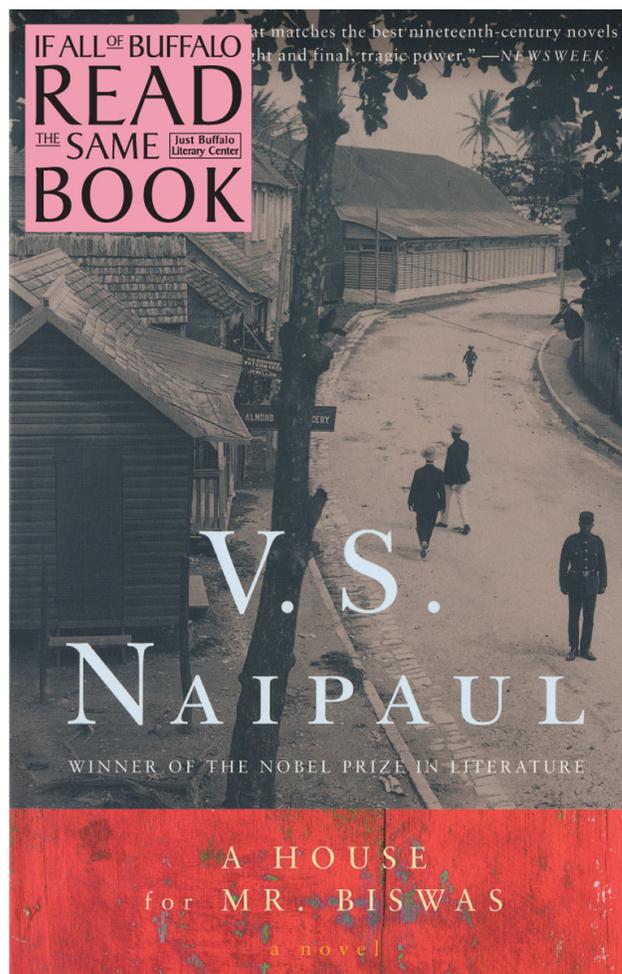


BABEL

A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS READER'S GUIDE



V.S. Naipaul



Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, known as V.S. Naipaul, is a novelist, travel writer, historian and essayist whose prolific career spans nearly 50 years. The recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001 as well as many other literary honors, Naipaul is widely recognized as a 20th-century master of English prose and postcolonial fiction. Born in 1932 on the Caribbean island of Trinidad—then a British colony—Naipaul has long regarded colonial cultures as being trapped by their own histories, geographies and traditions. Determined to escape and transcend his colonial upbringing, Naipaul chose writing as his way out.

Raised in a Brahmin (orthodox Hindu) Indian family in the town of Chauguanas, a stronghold of “East Indian”

immigrant culture, Naipaul uses his childhood to frame one of his classic novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas*. His maternal grandparents were part of a wave of indentured laborers who left India to work in Trinidad’s vast sugarcane fields. The family eventually acquired wealth and status through Naipaul’s grandfather, an influential “pundit” or Hindu scholar. They became landowners and Naipaul and his siblings moved several times much like the Biswas family. Two of their homes—a large residence in Chauguanas called “Lion House” and another home in the capital of Port of Spain—were models for Hanuman House and the Tulsi’s city residence, respectively. And, as was custom in Hindu families, Naipaul’s father lived with his wife’s extended family in those homes. Middle-class Indian families considered education as the route to prosperity, so Naipaul, like Anand Biswas, was groomed to attend the island’s best secondary (high school), Queen’s Royal College.

Naipaul’s father, Seepersad, was a second-generation Indo-Trinidadian, a sign painter who wanted to be a creative writer but ended up a newspaper reporter for the *Trinidad Guardian* in Port of Spain. In part because his son sympathized with his literary ambitions, and because his modest accomplishments were engulfed by his in-law’s success, Seepersad’s life became the main inspiration for *A House for Mr. Biswas*, which traces protagonist Mohun Biswas’s tortured path to home ownership and personal freedom.

After attending Oxford on scholarship and earning an English degree in 1954, Naipaul battled British xenophobia and personal depression in London, finding it difficult to find work as a writer. Around this time he met his first wife of 41 years, an Englishwoman named Patricia Hale. Later, in the early 1970s, he also developed a decades-long relationship with an Anglo-Argentine woman named Margaret Gooding. After Hale’s death in 1996, he married his current wife, Nadira Khanum Alvi, a former journalist from Pakistan. Naipaul has lived in England his entire career and was knighted in 1990.

