

The Things You Had Not Cared to Know

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***Half a Life* by V.S. Naipaul Knopf. 224 pp. \$24.00.**

"I found that Conrad ... had been everywhere before me." The man who wrote that 25 years ago was, though still in his 40s, already a formidable figure of English letters. The intervening years have made him sovereign. Who else has a comparable global understanding? Who tells us with equal authority what the world is like now? What Joseph Conrad was to his age, V.S. Naipaul is to ours. Conrad's meditation on the world of imperialism has its worthy counterpart in Naipaul's expansive account of postcolonial realities.

Born in 1932, Naipaul has written fiction, history, reportage, and autobiographical reflection on his native Trinidad and the other British West Indies (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Middle Passage*, *The Loss of El Dorado*, *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, *Guerrillas*, *A Way in the World*, and more); three indispensable travel books about India, the country of his Hindu forebears; a pair of much debated reports on non-Arab Islamic places such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Iran; a marvelous work of uncertain genre, *The Enigma of Arrival*, set entirely in the Wiltshire countryside; and a patient, balanced, uncondescending book about life in the southeastern United States.

He has also written, prior to his new novel, two notable works about Africa: *In a Free State*, consisting of short pieces, and *A Bend in the River*, which takes place in Joseph D. Mobutu's Zaire. This catalogue of achievement is by no means comprehensive; I offer it merely to give some sense of the author's range.

Naipaul has been caricatured as a mandarin would-be sahib, sneering at wogs. In fact, his understanding of the Third World (a term he disdains) is suffused with personal involvement and an overriding grief; he writes as one of the formerly colonized. The playful, nasty tone of Evelyn Waugh in such books as *Scoop* and *Black Mischief* is remote from Naipaul's deadly serious encounter with what history has wrought. He is as armed against the blather of imperialist nostalgia as he is against Marxist, Muslim or nationalist ideologies. "Hate oppression; fear the oppressed," says a character in his novel *The Mimic Men*. Naipaul proffers no apologetics of any kind, only a determination to render plainly what is happening. Indeed, it is because he cannot be assimilated by the Left or the Right that his voice has emerged as the most important one of the postcolonial era.

The title novella of *In a Free State*, set in Uganda, begins: "In this country in Africa there was a president and there was also a king." That is getting down to business fast, as Naipaul invariably does. What he announces, without trimmings, is the inevitability of a tribal civil war in the aftermath of colonial rule. Near the end Naipaul's protagonists, very English and not very likable, behold the remnants of a town where the king had held sway, recently demolished by the president's armies: "The walls had been breached: there was destruction inside: lorries, soldiers, campfires. To that ancient site less than a hundred years before the first explorers had brought news of the world beyond the forest. Now the site had its first true ruin, a palace built mostly in the 1920s, the first palace built there of materials less perishable than reeds and grass."

A lot of tragic history is compressed here. Naipaul subscribes to no myth of an immemorial, Edenic life of the bush; nor to any nostalgia for the governance Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, and Italy imposed; nor to any delusions about the political and economic prospects of formerly colonized countries.

In *A Bend in the River* a narrator of remote Arab ancestry, descended from that great earlier wave of colonization, has come from the east coast of Africa, perhaps from Dar es Salaam, to a town at a great bend in the Congo River--now Kisangani, formerly Stanleyville. It is the place where Conrad located Kurtz' "Inner Station" in *Heart of Darkness*. Naipaul uses Conrad's setting to tell the story of the bloody contest for power in the Congo of the mid-1960s, a complex struggle in which the U.S., the Soviet Union and the UN became vigorously engaged. The early reign of Mobutu ("Mobutu Sese Seko"--Mobutu Himself Forever), supposed gendarme of U.S. interests in central Africa, is rendered in all its barbarism and grotesquerie. The semi-tribal civil strife that resulted in Mobutu's rise to power is fueled by a rage so deep that the narrator can only stand back in awe:

"I had heard dreadful stories of that time, of casual killings over many months by soldiers and rebels and mercenaries, of people trussed up in disgusting ways and made to sing songs while they were beaten to death in the streets. None of the people who came in from the villages seemed ready for that kind of horror. Yet now it was all starting up again."

