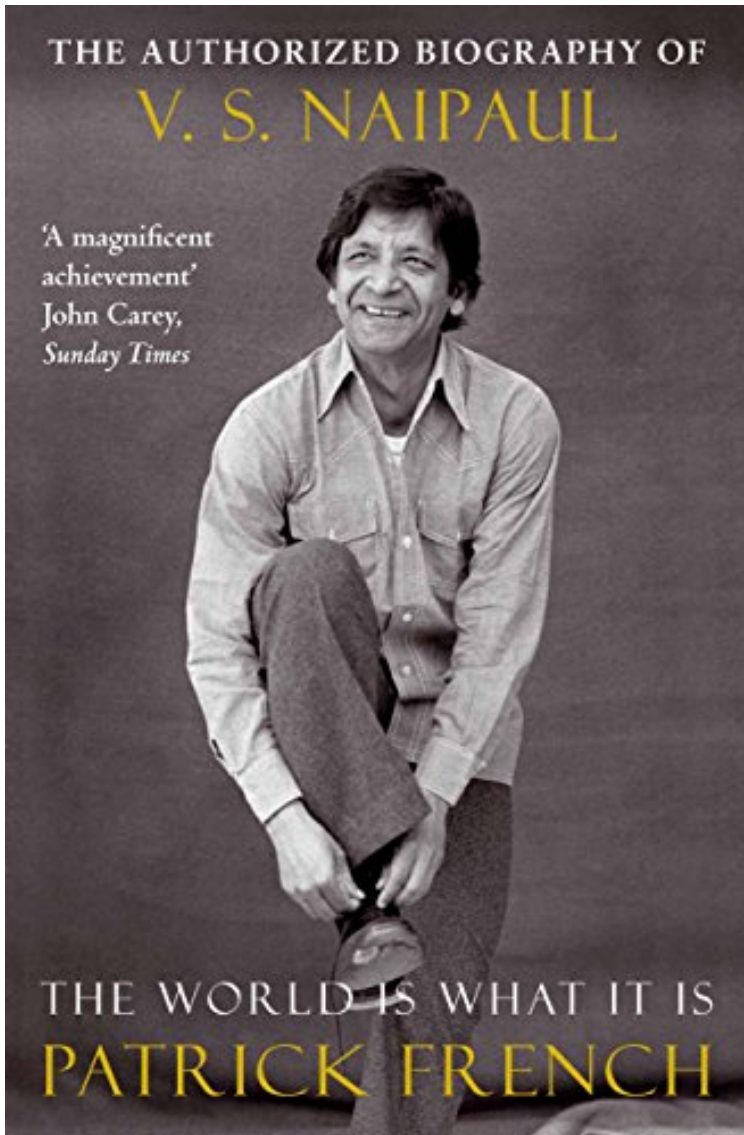


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The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul (English Edition)



Par Patrick French
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThis is the first major biography of V.S. Naipaul, Nobel Prize winner and one of the most compelling literary figures of the last fifty years. With great feeling for his formidable body of work, and exclusive access to his private papers and personal recollections, Patrick French has produced a lucid and astonishing account of this enigmatic genius: one which looks sensitively and unflinchingly at his relationships, his development as a writer and as a man, his outspokenness, his peerless creativity, and his extraordinary and enduring position both outside and at the very centre of literary culture. Its clarity,

