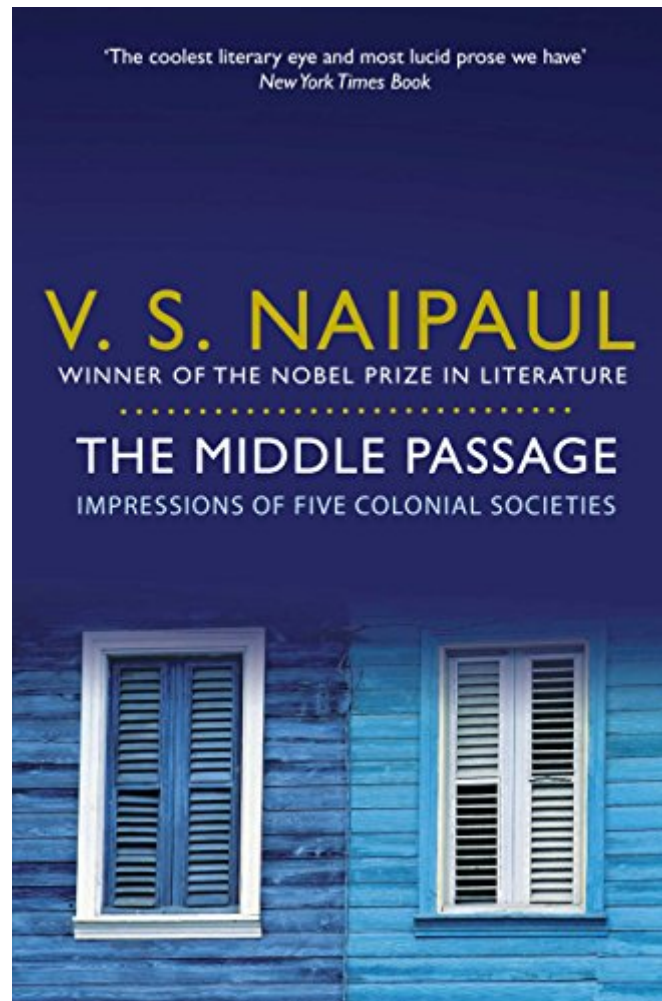


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The Middle Passage: Impressions Of Five Colonial Societies



Synopsis

In 1960, Dr Eric Williams, the first Prime Minister of independent Trinidad, invited V. S. Naipaul to revisit his native country and record his impressions. In this classic of modern travel writing he created a deft and remarkably prescient portrait of Trinidad and the Caribbean societies of four adjacent countries, Guyana, Surinam, Martinique and Jamaica. Haunted by the legacies of slavery and colonialism, and so thoroughly defined by the norms of Empire that it can scarcely comprehend its end, Naipaul catches this poor, topsy-turvy world at a critical moment, a time when racial and political assertion had yet to catch up â “ a perfect subject for the acute understanding and dazzling prose of this great writer. â ^Naipaul travels with the artistâ™s eye and ear and his observations are sharply discerning.â™ Evelyn Waugh â ^Belongs in the same category of travel writing as Lawrenceâ™s books on Italy, Greeneâ™s on West Africa and Pritchettâ™s on Spainâ™ New Statesman â ^Where earlier travellers enthused or recoiled, Mr Naipaul explains. His tone is critical but humane, and he tempers his inevitable indignation with an admirable sense of comedy.â™ Observer â ^Dazzling reportorial skills and a sharp historical mindâ™ New York Times Book Review

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Customer Reviews

'The Middle Passage' is the account of a sunny journey across the Caribbean in 1960-61. During his travelling, Naipaul enjoys the calypso in Trinidad, takes a memorable hiking trip to the Nutchi falls in British Guyana, travels around the picturesque roads of Martinique, enjoys a cool beer in Brazil, and goes to the beaches of Jamaica and Surinam. However, Naipaul is not primarily interested in the joys which an average tourist might take from such a dreamt-of holiday. 'The Middle Passage' is a book with a purpose: it seeks to dissect the ways in which different Caribbean territories deal with the legacy of more than 400 years of European domination. There is very much Naipaul doesn't like about the people living in these (post-)colonial societies. But his sharp eye and elegant prose lead to a cascade of eye-opening, stunning and often merciless observations which makes this book still mandatory reading today. On the multi-layered social structure of Trinidadian society, Naipaul says: "[The Trinidadian] is adaptable; he is cynical; having no rigid social conventions of his own, he is amused by the conventions of others. [...] If the Trinidadian has no standards of morality he is without the greater corruption of sanctimoniousness." On the Indians of British Guyana: "Among more complex peoples there are certain individuals who have the power to transmit to you their sense of defeat and purposelessness: emotional parasites who flourish by draining you of the vitality you preserve with difficulty. The Amerindians had this effect on me."

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature 2001, wrote this summary of his observations travelling through the Caribbean area where he was born just after his famous novel, "A House for Mr. Biswas". This book was his first published nonfiction, and although the typical themes of Naipaul (migration, racial issues, legacy of colonialism) play the main roles in his observations, this work is generally not as interesting and successful as his fictional depictions of the same issues. In "The Middle Passage", Naipaul describes how he travels from the UK, where he had been living for ten years, back to his homeland of Trinidad, and onward to Guyana (then British), Suriname (then Dutch), Martinique, and Jamaica. The main part of the book depicts his experiences in Trinidad itself. Naipaul is generally critical but not unsympathetic to the different racial-ethnic groups found in the Caribbean and their struggles to overcome the legacy of colonialism, and clearly does his best to be fair and objective to all involved. Nonetheless, it is noticeable his instinctive sympathies are mostly with the Indians in the Caribbean like himself, and his depictions particularly of black Caribbeans have been criticized, among others by Edward Said for

perpetuating racist mythology. These charges may be somewhat exaggerated, as Naipaul definitely does not deny them their agency or their attempts at political improvement; but one can note that he tends to portray the colonial and postcolonial situation as more rosy than it really was, and there is some sense of fear of "barbarian self-rule in civilization", of the kind one found in South Africa that Coetzee so effectively described.

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