

**V.S. Naipaul wins the Nobel –
By Gillian Dooley
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V.S. Naipaul has finally won the Nobel Prize for Literature after many years on the short list. He said in 1979, with a certain bitter pride, 'They won't give me a Nobel Prize ... I don't represent anything. One doesn't speak for anyone.' The Academy doesn't agree. They awarded him the prize 'for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories.' The significant phrase here is 'incorruptible scrutiny.' Naipaul has always been a meticulous, merciless observer, and he can make those under scrutiny very uncomfortable. Indeed, he once said, 'I think unless one hears a little squeal of pain after one's done some writing one has not really done much. That is my gauge of whether I have hit something true.'

Naipaul's writing has continued to develop over the years because of his conviction that inherited forms do not suit new material. He says, 'every creative talent is always burning itself out, every literary form is always getting to the end of what it can do.' Consequently he has always felt the need to remake himself and recreate the forms he writes in, and this process has itself provided him with subject matter in several works, from *Finding the Centre* in 1984 to *Reading and Writing*, published last year.

His first book, as he recounts in *Finding the Centre*, was *Miguel Street*, but his first master work was *A House for Mr Biswas*, published in 1961. To attain the mastery of this epic tale of someone like his father – an individualist trapped in a ritualistic world, a writer in a society where literacy and culture are devalued – he had first to define his subject matter. He had to overcome his early feeling that his Trinidad birth-place was not important enough to write about: he couldn't recognise it as a proper subject until he had been away from it for some years.

After *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul began his series of travel books with *The Middle Passage*, a new type of travel book at the time. Rather than travelling as a stranger to whom everything is new, he was in fact a local revisiting Trinidad and other Caribbean countries. Since that first travel book, Naipaul has written 3 books on India, 2 on the converted Islamic nations and one on the American south. He has also published *The Loss of El Dorado*, a history of Trinidad, which had previously been overlooked by historians. His travel writing is characterised by the close attention he pays to the people he meets. He is more intent on letting them tell their stories than on reporting his own response to what he sees.

After *A House for Mr Biswas* he began to experiment more with the formal aspects of writing fiction, becoming more and more convinced that it was essential to find the correct form for his material. *In A Free State*, his Booker-winning novel from 1971, is a series of five narratives, with no continuity of plot, setting or character. Its theme is the victims of the post-colonial world – what he calls 'the casualties of freedom.' It deals with a number of people who have been cut adrift from their origins, and the fractured form of this novel mimics the fragmented, incomplete lives it describes.

During the 1970s, Naipaul wrote several other novels which are quite conventional on the surface – he has never been a difficult or obscure writer.

These books deal starkly with the violence inherent in the post-colonial world. *Guerillas*, from 1975, the grim story of an English woman who becomes fatally entangled in racial politics in Trinidad, deeply shocked many readers. However, a new change came in the 1980s with his masterpiece, *The Enigma of Arrival*, which is in many ways less like a novel than any of his previous fiction. In 1995, he said, 'I hate the word "novel". I can no longer understand why it is important to write or read invented stories.' He had come to the conclusion that to write in a third-person omniscient narrative voice was fraudulent, and he was concerned to make his presence in his own work quite clear. *The Enigma of Arrival* is a memoir of his life in rural Wiltshire, in which he is the lens through which the events of the narrative are seen, although the events he is relating are fictional at least in detail. *Enigma* has deeply serious themes, but like *A House for Mr Biswas* it is suffused with a joy in language – an infectious delight in finding just the right words. He followed this in 1994 with *A Way in the World*, a mixture of semi-fictional memoir and imaginative historical recreation. Now, however, with the new novel *Half a Life*, he has gone back once more to 'pure' fiction, with events, narrators and characters none of which can be interpreted as simply autobiographical.

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