honesty, even-handedness, its panoramic range and close emotional focus, above all its virtually unprecedented access to the dark secret life at its heart, make it one of the most gripping biographies I've ever read. Hilary Spurling, *Observer*: A brilliant biography: exemplary in its thoroughness, sympathetic but tough in tone . . . Reading it I was enthralled and frequently amused (how incredibly funny Naipaul can be!) *Spectator*: A masterly performance . . . If a better biography is published this year, I shall be astonished. Allan Massie, *Literary Remarkable*. This biography will change the way we read Naipaul's books. *Craig Brown, Book of the Week, Mail on Sunday*. *Extrait The New World*: The islands of the Caribbean dot and dash their way through the sea, linking different worlds. Central America joins the southern and northern hemispheres, taking you up through Colombia, Panama and Nicaragua by the land route until you reach Mexico, or down through the shallows of the Atlantic from Florida to the Bahamas, skirting Cuba and Jamaica, passing Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, until you find yourself in the sprayed arc of islands known as the Lesser Antilles, some no more than a few miles across: Anguilla, Sint Maarten, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia, Martinique, Grenada. At the tip of the chain lies a larger island which, beneath the sea or geologically, is part of the South American mainland. Almost square, with a low promontory at its south-western corner pointing to Venezuela, this is Trinidad. In the summer of 1498, three ships approached the shores of the island. The men on board were exhausted and burned by the sun, surviving off raisins, salt pork and sea biscuits, their supply of water running low. They were led by a white-haired voyager in his forties named Christoforo Colombo, known also as Christbal Coln or Christopher Columbus. He was ill, his body inflamed and his eyes bleeding. It was Columbus's third voyage in search of Asia, and the one on which his future depended. A few months earlier, Vasco da Gama had reached Calicut, opening Europe's sea route to India. Renowned for his acute sense of smell, Columbus would have drunk in the lush, flowering vegetation of the island with its easy, humid, tropical climate, home to rainforests of bamboo and hardwood, flashing birds like the silver-beaked tanager, rivers, waterfalls and an array of caymans, snakes and beasts such as the nine-banded armadillo. There were no cocoa estates, no sugar-cane plantations, no breadfruit trees; Captain Bligh had yet to bring them from Tahiti. The only inhabitants were families of Amerindians who lived by farming and fishing, having paddled across the sea from the Orinoco river delta many centuries before. Seeing three ranges of mountains running across the island, Columbus named it La Isla de la Trinidad after the Holy Trinity, in the Christian way. Later that day his sailors landed on the south coast to take on fresh water the moment of first contact. Over the following weeks they navigated neighbouring waters, and became the first Europeans to see the mainland of South America, the fresh green breast of the New World. Columbus suspected as he charted the wide mouth of the Orinoco river that he was on the edge of a continent rather than another island. With his health failing, he ordered his ships to sail north through the stretch of water between Trinidad and the mainland the Gulf of Paria until they reached the island of Margarita. The outbreak of the sixteenth century brought adventurers to the island of Trinidad, who enslaved the indigenous Amerindians and sent them to work in Spanish colonies overseas. The old world disappeared: land was stolen, new settlements were made. The English, Dutch, French and Spanish all battled and schemed for supremacy in the islands of the West Indies. Using the legal formalities of the time, local chiefs lost their inheritance and power. Sir Walter Raleigh, an English marauder who raided Trinidad in 1595, found five desperate, dispossessed men in the custody of the Spaniards. They turned out to be the last aboriginal rulers of the land, held together on one chain, scalded with hot bacon fat, and broken by other punishments. Nearly three centuries after the appearance of Columbus, Trinidad had barely been colonized. By 1783 it had 126 whites, 259 free coloureds, 310 African slaves and 2,032 Amerindians.³ To encourage settlement, King Charles III of Spain offered land and tax breaks. Roman Catholics of French descent moved from neighbouring islands, accompanied by their slaves, and started farming cocoa, tobacco, cotton and sugar. By 1797, when the Spanish surrendered Trinidad to the British during the French Revolutionary Wars, the population had risen to just under 18,000. In the nineteenth century, migrants flooded in, and by 1900 there were around 300,000 inhabitants. Unlike most other islands in the West Indies, the people of Trinidad came from many different places: there were Africans who spoke French creole or Yoruba, sailors and indentured labourers from China, neighbouring Venezuelans, German and French labourers, Syrian and Lebanese business families, wanderers from Grenada and Barbados, residual Amerindians, visitors from Madeira, demobbed black British army veterans, Portuguese and Spanish-speaking farmers of uncertain ethnicity and free slaves from the United States. Most Caribbean islands were homogenous by comparison, with white planters and black slaves, but Trinidad was uniquely and enduringly ethnically complex. Even its place names were various: Amerindian (Chaguanas), Spanish (San Fernando), French (Sans Souci) and British

(Poole). When slavery was formally abolished across the British empire in 1834 and cheap labour was needed for the sugar-cane plantations, malnourished Indians were shipped over from Calcutta and Madras. While the white planters of the West Indies had grown rich on sugar cane, their cousins in India had made fortunes from land revenues; and many beautiful houses were built in the English countryside. North India, under British control, was awash with dislocated, landless peasants. A voyage across the oceans and a stint as a bonded or indentured labourer was an alternative to destitution. In Trinidad, the newly arrived East Indians were nervous of the alien society in which they found themselves. They feared the island's black majority: Negroes seemed physically stronger, had rough manners and their dark skin identified them with the lower castes of Hinduism. The Negroes, for their part, came to regard these East Indians as heathens with peculiar customs who kept to themselves, were mean with money, cooked strange food and were servile to the plantation owners. Black agricultural labourers found their wages being undercut. They looked down on the Indians, who had to work long hours in the cane fields, as the new slaves.

