

# books

Andrew Robinson

## 'I had no idea that madness in the Islamic world had gone so far'

**T**he news came on the phone: "The Nobel Prize for Literature for 2001 is awarded to the British writer, born in Trinidad, V. S. Naipaul." When, last October, the call from Stockholm came to his house in Wiltshire, Sir Vidia Naipaul pretended to be busy in the garden. In fact, he had taken to his bed. The award was a shock — he had long assumed his work was unpalatable to the academic world, and there had been no prior hint of the honour. His immediate reaction, he tells me, was one of "extreme exhaustion." "One needs time to think about everything. So I went and lay down."

Later, he issued a statement that the award was "a great tribute to both England, my home, and to India, home of my ancestors." He made no mention at all of Trinidad — as people were quick to note — despite the fact that Naipaul was brought up there until the age of 18 and that Trinidad is the setting for his early books, including his most moving work, *A House for Mr Biswas*, which had established him as a leading young novelist by the early 1960s. Naipaul is unrepentant. India, from which his Hindu grandfather sailed to Trinidad in the late 19th century, was the subject of three substantial books spread over three decades. Unlike Trinidad, India remains a key influence and concern.

"A billion people and a little island, which has done almost nothing for me... We mentioned in the citation that I was born in Trinidad. I thought it was enough." As for being "British", Naipaul (who was knighted in 1990) says: "I could not have done this writing in any other country. To that extent, I am a British writer. I've been supported by this country in many ways." Although seasoned Naipaul watchers are used to his com-

**About the Taj Mahal: 'So wasteful, so decadent and in the end so cruel that it is painful to be there for very long'**

V. S. Naipaul, at 70, speaks about his controversial career and reveals that "for the first time in my life, I'm doing nothing"

plaints of exhaustion, right now he really does seem fatigued. "I'm sleeping about 14 hours a day. I'm like a cat: immense sleep," he admits. As a writer acutely aware of the passing of time — he prints the precise period in which he composed a book on the final page — he sounds melancholy about turning 70 this month. "On my 60th birthday, I was working. I was very much a working man. I'm not working now. For the first time in my life, I'm consciously doing nothing. I'm dormant, not agitating my mind in any way. Since my schooldays I've always been wound up, and thinking of doing the next thing and the next thing, then with this writing career getting started, the next book and the next book and the next book... Now I examine myself and feel that I've done the work really. I've got rid of the idea of writing about my first marriage. That has been with me for a long time, and I tried to face it and I couldn't face it. If I do another book, it might be some kind of book about England, where I've spent so long. That's stuff within me that hasn't been expressed. But I would need to arrive at a narrative, and I don't know how one does that, how it comes to one."

Nobelled or not, Naipaul's is a wide-ranging and original oeuvre, some two dozen books in all, that should satisfy any writer. And it is a genuine tribute to its readability that all of his books remain in print, unlike the works of some Nobel laureates. Indeed, his new publisher, Picador, is re-issuing everything, including much of the uncollected journalism, with new covers. As Naipaul himself, ever alert to publishing realities, observes, the prize means "a good strong second wind".

There are the novels and stories of the Caribbean, chiefly comic, such as *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street*, *A Flag on the Island* (including that deadpan classic, *The Night Watchman's*

*Occurrence Book*) and of course *A House for Mr Biswas*, based on Naipaul's father, a struggling journalist. There are the dark, violent novels about Africa, *In a Free State* and *A Bend in the River*. And there are the narratives which connect continents, the intricate *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, with clear autobiographical elements, and *Half a Life*, published just before the Nobel award. Then there is the non-fiction: travel books of a particularly penetrating kind, which describe, report and analyse with formidable intelligence the post-colonial societies of the Caribbean, India, the Islamic world, West Africa, South America and the American South. The most read are probably *An Area of Darkness*, about India, and *Among the Believers*, about Islam — both of which provoked a furious reaction from the societies they criticised. Taken together, Naipaul's fiction and non-fiction unite "perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories", as the Nobel judges remarked.

While that is true, as is the claim made on both sides of the Atlantic that Naipaul is the great-

**About the internet: 'I began to think it was something for the lower classes — a toy. Other people, those who had access to libraries and books, could just find their information in the usual way'**

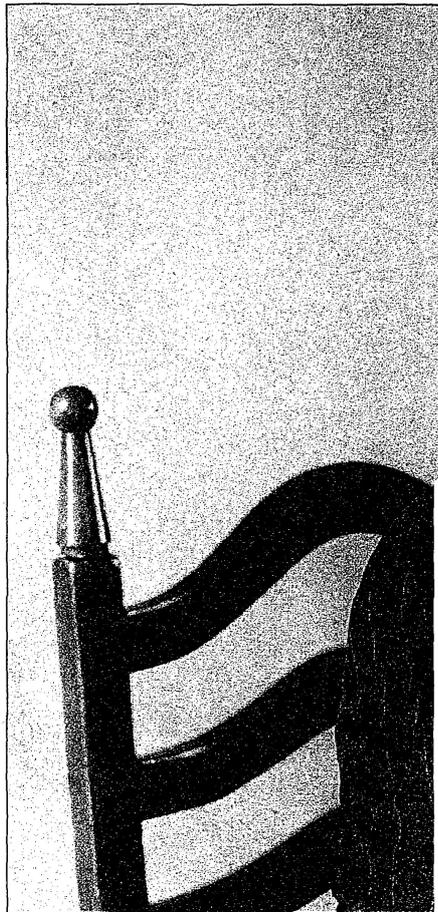
est living writer of English prose, also true is that for many serious readers Naipaul is still only a name: "I'm sure he's very good, but I don't feel he's for me," a friend of Diana Athill, Naipaul's first editor, told her. In *Stet*, Athill's memoir of working with Vidia, she perceptively identifies three reasons: readers' lack of interest in the consequences of imperialism; the writer's lack of interest in writing about women; and, after *Mr Biswas*, the books' relative lack of pleasure in life. "They impress, but they do not charm."

