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Writing 'A House for Mr. Biswas'

By V. S. Naipaul

Of all my books *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the one closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child. It also contains, I believe, some of my funniest writing. I began as a comic writer and still consider myself one. In middle age now, I have no higher literary ambition than to write a piece of comedy that might complement or match this early book.

The book took three years to write. It felt like a career; and there was a short period, toward the end of the writing, when I do believe I knew all or much of the book by heart. The labor ended; the book began to recede. And I found that I was unwilling to reenter the world I had created, unwilling to expose myself again to the emotions that lay below the comedy. I became nervous of the book. I haven't read it since I passed the proofs in May 1961.

My first direct contact with the book since the proofreading came two years ago, in 1981. I was in Cyprus, in the house of a friend. Late one evening the radio was turned on, to the BBC World Service. I was expecting a news bulletin. Instead, an installment of my book was announced. The previous year the book had been serialized on the BBC in England as "A Book at Bedtime." The serialization was now being repeated on the World Service. I listened. And in no time, though the installment was comic, though the book had inevitably been much abridged, and the linking words were not always mine, I was in tears, swamped by the emotions I had tried to shield myself from for twenty years.

Lacrimae rerum, "the tears of things," the tears in things: to the feeling for the things written about—the passions and nerves of my early life—there was added a feeling for the time of the writing—the ambition, the tenacity, the innocence. My literary ambition had grown out of my early life; the two were intertwined; the tears were for a double innocence.

When I was eleven, in 1943, in Trinidad, in a setting and family circumstances like those described in the book, I decided to be a writer. The ambition was given me by my father. In Trinidad, a small agricultural colony, where nearly everyone was poor and most people were uneducated, he had made himself into a journalist. At a certain stage—not for money or fame (there was no local market), but out of some private need—he had begun to write short stories. Not formally educated, a nibbler of books rather than a reader, my father worshiped writing and writers. He made the vocation of the writer seem the noblest in the world; and I decided to be that noble thing.

I had no gift. At least, I was aware of none. I had no precocious way with words, no talent for fantasy or storytelling. But I began to build my life around the writing ambition. The gift, I thought, was going to come later, when I grew up. Purely from wishing to be a writer, I thought of myself as a writer. Since the age of sixteen or so I don't believe a day has passed without my contemplating in some way this fact about myself. There were one or two boys at Queen's Royal College in Trinidad who wrote better than I. There was at least one boy (he committed suicide shortly after leaving school) who was far better read and had a more elegant mind. The literary superiority of this boy didn't make me doubt my vocation. I just thought it odd—after all, it was I who was going to be the writer.

In 1948, when I was sixteen, I won a Trinidad government scholarship. This scholarship could have taken me to any university or institute of higher education in the British Commonwealth and

given me any profession. I decided to go to Oxford and do a simple degree in English. I went in 1950. Really, I went to Oxford in order at last to write. Or more correctly, to allow writing to come to me. I had always thought that the writing gift would come to me of itself as a kind of illumination and blessing, a fair reward for the long ambition. It didn't come. My efforts, when I made them, were forced, unfelt. I didn't see how I could ever write a book. I was, of course, too young to write: hardly with adult judgment, and too close to childhood to see the completeness and value of that experience. But I couldn't know that at the time. And in my solitude in England, doubting my vocation and myself, I drifted into something like a mental illness. This lasted for much of my time at Oxford. Just when that depression was beginning to lift, my father died in Trinidad.

In Trinidad, as a child, I had been supported by the idea of the literary life that awaited me when I grew up. It had been a prospect of romance. I was in a state of psychological destitution when—having no money, besides—I went to London after leaving Oxford in 1954, to make my way as a writer. Thirty years later, I can easily make present to myself again the anxiety of that time: to have found no talent, to have written no book, to be null and unprotected in the busy world. It is that anxiety—the fear of destitution in all its forms, the vision of the abyss—that lies below the comedy of the book.

A book with emotions so close to me did not immediately come. It came after I had spent three years in London and written three works of fiction. It had been necessary for me to develop some skill, and through practice to begin to see myself and get an idea of the nature of my talent. I had had an intimation—just an intimation, nothing formulated—that the years of ambition and thinking of myself as a writer had in fact prepared me for writing. I had been a looker; I had trained my memory and developed a faculty of recall.