Christmas 1894: Picture the tropical island of Trinidad with its sandy beaches, bursting coconuts, leaping howler monkeys and freshwater mangrove swamps teeming with scarlet ibis. A ship approaches Nelson Island, a parched limestone islet overlooking the capital, Port of Spain. The passengers who have survived the three-month sea voyage from Calcutta are loaded into open rowing boats. Quickly, the holding barrack is filled with men, women and children, their names recorded in a ledger under the supervision of a government official, the Protector of Immigrants. Their possessions are fumigated. They are housed, both sexes, in a long shed lined with wooden bunks filled with hay, infested with mosquitoes and sandflies. Most are Hindus, driven to flight by starvation or debt or trickery. All are desperate. They do not even know where they have come to; all they know is the name of the hot place to which they have been shipped, transposed into Hindi as Chinitat. Soon, an overseer will come from a plantation and indenture them as estate labourers, or coolies. The Handbook of Trinidad and Tobago states that when visiting the colony, Elaborate tropical outfits are not necessary . . . For ladies, the same clothes as would be worn during a hot English summer are suitable all the year round. Photographs of these new arrivals from India show them dressed almost in rags: a kurta and dhoti and light turban for the men, or a sari with the pallu, or tail, of the sari draped over the head in modesty for the women. These broken-down, thin-limbed immigrants with their tiny bundles of possessions can only have made the journey to Trinidad as a last resort. One man among the many his name recorded as Kopilis a Brahmin, from a family of hereditary pundits in a village near Gorakhpur on the Nepalese border with India. He has pretended to be from a different background, since the recruiter back in India told him he might not be accepted as a labourer if he admits to being from the highest caste. For thirteen generations, Kopil's family have presided over the religious destiny of their neighbourhood, reading the Sanskrit texts and lecturing on spiritual practice to those who seek enlightenment. Wishing to study, he had walked south to Benares, the sacred Hindu city on the banks of the Ganges, where he met a recruiter who told him stories about the Caribbean, and how in this far-off place he would be given a gold coin each day as a reward for sifting sugar. If Kopil emigrated, he might even want to have a broad canvas belt made in which to store the gold coins. He is brought to a depot in Calcutta, and taken aboard the ship *Hereford*. At once, he feels his difference from the other immigrants. On board ship, he finds a piece of beef in his food. Although the voyage is terrible (forty people die from an outbreak of cholera, their corpses thrown overboard) Kopil starves himself for two days in horror at this contamination by cow meat, until the surgeon-superintendent intervenes and he is given a separate daily ration of raw potatoes and rice, which he cooks himself. He reaches an island far from the large country and ancient civilization he has left behind. It is Kopil's misfortune to be indentured to Woodford Lodge in Chaguanas, an estate in central Trinidad where the regime is especially severe. Each morning, to preserve his caste identity, he sets his own pot of khitchri rice and spiced lentils on an earthen oven before going to work. Kopil is assigned to the shovel gang, to digging and planting. It breaks him. He is put on the weeding gang with the women and children, and later made responsible for clearing the dung from the animal pens, a sweepers job. Kopil's health breaks. He is twenty-one years old, alone. . . .

