



The Writer and the World: Essays

V.S. Naipaul , Pankaj Mishra (Introduction)

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Spanning four decades and four continents, this magisterial volume brings together the essential shorter works of reflection and reportage by our most sensitive, literate, and undeceivable observer of the post-colonial world. In its pages V. S. Naipaul trains his relentless moral intelligence on societies from India to the United States and sees how each deals with the challenges of modernity and the seductions of both the real and mythical past.

Whether he is writing about a string of racial murders in Trinidad; the mad, corrupt reign of Mobutu in Zaire; Argentina under the generals; or Dallas during the 1984 Republican Convention, Naipaul combines intellectual playfulness with sorrow, indignation, and analysis so far-reaching that it approaches prophecy. **The Writer and the World** reminds us that he is in a class by himself.

The Writer and the World: Essays Details

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Khush says

I give an excellent rating to this book for its language. Just like Naipaul's other works, this book is, too, in parts, quirky. The book has five essays. The first two essays 'The Worm in the Bud' and 'An English Way of Looking' are engaging. In the first one, he writes about writers from Trinidad, and their struggles, including his father's, with writing. The essay, in fact, traces the history of significant writers who came from that part of the world – those who became successful and known, and those who vanished. I liked reading about what he has to say about his father's work, and how that has shaped him. Since I have read letters between Naipaul and his father, I liked reading this essay.

The second essay is about his life in England and his friendships with editors, publishers and other writers. He writes with great care, concern, and honesty about the author Anthony Powell. The essay gives a peep into the nature of friendships and politics that prevails in the literary world. He also wrote in detail about his own grappling with words and deadlines, but once he established himself he gave up writing book reviews. It came as a pleasant surprise that Naipaul usually took a week to write a thousand-word book review.

The rest of the essays are on India. He writes about India, its culture, politicians, and his own relationship with India. Of course, the picture that emerges is a fascinating one no matter how much one dislikes some of the stuff Naipaul writes, he cannot be easily dismissed. He writes about India with great understanding. Many Indian people bash him for his views on India because they think that he panders to the western audience. There could be some truth in these accusations, however, there is a lot in his critique that is significant.

Naipaul writes effectively about caste and the immigrant experience, and how immigrants when living far away from their native lands turn reality into myths. Here he talks about his own family. For instance, when his family could travel back to India, his mother visited her village. She was hugely disappointed in them. The way this visit is described in the book makes it clear that both mother and son get disgusted by the dust-ridden Indian landscape, and the muddy tea the poor relatives offered his mother. The Brahmin relatives are looked upon as if they were untouchables. It is fascinating to see that Naipaul is harsh with almost every aspect of Indian life, he never gave up his caste. There is a lot in Brahmanism that he seems to admire: in fact, in the book he claims that almost all human nature can be expressed by the Hindu epics. He confesses that religion has a huge impact on him, and in very important ways, in a foreign land, his ancestors could maintain their sense of self by practicing caste and religious rituals.

Coming back to the experience of the mother rings perfectly true, but the conclusions drawn from the experience are not convincing. I have seen very poor people, especially the so-called upper castes, who are clean and extremely cultured. As I read him, I wondered Naipaul's own ancestors had survived outside India, in his own estimation, due to their religion and what they knew in terms of rituals, stories, and so forth. The cultural values were strong and remained a guiding force in the unfamiliar land. How come, then, those who stayed back in India, in their own world doing what they have always been doing for centuries, unfazed by conquests and colonialism, turned heathen.

There are several such contradictions I notice while reading Naipaul. It is for these contradictions that I read the amazing Naipaul.

Kobe Bryant says

Is there anything cooler than a short essay on Yamoussoukro by a bitter old man? No there isnt

Thomas says

V.S. Naipaul is a wonderful author. No one disguises his biases better. He simply records observations. Only at a few key points will he more than hint at a his personal response. Still his sensibility comes - and it is strange to observe that in spite of the subtlety one knows that he's not got a gentle edge.

This is a collection of essays I read and owned several years ago. I wanted to re-read his bits on Argentina and the Ivory Coast, but found him again so readable I went ahead and re-read everything but the essays on India.

text #1: how to observe.

Deborah Schuff says

Decades ago I was a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club. One month they featured V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas, and I bought it out of my usual insatiable curiosity for all things new and unknown. I no longer own the book nor remember many details about it, aside from my enjoyment of it, but I have never forgotten the title or the author. Mr. Naipul went on to write many other books, but I remember hearing about his "travel" books most.