During his early career, Naipaul worked as a journalist and broadcaster for the BBC, and eventually began documenting his travels through Africa, Asia and South

America. He effectively split his writing between fiction and non-fiction, producing some of his most seminal work during the late 1960s and 1970s, including *A Bend in the River* (1979), a novel based in Africa, and *An Area of Darkness* (1964), a critique of modern India. During his travels, he painstakingly collected native people's stories to illuminate the dual problem of post-colonialism: how developing countries cope with the lingering oppression of their histories, as well as the modern-day chaos of modernization. Naipaul's travelogues revealed a scorn for world religions, Islam in particular, but he also saw some hope in the world, reflected in India's cultural ability to allow belief and non-belief to co-exist.

Naipaul's 26 books also include *In A Free State* (1971), which won the Booker Prize. His first three titles—*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and the short-story collection, *Miguel Street* (1959)—are comedic portrayals of Trinidad; his later fiction became more political as he began to explore the problems of decolonization and globalization. His non-fiction followed suit and includes *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies—British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America* (1962); and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (1998), his second book on Islam. For a time leading up to his Nobel Prize win, Naipaul became disenchanted with fiction, calling it a “dead” art, but went on to publish *Half a Life* in 2001, the year of the award. His latest work of fiction, *Magic Seeds*, came out in 2004, and *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief*, a travelogue, was published in 2010.

Naipaul believes in the literary power of realism, although he has downplayed his autobiographical intent, writing, “I try to make my fiction as close to life as possible, leading the reader through deception into my narrative. It's an illusion.” He embeds repeating themes of dislocation, fear and panic into his work and is known for his laser-sharp depictions of the sights, sounds, people and landscapes that populate rapidly decolonizing countries—what he has called “half-made societies.” During a visit to Trinidad in 2007 after a 10-year, self-imposed exile in England, he defined them as “small places with hardly any history to talk of ...which were then left in the world. They are small, their people are not fully educated.”

Influenced by such European authors as Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy and Marcel Proust, Naipaul

has said that great novelists should write about great societies. However, being from Trinidad, he felt unable to fully join them. “I couldn't share the assumptions of the writers; I didn't see my world reflected in theirs,” he has written. “My colonial world was more mixed and secondhand, and more restricted.” In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul creates that world using a sympathetic, often humorous perspective, but quaintly titled chapters like “Pastoral” and “Green Vale” include some of Naipaul's darkest prose. Critics hailed the book for its complexity and humanity, while others saw it and Naipaul's other novels as apologizing for a Western imperialism that, as he portrayed it, dragged a screaming and kicking Trinidad into the modern era.

Naipaul has never shied away from controversy and opinion. He has retained a deep aversion to being labeled Trinidadian, let alone a “Commonwealth” writer—his term for the English literature produced by writers based in former colonies of the British Empire. Fellow Nobel laureate Derek Walcott (a Caribbean poet previously featured in *Babel*) acknowledges Naipaul's talent but also has denounced his portrayals of the West Indies, and especially his denigration of ethnic groups like blacks and Muslims. Those views, coupled with a reputation for outspokenness and his multiple high-profile awards, have helped give Naipaul's public persona a colorful mystique.

While Naipaul may be regarded as a subversive master of narrative with legendary confidence in his talents, he has acknowledged the limitations of the fictional world, and his own inability to prevent his stories from becoming part of someone else's history. One can never escape from the chaos of artistic creation, and Naipaul is acutely aware of that reality. “A writer is in the end not his books, but his myth,” he once said. “And that myth is in the keeping of others.”

The Many Faces of Trinidad



V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is set in Trinidad, a small Caribbean island that went through rapid cultural, political and economic change in the first half of the 20th century as it transitioned from a colony of the British Empire to an independent nation. This history period loosely follows the 46 years of Mohun Biswas's life, from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Trinidad and its smaller neighbor-island, Tobago, make up the modern-day country of Trinidad and Tobago. They are part of the "West Indies," as Columbus first called the Caribbean islands, and although they are the closest to South America, most of Trinidad's cultural and trading history has been with the United Kingdom, Europe and North America.

Originally settled by Spanish missionaries in the 1600s, Trinidad attracted French and Dutch merchants and plantation owners who brought over African slaves to help them exploit the island's resources in petroleum, sugarcane and cocoa. Trinidad eventually became part of the British Empire in 1797, and it remained a crown colony of England throughout the 19th century. After slaves were freed in the Caribbean in 1833, the sugarcane plantations needed a new source for labor, so they enticed Indians to uproot their families and move to Trinidad

to become indentured fieldworkers, promising them freedom, their own parcel of land, or an often-renege passage back to India, in return. Trinidad's sugarcane industry was dependent on this immigrant workforce up until the turn of the century.