Revue de presse PRAISE FOR PATRICK FRENCH'S THE WORLD IS WHAT IT IS 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. Now Naipaul has his monument, *The World Is What It Is* 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 judgments 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 rich narrative impossible to put down. Pats voice is faltering and uncertain where Naipauls 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.- George Packer, on the cover of the New York Times Book a prodigious achievement, a wonderful biography, a justification for the art of biography itself.- A. N. Wilson, Times Literary Supplement astonishing (and astonishingly authorized). With the aid of this exhaustive and efficient biography, one can make some more-educated surmises about the connection between Naipauls rigidly maintained exterior and the many layers of insecurity that underlie it. shrewd and intelligent.- Christopher Hitchens, The Atlantic I doubted whether an honest book could be written by anyone while Naipaul was still alive. I was wrong. The truth is not skimmed in Patrick Frenchs excellent book.... The great merit of a superb biography, such as this one, is that it can deepen our understanding of the literary character by telling us more about its creator.... French gets it right.- Ian Buruma, The New York Times extraordinary biography. French has handled an immense amount of materials with a deft hand, and the reader actually wishes he had extended the books 487 pages of text and pursued his subject past 1996. authorized but not compromised. Its hard to see how French could have been more objective if his subject had been dead for ten years. French is so thorough that its likely no further biography of Naipaul, at least one covering the first sixty-odd years of his life, will ever be needed. French is very good on Naipauls writing. The World Is What It Is adds depth and clarity to the discussion of Naipauls work. French has met his own rigorous standards and, one feels, Sir Vidias as well.- Allen Barra, Bookforum one of the sprightliest, most gripping, most intellectually curious, and well, funniest biographies of a living writer to come along in years. Mr. French is a relative rarity among biographers, a real writer, and at his best he sounds like a combination of that wily bohemian Geoff Dyer and that wittily matter-of-factual cyborg Michael Kinsley. Even the cameos in Mr. Frenchs biography are crazily vivid. crafty and inquisitive book. Mr. French quickly and adroitly steps back to give us a wide-angled and morally complicated view. vivid prose. Mr. French writes with wit and feeling.- Dwight Garner, The New York Times nuanced and generous. distinguished biography, one that aims to understand rather than simplistically condone or chastise. a superb, clear-eyed study, always sympathetic, balanced and thoughtful, as well as rich in what Joseph Conrad called the fascination of the abomination.- Michael Dirda, Washington Post extraordinary. Patrick French shrewdly give[s] us an idea of the world Naipaul had to join and beat. full of intimate and moving revelations. thrilling pages. masterly, mournful book. hideously just.- James Wood, The New York Times candid. well-researched and fair-minded. French skewers nothing and illuminate[s] aspects of a life full of entanglements and opposing selves.- Alexander Theroux, Boston Sunday Globe shrewd and honest [French is] a writer not given to extremes. French is a graceful, confident and subtle writer. offers a vivid, and sometimes enthralling, portrait of a deeply enigmatic writer. rich account. French skillfully evokes the atmosphere of political turmoil and transition. with brio and wit. French is alive to the nuances, quirks and contradictions in Naipauls character, and he has an acute sense of his subjects displacement and rootlessness. a formidable achievement. contains a remarkable accumulation of rich, minute detail; covers a vast amount of history and politics in an effortless manner; and navigates difficult emotional territory with a very high degree of compassion, subtlety and authority. engrossing, with French pulling surprises out of his hat from the opening pages.- Scott Sherman, The Nation shocking moments. startling candor. as haunting and harrowing a psychological document as you could ask for. French pursues his prey with an acuity worthy of the man himself. The particular achievement of The World is to flesh out the two potent forces that Naipaul has often seemed to repress: women and Trinidad, where he grew up. French grippingly develops an account of the writers life as cool and undeluded as Naipauls former friend Paul Theroux was rivetingly emotional. French is as plainspoken as his subject.- Pico Iyer, Time perhaps the most shockingly authorized biography in the history of authorized biographies. French handles the incendiary material with novelistic subtlety and grace.- Sam Anderson, New York Magazine a major achievement. harrowing. frank. Naipauls work will inevitably be read differently in light of this biography.- Floyd Skloot, The Philadelphia Inquirer sweeping. Highly recommended.- Stacy Russo, Library Journal PRAISE FROM THE UK FOR PATRICK FRENCH'S THE WORLD IS WHAT IT IS longlisted for the prestigious BBC Four Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction Frenchs character analysis is not flattering, but it does justice to its subjects complexity. Frenchs book is a magnificent achievement. But the achievement is partly Naipauls. For he did not have to agree to these conditions, or speak to French so openly. He has chosen to submit himself to the

truth-telling and ruthless objectivity that have always characterised his own work.- John Cary, The Sunday Timespenetrating, wide-ranging and unflinching biography. The closing pages are enough to draw tears.- The Economist He has written a biography of a living person that is every bit as honest, perceptive, compelling and plain good as if his subject was dead. It is a masterly performance, and if a better biography is published this year, I shall be astonished. It is rare to wish that a biography running to over 500 pages was longer, but this is an exception.- Allan Massie, Literary French's character analysis is not flattering, but it does justice to its subject's complexity. French's book is a magnificent achievement. But the achievement is partly Naipaul's.

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The Sunday Timespenetrating, wide-ranging and unflinching biography. The closing pages are enough to draw tears.- The Economist Patrick French has brought off something very difficult, so difficult indeed that I would have thought it impossible. He has written a biography of a living person that is every bit as honest, perceptive, compelling and plain good as if his subject was dead. It is a masterly performance, and if a better biography is published this year, I shall be astonished. It is rare to wish that a biography running to over 500 pages was longer, but this is an exception.- Allan Massie, Literary a brilliant biography: exemplary in its

thoroughness, sympathetic but tough in tone. Against Naipaul's own increasing tendency to caricature himself in public, and against the distortions peddled by snubbed friends and ideological enemies, French has set down a complex and credible portrait. Reading it I was enthralled and frequently amused (how incredibly funny Naipaul can be!). I was also continually aware of a great and unrelenting pressure on the developing writer; it suffuses the book like suspense. lovely to read. French's accounts have their own entertainment value...- Sebastian Smee, Spectator Patrick French's brilliant and candid The World Is What It

Is lays bare the demons that drove one of our greatest and most controversial #8...