Just as, because I was to be a writer, I had as a child fallen into the habit (though not at school) of speaking very fast and then immediately silently mouthing the words I had spoken, to check them, so I automatically—thinking of it as a newsreel—mentally replayed every meeting or adventure, to check and assess the meaning and purpose of people's words. I had done no writing as a child, and told no stories; but I had trained myself to an acute feeling for human character as expressed in words and faces, gestures and the shape of bodies. I had thought, when I began to write in London, that my life was a blank. Through the act of writing, and the need always to write more, I discovered I had processed and stored a great deal.

So the idea for this big book came to me when I was ready for it. The original idea was simple, even formal: to tell the story of a man like my father, and, for the sake of narrative shape, to tell the story of the life as the story of the acquiring of the simple possessions by which the man is surrounded at his death. In the writing the book changed. It became the story of a man's search for a house and all that the possession of one's own house implies. The first idea—personal, lodged in me since childhood, but also perhaps reinforced by an all but erased memory of a D.H. Lawrence story called "Things"—wasn't false. But it was too formal for a novel. The second idea, about the house, was larger, better. It also contained more of the truth. The novel, once it had ceased to be an idea and had begun to exist as a novel, called up its own truth.

For me to write the story of a man like my father was, in the beginning at any rate, to attempt pure fiction, if only because I was writing of things before my time. The transplanted Hindu-Muslim rural culture of Trinidad into which my father was born early in the century was still a whole culture, close to India. When I was of an age to observe, that culture had begun to weaken; and the time of wholeness had seemed to me as far away as India itself, and almost dateless. I knew little about the Trinidad Indian village way of life. I was a town boy; I had grown up in Port-of-Spain. I had memories of my father's conversation; I also had his short

stories. These stories, not many, were mainly about old rituals. They were my father's own way of looking back, in his unhappy thirties and forties. This was what my fantasy had to work on. So the present novel begins with events twice removed, in an antique, "pastoral" time, and almost in a land of the imagination. The real world gradually defines itself, but it is still for the writer an imagined world. The novel is well established, its tone set, when my own wide-awake memories take over. So the book is a work of the imagination. It is obviously not "made up," created out of nothing. But it does not tell a literal truth. The pattern in the narrative of widening vision and a widening world, though I believe it to be historically true of the people concerned, derives also from the child's way of experiencing. It was on the partial knowledge of a child—myself—and his intuitions and emotion that the writer's imagination went to work. There is more fantasy, and emotion, in this novel than in my later novels, where the intelligence is more in command.

The novel took some time to get going. I began it, or began writing toward it, in the latter half of 1957. I was living on the drafty attic floor of a big Edwardian house in Muswell Hill in north London. The sitting room was choked with my landlady's unwanted furniture. The furniture was from her first marriage; she had lived in Malaya before the war, had seen or glimpsed Somerset Maugham out there, and she told me, as though letting me into a secret, that he was "a nasty little man." When middle-class Muswell Hill dinner parties were given downstairs (with the help of a very old uniformed maid, a relic, like her mistress, of a dead age), there was the modest smell of Dutch cigars. Upstairs, in my attic, the tattered old sitting-room carpet, its colors faded with old dust, rippled in the winter gales. There was also a mouse somewhere in the room.

Old furniture, "things," homelessness: they were more than ideas when I began writing. I had just, after ten weeks, left a well-paid but pointless and enervating job (my first and only full-time job). So, from having money, I had none again. I was also trying to do reviews for the *New Statesman*, which in 1957 was near the peak of its reputation. The *New Statesman* tormented me more than the novel. I was trying too hard with the trial reviews, and making myself clouded and physically queasy day after day. But the *New Statesman* gave me more than one chance; and at last, quite suddenly one day, I found my reviewer's voice. Two or three months later the novel came alive; as with the reviewing, it seemed to happen at a particular moment. Soon the excitement of the novel displaced the glamour of the *New Statesman*. And then for two years I wrote in perfect conditions.

