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V.S. Naipaul: A man of many contradictions

The World Is What It Is
The Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul
By Patrick French
Illustrated. 554 pages.
Alfred A. Knopf. $30.

By George Packer

A great writer requires a great biography, and a great biography must tell the truth. V.S. Naipaul wanted his monument built while he was still alive, and, sticking to his own ruthless literary code, he was willing to pay the full price. Approached around the time of Naipaul's Nobel Prize in 2001, the writer Patrick French insisted on complete access to the Naipaul archives at the University of Tulsa, which include his correspondence, his journals and the diaries of his wife, Pat (who died in 1996), never read by Naipaul. French also wanted his subject to sit many hours over many years for unrestricted interviews.

In the end, this most difficult and fastidious of writers didn't ask French to change a single word. Naipaul's scrupulous compliance with all of his biographer's demands, French writes, was "at once an act of masochism and humility." Now Naipaul has his monument. "The World Is What It Is" (the novel's opening words of "A Bend in the River") is fully worthy of its subject, with all the dramatic pacing, the insight and the pathos of a first-rate novel.

It is a magnificent tribute to the painful and unlikely struggle by which the grandson of indentured Indian workers, born in the small island colony of Trinidad, made himself into the greatest English novelist of the past half century. It is also a portrait of the artist as a monster. How these two lives

of it in terms of my passion for her. Her face was bad. She couldn't appear really in public. My hand was swollen. I was utterly helpless. I have enormous sympathy for people who do strange things out of passion."

Naipaul's capacity for sympathizing with himself is large: it even extended to the moment when he revealed the affair to Pat. "She was so good: she tried to comfort me. . . . I was so full of grief myself that in a way I expected her to respond to my grief, and she did." The tenderness soon passed, and Naipaul began to hurl insults at his wronged wife. But the sensual release with Margaret opened up Naipaul's most creative period, in the 1970s.

"And thereafter I thought if that thing hadn't occurred in my life I probably would have shriveled and died as a writer," Naipaul told French. Compare Naipaul's two Africa novels — the taut, austere "In a Free State," published in 1971, and his full-bodied masterpiece "A Bend in the River," published in 1979 — and it's impossible to deny that having sex with Margaret was good for his writing. But so was living with Pat — for Naipaul didn't leave her, nor she him. Instead, he went back and forth between them with the knowledge, if not exactly the consent, of both.

Pat acceded to the arrangement because she had no idea of any possible life without Naipaul. "Many years later, he acknowledged that his relationship with Margaret effectively undid Pat's life," French reports. "'I was liberated. She was destroyed. It was inevitable.'" Note the passive voice. Also note the hand of fate. Naipaul's confessions to French are like those of a man who leads an investigator to the freshly dug earth in his backyard, and even points out the pieces of human flesh and bone,

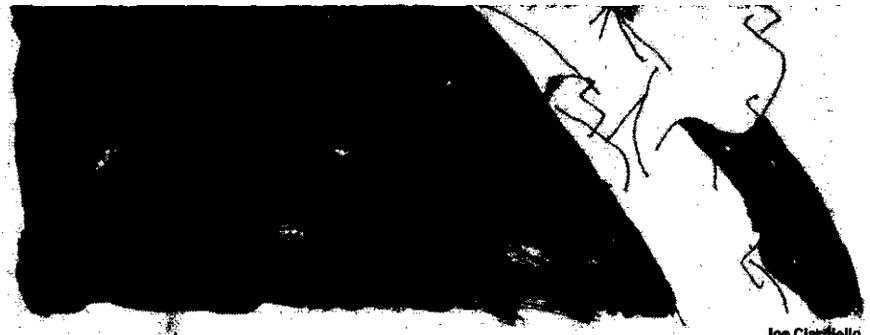
ments can be simultaneously true is one of this book's central questions. Whether Naipaul himself understands the enormity of the story to which he contributed so much candor is another.

Naipaul was born in 1932, into a large extended family that mingled Hindu caste pride, small-time political power and material poverty. It was a rougher, more chaotic world than one would surmise from Naipaul's autobiographical writings — at times there wasn't enough to eat — and it helps to explain the affliction that one of his characters calls "colonial rage," as well as Naipaul's less-noticed sympathy for the oppressed and blighted of the earth.

His mother Droapatie's kin were local potentates; his father, Seepersad, was a sensitive, psychologically unstable newspaperman, a failed writer who endured constant humiliation by his overbearing in-laws. The result in young Vidia was soaring ambition and unquenchable anger — a sense of destiny shared with his father, along with consuming resentments of his homeland, his family, the world's injustice and indifference.

French shows that, though Naipaul has always identified himself with his noble, tragic father — to the exclusion of the many Naipaul women — it was his mother who gave her son the means to force his way in the world: "Ma's bright, certain, robust, slightly mocking tone of voice would be inherited by Vido; without the impetus of Ma and her family, his later achievements would have been impossible."