Although it does not much resemble either predecessor, *Half a Life* should be read in the context of Naipaul's earlier African fiction. *In a Free State* takes place over the course of a few days. *A Bend in the River*, several times as long, covers a period of about seven years. *Half a Life* is nearly as short as *In a Free State*, but it spans more than three decades and three continents. The author has set himself an ambitious task, even by his own standards.

The protagonist, Willie Somerset Chandran, tells of his childhood in an autonomous, maharajah-governed Indian state during the 1930s. His high-minded self-pitying father, a comic figure reminiscent of certain characters in Naipaul's early Trinidadian novels, stays busy recounting his life to his son. In many variants, he tells of his turn from humane letters to the call of the Mahatma ("I made a little bonfire of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Shelley and Keats") and his subsequent marriage to an untouchable.

Willie, the product of what was a disastrous union, has enough sense to want a life that does not resemble that of either of his parents. He seizes on a scholarship to "a college of education for mature students" in London and, in the year of the Suez Crisis, makes his way to England by steamer. A total innocent, he falls in with the sensation seekers, poseurs and sharpies of the bohemian-immigrant milieu of 1950s Notting Hill, who strike him as glamorously metropolitan. He picks up work at the BBC and several newspapers, and he diverts himself with a couple of pathetic sexual adventures. Candide-like, he observes in Notting Hill the bands of young toughs in mock-Edwardian dress roaming the streets in search of dark-skinned victims. (In 1962, Anthony Burgess would make them world-famous as "droogs" in *A Clockwork Orange*.)

Willie puts together a collection of his writings and gets it published, in a modest run. But his name on the spine of a slim volume seems not to prompt the usual longing for more recognition: "All that he had now was an idea--and it was like a belief in magic--that one day something would happen, an illumination would come to him, and he would be taken by a series of events to the

place he should go. What he had to do was to hold himself in readiness, to recognize the moment."

Revelation arrives in the form of a fan letter. Somebody out there has actually liked his book--a surprise, given that the handful of reviews have been uniformly negative. His admirer is Ana, a Mozambican woman who is three-parts Portuguese and one-part African. Their lives are obviously parallel, Willie being a kind of mestizo himself, yet he allows himself to believe she is unaware of his mixed parentage. The truth is, she had sensed it from his stories; indeed, that is what drew her to him.

Willie casts his lot with Ana. She brings him home to her family's cotton, cashew and sisal estate in a northern province of what was still Portuguese East Africa. As soon as he sees the place, he says to himself, "I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying." He stays for 18 years--the period that turns out to be the endgame of Portuguese power. Willie says:

"I wonder whether in our circle we hadn't all ... been granted some unsettling intimation ... that our bluff in Africa would one day be called. Though I don't think anyone could have guessed that the world of concrete was going to be so completely overwhelmed by the frail old world of straw."

A liberationist movement seeps in from the bush; its tactic is unarmed infiltration. In 1974, an unexpected *coup d'etat* in Lisbon throws all into disarray. The insurgents establish a Marxist-Leninist People's Republic of Mozambique: "The colonial government in the capital closed down, just like that; the guerrillas took over."

With harrowing economy, Naipaul's novel describes the newborn nation going to ruin: "It didn't take long for things to break down, to become again as they had been in the days of Ana's grandfather, who had had to live close to the ground, close to the climate and insects and illnesses, and close to his African neighbors and workers, before comfort had been squeezed out of the hard land, like blood out of a stone."

But something far worse than a decline in the quality of life is in the offing. Here, as in all his books, Naipaul expects you to know a good deal of the history. The climactic event, virtually unspoken, is the long civil war that quickly followed independence, claiming more than a million lives and creating more than three million refugees. A new breed of guerrillas, sponsored initially by Rhodesia and then by South Africa--white supremacist regimes seeking to exploit tribal enmities in order to undermine the regime in Mozambique--spread terror and mass destruction for more than twenty years. Noted desultorily in the developed world at the time, this tragedy is now quite forgotten.

"How nice it would be," the narrator of *A Bend in the River* muses, "if in the morning we could wake up and find that the world had shrunk only to what we knew and what was safe." But the world being what it is, an unfathomable blood lust is what Naipaul must reveal. Like *In a Free State* and *A Bend in the River*, *Half a Life* makes you ashamed of the things you had not cared to know. Let those who find Naipaul's clarity intolerable turn to more consoling authors.

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