"People are nervous of me, you know. I don't know why," says Naipaul with the slight chuckle which indicates irony, and is part of his charm for admirers. He is referring to a recent visit to India as the star guest at a government-sponsored writers congress. "I got myself into a couple of scrapes. But it seemed to be all right in the end. You see, I can be provoked when people set out to provoke me. I'm not philosophical enough to walk away."

It is well known that he has little time for the Indian writing in English that has boomed since the 1980s (though his writing is revered by many to whose work he is indifferent). And he has never shown the slightest respect for writers and intellectuals who have done well by presenting themselves as victims of colonialism; and has thereby irritated a whole legion of academics. Hence the "scrapes". But what has really stung some Indians is his sympathy for Hindu revivalism in the form of the BJP, now in government, and his unwillingness to condemn excesses such as the 1992 destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya.

He feels a definite antipathy for Islam's fanatical role in India, past and present. Of the riots in Gujarat this year, which began with the burning by Muslims of a train carrying Hindu fundamentalists, he says: "The original thing that started it was a terrorist act, and should be considered so. It was meant to create a reaction."

As the grandson of an indentured labourer from India, Naipaul is drawn to and repelled by the movements of the Hindu downtrodden in India — as he expressed in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). "My feelings about the BJP are very complicated," he admits; but he has not changed his basic view. "I think



Naipaul: when he heard that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for

every liberal person should extend a hand to that kind of movement from the bottom. One takes the longer view, rather than the political view. There's a great upheaval in India; and if you are interested in India, you must welcome it."

If his three books on India have been influential, his two books on Islam, especially the one written just after the Iranian revolution of 1979, can be described as prophetic. "That expectation — of others continuing to create, of the alien, necessary civilisation going on — is implicit in the act of renunciation [of the West], and is its great flaw," he wrote in *Among the Believers*.

Did his travels give him any inkling of the possibility of the attacks of September 11? "I've been aware of madness in the Islamic world. I've written about

**About women: 'I adore women. I am probably the greatest lover of women you are likely to meet'**

it. The madness of people who have fallen behind technically, and who do not have the will to make the intellectual effort to catch up. I was aware of the religious hatred, I was aware of the indifference to life. I was aware of the anti-civilisation aspect of the new fundamentalism. But I had no idea it had gone so far — the madness. The idea of their strength is an illusion. Nothing is coming from within. The terrorists can fly a plane, but what they can't do is build a plane. What they can't do is build those towers. I think people have spoken much rubbish about that event. The poor revenging themselves on the rich! It's nothing but an aspect of religious hatred. And that is so hard to deal with, or even contemplate. You can deal with the poor striking out, but you can't deal with the threat of a universal religious war." Though he approved of the recent war in Afghanistan, he is keenly aware of the inherent absurdity of the current war on terrorism: "Your biggest enemy is your great ally — Saudi Arabia — and the foot-soldiers of the terror come from your other ally — Pakistan."

Perhaps Naipaul's talked-about marriage to a Pakistani journalist, Nadira Khanum Alvi, in 1996, just after the death of his first wife, might have been expected



erature In 2001, his initial, shocked reaction was to take to his bed. "One needs time to think about everything. So I went and lay down."

to make him more sympathetic to Islam, or to Pakistan. Instead, the opposite seems true. Both his books on Islam have been "banned" there, he says: anyway, they cannot be obtained. Naipaul is scathing: "It's not a book-reading country, it has no intellectual life — it's against the intellectual life. I think if the fount of all your actions is religion and the idea of the religious war, which involves religious hatred — then books, civilisation . . . these things don't matter to you. All you need is the

Koran, and a ruler with a big stick."

Vintage Naipaul. His views are original and often surprising. About his all-green garden: "I feel if I wanted to see flowers, I could just take a bus ride and in front of every house there would be a series of shocking colours." About book reviewing: "One of my golden rules was: never mention the name of a character. If you deny yourself that, you have to go to the heart of a novel." About himself: "It's my great re-

gret that I didn't do science at Oxford. I think I would probably have been a better man if I had studied science profoundly."

No wonder his former friend Paul Theroux's envious memoir, *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, is so fascinating — "a portrait of Mozart by Salieri", as A. N. Wilson called it. For V. S. Naipaul can never be dull. He is always thinking, always moving on.

"The artist, the writer, the filmmaker, moves on, and the friend who liked him no longer likes

him. It has to be like this — people fall away," Naipaul reflects. "I'm not lonely. It's a fantasy about the writer's life being lonely; I'm never happier than when I'm writing. Writers live when they're writing: the other side of them is probably not as important as this life during the writing, in the writing."

◆ Andrew Robinson is the literary editor of the THES; V. S. Naipaul's books are being reissued by Picador

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