In French's rich narrative, there are two turning points, two moments of truth that might have crippled or destroyed Naipaul, but that instead made him the writer and the man he became. After receiving a coveted scholarship to Oxford and graduating, he found himself, in the early 1950s, alone in London, racially marginalized, with no job or prospects, unable to get his first attempts at fiction published, desperately homesick, but unwilling to admit failure and return to Trinidad, even after his father's death. This crisis plunged Naipaul into what he later called "a great depression verging on madness" that continued for 18 months.



Joe Ciardiello

In his later writing he would return to the panic of this period of his life obsessively — in fiction, where he projects himself into the despair of various young male characters, or more directly in autobiographical work. But he always left out one crucial thing.

After he had become an internationally famous writer, Naipaul liked to claim that he was a man without commitments or entanglements, free to observe and tell the truth as other, more sentimental souls were not. But at the darkest moment of his life, he attached himself to a quiet, intelligent, self-effacing young Englishwoman from an unhappy lower-middle-class family named Patricia Hale; and she kept him from drowning. Excerpts from their letters reveal how desperately Naipaul clung to her: "You saved me once, and it is from that rescue that I have been able to keep going — from Feb. 9 to today. I love you, and I need you. Please don't let me down. Please forgive my occasional lapses. At heart I am the worthiest man I know."

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The relationship began with Pat in the position of strength. Once they married and Naipaul began to publish his early books, the balance of power shifted decisively to him. Pat became his indispensable literary helper; his maid and cook, his mother, the object of his irritations, the traveling companion who never appears in any of his nonfiction. They had met as two highly repressed and untutored virgins, and a true sexual connection never formed. French places Naipaul's tormented sexuality at the center of his creative efforts, revealed in detail through various sources, above all Naipaul himself, without ever sinking into voyeurism or what Joyce Carol Oates called "pathography."

Over the years, as Naipaul's fame grew along with his irascibility, the marriage desiccated. Naipaul frequented prostitutes, which brought no satisfaction. The Naipauls moved from place to place all over the world, dislocation becoming his great theme. By the early 1970s, age 40, Naipaul had reached an impasse in his life and work. He told Pat that they had destroyed each other.

The second turning point comes when Naipaul, on a writing trip to Buenos Aires in early 1972, meets an Anglo-Argentine woman named Margarita, or Margaret Gooding. She was 30, unhappily married with three children, and Pat's opposite — "tempestuous, cynical and sexy." Naipaul and Margaret began an affair that set free all of his desires and fantasies. When his editor and friend Diana Athill scolded him, he replied, "I am having carnal pleasure for the first time in my life, are you saying I must give it up?"

Carnal pleasure meant violence; in fact, it was inextricable from beating Margaret up, degrading her in bed, turning the great man's penis into an object of worship. How do we know these things? Because Naipaul tells them to his authorized biographer. "I was very violent with her for two days with my hand; my hand began to hurt. ... She didn't mind it at all. She thought

When she learned about her husband's affair, Pat resumed a diary that she had kept intermittently over the years. French's access to these words raises this miserable woman above the merely pathetic and gives the book a badly needed second point of view.

The diary, French writes, "puts Patricia Naipaul on a par with other great, tragic literary spouses such as Sonia Tolstoy, Jane Carlyle and Leonard Woolf." Pat's voice is faltering and uncertain where Naipaul's is relentlessly in command, but its small observations, evasions and sudden bolts of understanding haunt the reader up until her death of cancer, which gives this story its heartbreaking end. Naipaul, keeping a journal of his own, finally sees his wife as if for the first time: "I to her: 'Are you content?' Yes. Would you say you have had a happy life? No direct answer. 'It was perhaps my own fault.' ... The 'patch' is working together with the Zudol tablets. She sleeps. But when she wakes up she feels 'stunned' by what she has been through. Her bad — jaundiced — color comes and goes. She is pure grace." He scatters Pat's ashes deep in the Wiltshire countryside, accompanied by the woman he had already decided to marry once Pat was dead, having jettisoned Margaret a final time.

Naipaul's code of accountability lies in facing the truth, but it's a limited truth, with no sense of agency. He cannot begin to see himself as his biographer or reader sees him, for the pain of others always reverts back to his own.

And yet this bottomless narcissism, together with the uncompromising intensity of his vision, holds the key to Naipaul's literary power. He had the capacity in his writing to project himself into a great variety of people and situations, allowing him to imbue his work with the sympathy and humanity that he failed to extend to those closest to him in life.

George Packer, a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the editor of a new two-volume edition of George Orwell's essays, "Facing Unpleasant Facts" and "All Art Is Propaganda."