I left Muswell Hill and the attic flat and moved south of the river to Streatham Hill. For twenty-five pounds a month I had the whole of the upper floor of a semidetached house, with my own entrance off the tiled downstairs hall. My landlady's daughter lived alone downstairs; and she did a job all day. I had more than changed flats: for the first time in my life I enjoyed solitude and freedom in a house. And just as, in the novel, I was able to let myself go, so in the solitude of the quiet, friendly house in Streatham Hill I could let myself go. There is a storm scene in the book, with black, biting ants. It was written (perhaps in its second draft) with the curtains drawn, and by candlelight. I wanted the atmosphere, and wanted to remind myself of the moving shadows thrown by the oil lamps of part of my childhood:

My landlady's daughter read a lot and was a great buyer of books. I don't believe she cared for those I had published, but during all my time in her house I felt her as an understanding, encouraging presence, never obtrusive. She made me a gift one day of a little square wool rug she had made herself. It was some weeks before, turning the square rug another way, I saw that the pattern was not abstract, but made up of my initials. She subscribed to the *New Statesman*; and it was for her, as much as for the literary editor of the *New Statesman*, that every four weeks I wrote my review of novels.

In that week I also did other journalism, mainly radio talks for the BBC Overseas Service. Then for three weeks at a stretch I worked on the novel. I wrote with joy. And as I wrote, my conviction grew. My childhood dream of writing had been a dream of fame and escape and an imagined elegant style of life. Nothing in my father's example or conversation had prepared me for the difficulties of narrative prose, of finding a voice, the difficulties of going on to the next book and the next, the searching of oneself for matter to write about. But, equally, nothing had prepared me for the liberation and absorption of this extended literary labor, the joy of allowing fantasy to play on stored experience, the joy of the comedy that so naturally offered itself, the joy of language. The right words seemed to dance above my head; I plucked them down at will. I took chances with language. Before this, out of my beginner's caution, I had been strict with myself.

In the last year mental and physical fatigue touched me. I had never before experienced that depth of fatigue. I became aware of how much I had given to the book, and I thought that I could never be adequately rewarded for the labor. And I believe it is true to say that the labor had burned up thoughts of reward. Often, out in the Streatham Hill streets, momentarily away from the book, shopping perhaps, I thought: "If someone were to offer me a million pounds on condition that I leave the book unfinished, I would turn the money down." Though I didn't really need one, I bought a new typewriter to type out the precious finished manuscript. But I was too tired to type to the end; that had to be done professionally.

When the book was handed in, I went abroad for seven months. An opportunity for travel in the Caribbean and South America had been given me by the Trinidad government. Colonial Trinidad had sent me to Oxford in 1950, and I had made myself a writer. Self-governing Trinidad sent me on a colonial tour in 1960, and by this accident I became a traveler. It wasn't absolutely the end of the Streatham Hill house—I was to go back there for nine months, to write a book about my travels. But that was another kind of writing, another skill. It could be as taxing as fiction; it demanded in some ways an equivalent completeness of man and writer. But it engaged another part of the brain. No play of fantasy was required; the writer would never regard with wonder what he had drawn out of himself, the unsuspected truths turned up by the imagination. The two years spent on this novel in Streatham Hill remain the most consuming, the most fulfilled, the happiest years of my life. They were my Eden. Hence, more than twenty years later, the tears in Cyprus.

A House for Mr Biswas is a 1961 novel by V. S. Naipaul, significant as Naipaul's first work to achieve acclaim worldwide. It is the story of Mohun Biswas, an Indo-Trinidadian who continually strives for success and mostly fails, who marries into the Tulsi family only to find himself dominated by it, and who finally sets the goal of owning his own house. Drawing some elements from the life of Naipaul's father, the work is a sharply drawn look at life that uses postcolonial perspectives to view a A House for Mr. Biswas is one of my favorite books. Poor Mr. B.: all he wants is to live with his nuclear family without interference from his horde of inlaws. Desperately funny much of the time, this is still a very sad and even tragic book. The journey of Mr. Biswas from a sad beginning in the country to becoming a painter and a long road to being a journalist, and all the places he lived is marvelous and extremely captivating. The depiction of Indian people in Trinidad and how they protected the culture is fascinating and makes the reader want more. Writing A house for mr.Biswas - Download as PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read online. V.S.Naipaul's recollections. Naipaul Of all my books A House for Mr. Biswas is the one closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child. It also contains, I believe, some of my funniest writing. I began as a comic writer and still consider myself one. In middle age now, I have no higher literary ambition than to write a piece of comedy that might complement or match this early book. The book took three years to write. It felt like a career; and there was a short period, toward the end of the writing, when I do believe I knew all or much of the book by heart.