At the last AAUW used book sale, I came across and bought his The Mystic Masseur. I thoroughly enjoyed this slim novel and afterwards remembered I had picked up from somewhere this book of essays. It was first published in 2002; the essays included were published from 1962-1991 and are written about places and countries with which I am, shamefully, not familiar. Not exactly current events. And yet. I was enthralled by this book and Mr. Naipul's writing. This is not a dull book of old politics and events. It reads like a novel thanks to Mr. Naipul's skill, interest, understanding, and truth-telling. I highly recommend this book to everyone.

Buck says

For decades, V.S. Naipaul has played the part of sassy gay friend to the Third World. (Never mind that he's

actually straight). He'll come swishing into some post-colonial backwater, give the place the once over, and then start in with the home truths: your society is sick, your economy is a joke and your government is a horror show. And I don't know what they told you at the store, but those jeans make your ass look ginormous.

Naipaul is a writer of many virtues, but cultural sensitivity is not one of them. Wherever he goes, he can be counted on to find something incredibly tactless to say:

On India: *The absurdity of India can be total. It appears to ridicule analysis. It takes the onlooker beyond anger and despair to neutrality.*

On Argentina: *...an artificial, fragmented colonial society, made deficient and bogus by its myths.*

On a group of black American women serving as missionaries in the Ivory Coast:

They were ill-favoured, many of them unusually fat, their grossness like a form of self-abuse, some hideously bewigged, some dumpling-legged in short, wide, flowered skirts. They were like women brought together by a common physical despair.

So is Naipaul a hater? Indubitably. Should this worry you? That depends on your politics. But before you go putting him on your personal *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, I'd just point out that half the writers worth reading are haters in some respect, from Christopher Hitchens all the way back to Yahweh himself. You know who's not a hater? Deepak Chopra. Make your own decision.

Abhi says

Naipaul travels the world and gives us a slice of history along the way in his own inimitable style

Luis Morales says

Great book to give you a perspective on various parts of the world, in the recent past. I feel like I understand a bit about more about the world and neocolonialism after reading these essays. Also a great book to work on your vocab.... I had to look up so many words!!!!

Clivemichael says

Densely detailed observations from a perceptive perspective. Well written, engaging and stark.

Marianovsky says

Interesting collection of essays by Naipaul. I liked the ones about India (many parallels with other regions such as Latin America), the one about Argentina, and some of the African themed ones. The one about the republican convention in Dallas could have been written yesterday.

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

I read 7 essays.

Mattias Appelgren says

Naipaul travels and writes giving a whole lot of insight from all the corners of the world. Wherever he goes he seems to have a way of finding out the just how the past influences the current and what have gone wrong and what will go wrong. Whether in India, Trinidad, Ivory Coast or Argentina. Not always an easy read of course, I found myself struggling on some of the longer essays. Some of these essays are written a long time ago. Especially the ones in India that regards certain events and politicians that are now almost 50 years back in time and no matter how well Naipaul writes I just have a hard time knowing just what to do with them. I found the book most fascinating when you could tell how he used some of the experiences from his travels later on in his fictional books. Like how Michael X and Gale Benson from the commune in Trinidad appears in *Guerillas* or how he describes using a certain feeling he got from the dirty wars in Argentina but putting it in an African setting for *A Bend In The River*.

Afrodeity says

Naipaul is ultimately more cynical and derisive than he is revealing, and this book is a prime example. At best, there is some kind of enchantment you experience when he lines the words up just right, but more often you wonder why he bothers at all since everything is so screwed.

Perhaps my discontent with this work has to do with my understanding of (or hope for) the human condition. This book allows little of that really, except for the peculiar speech included at the end where he weighs in on the "universal civilization" as it deems it, while never truly defining it. My interpretation is that this is 'Western civilisation' in its most tolerant of manifestations. What a wholly unsatisfying addendum, which raises more questions about the author's loyalty to American and British publishers, that it answers or postulates about just about anything. I suppose it doesn't help that in person he happens to be supremely disagreeable and arrogant and apparently believes that his work, as with all literature is "not for children" as he informed an initially eager audience of high-school students during a recent visit to his homeland, Trinidad and Tobago.

Saurav Chakravorty says

I confess the only Naipaul work I had read was A house for Mr. Biswas.

I started this book (a collection of essays) by reading the essays on Africa. However, his essays on on India had me hooked. Lovely prose and very interesting observation on India during the late 60s and 70s. The observations are so symptomatic that are as true today as they were when Indira Gandhi split the congress.

He does paint India in a poor light. Specifically his commentary on Indian civilization.

Still, this collection are a must read.