Once in Trinidad, the Indian community found itself a part of a chaotic cultural and socioeconomic mix. Throughout the island's colonial period, British influences could be found in its architecture, schools and newspapers, and in 1941 the Americans arrived, establishing a naval base at Chaguaramas as an outpost during World War II. Hindus and Muslims—like Naipaul's grandfather, who was of the highest Brahmin Hindu caste or class, continued to practice Old World religious and social rituals, and the caste system remained a way to assert power between Indo-Trinidadian families and for such events as arranged marriages. "We were brought up aware of this ancestry but there were other things around one—the African world, the American base, the British-style school," Naipaul wrote in *Finding the Centre* (1984). At first tied to the sugarcane crop, then in charge of it, East Indians eventually controlled Trinidad's agricultural heartland, but in crowded, seaside cities like Port of Spain, their large, extended families functioned as mini-villages, often keeping their distance from other racial groups and bouncing between menial jobs. It was an economically dangerous choice that kept the Indian community whole, Naipaul wrote. "In Trinidad, where as new arrivals we were a disadvantaged community, that excluding idea was a kind of protection; it enabled us—for the time being, and only for the time being—to live in our own way and according to our own rules, to live in our own fading India." From 1946 to 1955, East Indians were a powerful minority who used their political power to gain the legal right to marry and bury their dead according to Hindu and Muslim rites, although some families had begun converting to Roman-Catholicism (Christianity having had a presence in Trinidad since Spanish rule). But conversion was not progress to Naipaul; a self-described atheist, religion meant blindness to the outside world. "In a ritualized society, their world is enclosed by ritual; they hardly know where they are," he has written. "They're not like other people who wish to adapt."



By the time Naipaul graduated from high school and was applying for scholarship to Oxford, the British Empire had been reduced to just 14 overseas territories, and Trinidad had moved into its postcolonial period. The dismantling of English culture in Trinidad can be seen throughout *A House for Mr. Biswas*: Indo-Trinidadians were still very separate culturally but had gained more prosperity and upward mobility by purchasing land and building multiple homes. They also began traveling the island; Naipaul never forgot his first of many personal migrations, at age six, when his family moved from the “Hindu and Indian countryside” of Chaguanas to his grandmother’s large house in the “white-negro-mulatto town” capital city, Port of Spain.

Meanwhile, blacks, first called “Negroes” and then “Afro-Trinidadians,” had claimed professional positions in government, in the oil fields and as skilled tradesmen. Unlike the East Indians, they mixed freely with Spanish-French “Creoles”—a word often used to describe all white Trinidadians—and other groups like the Chinese, Venezuelans and Portuguese. Most East Indians spoke a combination of Hindu and the island’s version of standard English, while other groups also spoke a *patois* (French Creole) dialect. Because each ethnicity had its own means of economic support, it kept racial tension from becoming violent, as it has in other Caribbean nations to this day.

By the mid-1950s, political power among the more established ethnic groups peaked, accelerating Trinidad’s quest for full independence from British rule, which came in 1962. Modernization came slowly: cars replaced bikes and mule-driven carts, political representation meant improved social services for the poor and the appearance of American jazz and Coca Cola had spread beyond the naval base, which was closed in 1967.

Naipaul is a product of Trinidad’s colorful history of migration, dislocation and cultural change. In the *New York Times Review of Books*, Joan Didion described him as “the Indian not an Indian, the Trinidadian not a Trinidadian, the Englishman never an Englishman.” He denounced his Caribbean roots; he escaped to England for 50 years, but reluctantly accepted knighthood in 1990; he traveled extensively in India, but criticized his family’s native country. His books illustrate a lifelong search for personal identity within an ever-changing, ever-expanding world, yet his story—and the fictional saga in *A House for Mr. Biswas*—began on this tiny island.

