind of book: no one of Indian ancestry had written a book like that about India, trying to look at the whole country." Naipaul's childhood faith in the "wholeness of India" was dispelled by his first visit. He hated westerners who found spiritual succour where he found only dirt and disease. In India: *A Wounded Civilization* (1977) he described a Hindu land injured by both the British Raj and the preceding Islamic conquest, India's "dark ages".

Travel, wrote Naipaul, "broadened my world view... and took me out of my colonial shell". Argentina in 1972 was a "breakthrough: far from being a colonial traveller, I was becoming an inquirer". He took his experience of "half-made societies" - "Argentina, Congo, places created by the colonial system" - into his fiction. *The Mimic Men* (1967) and the Booker-winning *In a Free State* (1971), dwell on "mimic men" absurdly imitating their former colonial masters, and on the anxiety of displaced individuals.

Naipaul was writer in residence at Makerere University in Uganda in 1966, and began using his trips as inspiration for both fiction and essays. His novel *Guerillas* (1975) fictionalised Caribbean black-power leaders of the 1970s, while *The Killings in Trinidad* (1980) was based on the real Michael X. A return visit to Zaire in 1975 grew into the novel *A Bend in the River* (1979) as well as the non-fiction *A Congo Diary* (1980).

In Thieme's view, the hand of Dickens gave way in these novels to Conrad's. A Bend in the River saw Heart of Darkness's Mr Kurtz reincarnated as a despotic Mobutu

view of decolonisation, and thinks modern nationalism is a disaster."

With his 1970s fiction, Naipaul overtook his contemporaries in praise. Phillips believes his career "cast a big shadow over that generation of writers because, with his dyspeptic, apocalyptic vision of the third world, he was anointed as the one authentic voice".

After the deaths of his sister, Sati, in 1984, and younger brother Shiva - also a writer - in 1985, Naipaul entered perhaps his third, "autumnal" phase. *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A Way in the World* (1994) combine autobiographical elements with wider histories - of postwar migration and the new world. The first is an elegiac novel, set largely in rural Wiltshire and overshadowed by death. While Walcott called it a "melodious whine - Trinidad injured me; England saved me", Rushdie found a total absence of love. Phillips says that "for the last 20 years, Naipaul's subject has been himself".

"I don't know why people think it's autobiographical," says Naipaul. "I was writing about myself as a writer. It has nothing about my wife, my girlfriends - all that's left out. The aim was to write about looking for subjects, being deceived by what you think you should write about, missing the real subjects - the writer coming to a boarding house in London full of displaced persons in Europe, a kind of flotsam after the war. That was a big subject, if only the boy of 18 could have seen it. Then the great irony of coming to rest in this manor house with imperial associations, which is itself in a state of decay. It's about England, a kind of country life, but not as others write about it. It sets ideas about country life on their head."

With India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990), Naipaul returned to his area of darkness. He analysed the shame and "neurosis" with which he first visited the country as a "fearful traveller", and chided himself for having seen "only the surface of things". This time he found evidence of intellectual regeneration, and appeared to allow his subjects to speak for themselves. "Now, at the end, I feel that when you travel in a country, you, the traveller, are not the most important person; the important ones are the people you're travelling among," he says. Yet he was accused of substituting for bitter negativity a sanguine faith, not least about phenomena such as Hindu fundamentalism that others found alarming.

Naipaul reacts with sarcasm to the charge of wilful optimism. "That assumes, 'Here is India being the same old India, and it's the writer who has changed. India itself has gone along on its own messy way,

in sloth and ignorance, and the writer now adores sloth and ignorance... It's not like that. The world changes."

The charge was different for his book on Islamic fundamentalism, *Among the Believers* (1981) and its follow-up, *Beyond Belief* (1998) travels though non-Arab, "converted" Islamic countries. Edward Hoagland in the New York Times thought Among the Believers a "vitriolic tour [that] evinces an inherent antipathy to the religion of Islam so naked and severe that a book taking a comparable view of Christianity or Judaism would have been hard put to find a publisher in the United States". Said describes Beyond Belief as an "intellectual catastrophe. He thinks Islam is the worst disaster that ever happened to India, and the book reveals a pathology. It's hard to believe any rational person would attack an entire culture on that scale."

In Half a Life there are traces of the early humour that most agree is absent from his later books, though he insists: "In all my work there's humour, all of it, even the darkest." It reprises a doom-laden vision of Africa, as civil war, fuelled by a neighbour resembling apartheid South Africa, hangs over the former colony. "The history of the Portuguese colonies in Africa is an appalling history; it's not over," Naipaul says. "To think that one can arrive at some serene view of Africa is foolish." Yet while he is contemptuous of westerners who cheer revolutions with a return air ticket in their back pocket, despair may also be a luxury of the visitor, the option of flight to the west a prerogative of the few.

The novel sees mixed-race, "half-and-half", "second-rank", people - including the half-Brahmin, half-low-caste Willie - as lost. It is the "pure" Africans who are happy. Though a product of several cultures, Naipaul's work betrays a dread of miscegenation, a hankering for racial, even cultural, separation. According to Thieme, "in The Mimic Men, he almost looks to an Aryan purity... He sees the precolonial period as Edenic, which is troubling."

Naipaul's first wife died in 1996 and that year he married Alvi, a divorced Pakistani journalist who is 25 years his junior. Among the guests at their wedding dinner in London were Harold Pinter and Lady Antonia Fraser, the writer Francis Wyndham and the former editor of the London Review of Books, Karl Miller. "I trust Nadira, I lean on her," he says. Owing to failing health he travels far less, but of death he says with grim satisfaction: "I'm looking forward to it." After his wife remonstrates ("he goes to the gym three times a week"), he resumes: "As long as one is alive, one has to be OK, so one's committed to the gym... But I'm actually looking forward to death. It's going to be hard, if you've been writing all your life, to imagine a time - which is not far away - when one will no longer be writing. I don't know how I'll cope with it. It'll be very painful."

He has given thought to posterity. "Nearly everything written in the last century will crumble away to dust - all the novels," he says. "In every novel written now there's an element of mimicry... People will still want to read the originals, the masters." Among these he counts early Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert and Maupassant. "No one in his right mind wants to read Hemingway for pleasure, or Galsworthy or Snow."

He seems to take most pride in his travel books - which are arguably, even for many admirers, his weakest. "The work I was doing on Islam, that kind of human narrative, was profounder and truer to our time than any novel of imitation," he says. "The travel books have all been original; there was nothing like them before. It would be easy for them to have copies."

For Naipaul, Britain remains "somebody else's landscape". While Niven believes he has been absorbed into a British literary tradition, Naipaul demurs. "I'm completely outside it; I have no part in it. I'm my own writer. My material means I'm entirely separate."

In Phillips's view, Naipaul has "allowed himself to be accepted by an English tradition but not absorbed. He'll accept garlands and applause, but he won't position himself at the centre publicly. His own tradition is being separate, different, apart."

"One's done an immense amount of work," says Naipaul. "Every book is an effort; every book extends vision. I'm not a detective-story writer. I'm not Agatha Christie, who ends as she begins, in the same limited view of the world. Nor Graham Greene, or P.G. Wodehouse - their world doesn't change. I'm quite different: my world changes as I write."

How far Naipaul's world changes remains open to dispute. But there is no doubt that his vision reveals as much about the man as about the world.

Source: The Guadian, London