Study Questions for *A House for Mr. Biswas*

1. Mohun Biswas is born the wrong way with six fingers—both signs of future misfortune. In reaction, his grandfather says, “Fate. There is nothing we can do about it.” How do the concepts of fate and luck play a role in Mr. Biswas’s life throughout the novel? What other characters use fate and luck as a yardstick for measuring their own lives?
2. Why does Naipaul refer to Mohun Biswas as “Mr. Biswas” throughout the novel, even when he was a child? What power do formal and informal names and titles carry for the characters in the novel and in East Indian culture?
3. What are some ways in which Mr. Biswas feels he has become “trapped”? In each instance, are the obstacles he perceives real or imagined?
4. The concept of home, and of building and owning one’s own house, is one of the main themes “framing” *A House for Mr. Biswas*. How would you describe the houses that Mr. Biswas and the Tulsis build? What might Naipaul be suggesting about Trinidad’s society through these structures?
5. Personal possessions are important to Mr. Biswas and, to a lesser degree, his wife and her family. Why are they so important to him? Does acquiring material possessions make any of the characters happier? Why or why not? What is revealed about the characters through their most beloved possessions?
6. How does Naipaul depict women in the novel? What are some examples where they wield power, and what is Mr. Biswas’s reaction to that power?
7. Naipaul uses a style of writing in *A House for Mr. Biswas* called comic realism. What specifically struck you as funny about Mr. Biswas, who is often referred to in the book as a “buffoon”? About other characters and situations in the book? Why do you think Naipaul chose to use comedy in this way?
8. The chapters “Green Vale” and “The Void” mark a crisis in Mr. Biswas’s life. How so?
9. How do trees and water appear in these chapters? How do they function as symbols in the novel?
10. Where does the act of writing appear in Mr. Biswas’s life? What importance does writing have on his jobs, his personal life and his family? How did he use writing to compare himself to others?
11. Mr. Biswas’s feelings about Hanuman House and the Tulsis change according to his circumstances and his need for the family’s support. What are some examples of how his family—his mother, Bipti and her family, and his in-laws—supported his personal growth or stunted it?
12. How does Mr. Biswas’s newspaper job in Port of Spain bring about change in his life and relationships? What were some of the “amazing scenes” he experienced that changed his perceptions about himself and others?
13. When Mr. Biswas left journalism to become a civil servant for the Community Welfare Department, what “new era” did he step into? What did the conditions of the “area” he visited say about his own situation at home?
14. When Mr. Biswas finally leaves the *Sentinel* for what he hopes is a better job, Naipaul writes, “Yet with everything improvement in his condition, every saving, he felt more vulnerable: it was too good to last.” How does impermanence battle permanence in the book? Which does Mr. Biswas dread more: change or the status quo?
15. What was significant about the Biswas family’s trip out to Miss Logie’s seaside house? Why was the idea of a “holiday” so important to their immediate family, and what might that have meant for East Indian culture in Trinidad?

16. How do Naipaul's descriptions of Trinidad's landscape—the "swords" of the sugarcane fields, the forests of Short Hills, the dirt and heat of Port of Spain, and the North Trinidad coastline—depict the country through Mr. Biswas's eyes?
17. How does Mr. Biswas's search for freedom and self-identity mirror Trinidad's? Did modernity bring him happiness and improve life on the island? Why or why not?

18. Do you think Mr. Biswas found success at the end of novel? Why or why not?
19. The prologue predicted his death and his family's struggles with poverty at the end. Why do you think Naipaul chose to begin and end the novel this way?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FICTION

The Mystic Masseur – (1957)
The Suffrage of Elvira – (1958)
Miguel Street – (1959)
A House for Mr Biswas – (1961)
Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion – (1963)
The Mimic Men – (1967)
A Flag on the Island – (1967)
In a Free State – (1971)
Guerrillas – (1975)
A Bend in the River – (1979)
Finding the Centre – (1984)
The Enigma of Arrival – (1987)
A Way in the World – (1994)
Half a Life – (2001)
Magic Seeds – (2004)

NON-FICTION

The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies – British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America (1962)
An Area of Darkness (1964)
The Loss of El Dorado – (1969)
The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles (1972)
India: A Wounded Civilization (1977)
A Congo Diary (1980)
The Return of Eva Perón and the Killings in Trinidad (1980)
Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey (1981)
A Turn in the South (1989)
India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990)
Homeless by Choice (1992)
Bombay (1994)
Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples (1998)
Between Father and Son: Family Letters (1999)
Reading & Writing: A Personal Account (2000)
The Writer and the World: Essays – (2002)
Literary Occasions: Essays (2003)
A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling (2007)
The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief (2010)

JUST BUFFALO PRESENTS

BABEL 2010/2011 SEASON

Sponsored by



With additional support from:



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

ARTVOICE



HALLWALLS



NYSCA



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF BUFFALO



Humanities Institute
University at Buffalo - The State University of New York



Erie County Cultural Funding
Robert J. & Martha B. Fierle Foundation
Friends of Just Buffalo
Corinne and Victor Rice
Western New York Delegation
Elsie P. and Lucius B. McCowan
Private Charitable Foundation

Just Buffalo Literary Center
Market Arcade
617 Main St. Suite 202A
Buffalo, NY 14203

Ticket Information and Purchases:
Phone: 716.832.5400
Fax: 716.270.0184
www.justbuffalo.org/babel