Bigger-Than-Life Lives

THE WORLD IS WHAT IT IS: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF V.S. NAIPUL

by Patrick French Knopf, 576 pp., $30

It’s not news, exactly, but the literary world of the 20th century has been rife with antagonism, Hemingway brutalized Fitzgerald; Norman Mailer brutalized nearly everybody else. Still, from the stories told of V.S. Naipul, his venomous misogyny and distinctly unsympathetic views on postcolonial nations already established, only a madman would want to tangle with the Nobel-winning limps of essayist, and provocateur. You’d have a better chance winning a wrestling match with a giant squid. However, British journalist and biographer Patrick French works some serious juju of his own in his new warts-and-all biography of Naipul.

Born in 1932 in Trinidad as a member of colonial India’s diaspora (India gained independence in 1947), Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipul longed to escape the island nation early on. He soon won a prestigious scholarship to Oxford University in England, where he met his first wife, Patricia Hale, and struggled with bouts of self-doubt and depression. Another decade passed before Naipul’s most famous novel, A House for Mr. Biswas, brought him international acclaim. In 1971, Naipul was the first author of Indian descent to win the Booker Prize (for In a Pillar of Dart) to his polygot, Indo-Trinidadian, his controversial accounts of visits to India and Africa also made history.

French comes to this assignment well-prepared. A powerful writer in his own right, he has published a nonfiction account of the life and times of the Victorian explorer Sir Francis Younghusband and a pair of outstanding, perceptible books on Indian history and Tibet’s struggle for independence. Turning his attention to a living, contemporary subject may have been daunting, but French never shows his nerves. He is gracious, funny, and honest. In a remarkable coup, considering that Naipul himself contacted French to write this “authorized” biography, French highlights Naipul’s cruelty to his first wife and his 24-year, often brutal affair with Margaret Murray. French also offers an account of Naipul’s famously sour relationship with Paul Theroux.

“The best a biographer can hope for is to illuminate the aspects of a life and seek to give a perspective of the subject, and to tell a story,” writes French. To his credit, this sprawling, fascinating biography does that and more: no matter what Naipul might say.

Additional Reading: Cinéma: Actor Lover Priest Spy by Ian Kelly (Tarcher, 416 pp., $28.95)

Comics

WATCHING THE WATCHMEN

by Dave Gibbons, Chip Kidd, and Mike Essl Titan Books, 256 pp., $39.95

Being Rorschach is a drag. One day you’re a faceless, ex-superhero vigilante trapped in a preapocalyptic, post-superhero, alternate-reality America, and the next? Well, the next day you’re getting real-world master’s theses written about your subtextual, neo-noir deconstruction of the traditional, long-underwear-and-cowl-wearing superdupermen. Even the Dark Knight himself generates less fanatical devotion than Watchmen (not counting last week’s intriguing “Batman’s gonna die” rumors). Seriously ... why so serious? Because Watchmen remains one of the medium’s deepest reads, and we don’t mean deep like the crimson shadow coagulating around the Comedian’s corpse. Those flimsy, pulp-printed 12 issues made up the first (or second) thematically adult and morally complex graphic novel—ever!—when they were bound up trade-paperback style at the end of their run. We’re not busting your chops, peevee, ‘cause we’d go to a Manhattan Project of our own going on when it comes to Silk Spectre, but let’s not forget how this manic-depressive, smiley-faced dystopia got McArdle into your permanent collection in the first place. Better yet, let’s let Watchmen artist Gibbons remind us: “I have to say that for all that Watchmen has been seen to be a dark and gritty deconstruction of super heroes, it was actually an act of love by Alan [Moore] and me. We may have taken the genre places it hadn’t been before, but our intention was always honorable.” Nowhere can that love be seen to better effect than in this, the sumptuous and splendidly told history of the greatest graphic novel in the world came to be.

and author Moore’s alienated antiheroes prove to be something of a genre Rosetta stone, pre-dating everything from Heroes to Hellboy, but they also read like they were written and inked last Monday. In a world gone mad, Watchmen holds its own. Gibbons, who admits to having long ago sold off nearly all of his original series artwork, spins an insanely informative and exhaustively detailed tale here, replete with all manner of nascent character pencil sketches, photos of Moore’s handwritten script addenda, visual eye-line schematics, and very nearly everything else. All told, it’s just about as spectacular as the comic book itself. Ego ipse custodes custudio? Vos operor.—Marc Savlov

Additional Reading: Marvel Chronicle by Tom DeFalco, Peter Sanderson, and Tom Brevoort (DK Adult, 352 pp., $50)

Humor

GET YOUR WAR ON: THE DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT OF THE WAR ON TERROR, 2001-2008

by David Rees Soft Skull Press, 256 pp., $15.95 (paper)

With the reign of President George W. Bush coming to a not-a-minute-too-soon end and with the promise of a “new” day on the horizon with President-elect Barack Obama set to take the helm next month, things look slightly more rosy than they did in the final months of 2001. But not too rosy. The economy is in the shitter, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (and whatever the ultimate fallout they will bring) are far from over. The world is a strange place, and we are a strange people. Case in point: In the days just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, poking fun at President Shrub or questioning the wisdom of his administration’s response to the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., were dan-gerous business, enough to get you branded a freedom-hater. Flash-forward to today, and even 43’s conservative flag-pin-wearing and Bible-clutching base wants nothing to do with him. My, how times have changed.

How history will treat Bush and his administration and their monumentally retarded war on terror remains to be seen—or maybe not. Indeed, the history is already written in part, cataloged with razor-edge bars, snarky lines, and copious profanity and delivered by a clip-art crew of office workers that are the creation of 36-year-old New York-based cartoonist David Rees, whose strip Get Your War On is one of the best and most biting looks at modern America and its dangerous conceits. Just in time for the holidays and on the precipice of what still could eventually become a new chapter in American life, Rees has published his third collection of GYWO strips, chronicling the seven years of anger, depression, and irony that were the Bush Years of Terror. Rees, who donated the royalties from his first two GYWO books to a nonprofit group that removes land mines from a province in northwest Afghanistan, began his strip on the Internet shortly after 9/11 as a way to cope with and understand what was happening in the world around him, he has said, and also as a response to the reactionary attitude that demanded deference to Bush and all things red, white, and blue. In other words, the strip was a way to push back. The chest-pumping, with-us-or-against-us reaction was nothing but a “disservice to the spirit of American dis- sent,” he told a radio interviewer in 2007. And so GYWO was born. Thankfully.

Rees’ strips are provocative and wise and delivered with a punch to the gut—concise, angry, and seriously funny. Rees’ book is a great gift for anyone who loves true freedom and prais-es the power of the written word. —Jordan Smith

Additional Reading: Karlology: What I’ve Learnt So Far ... by Karl Pilkington (DK Adult, 224 pp., $20); Free-Range Chickens by Simon Rich (Riverhead House, 144 pp., $17); Wishful Drinking by Carrie Fisher (Simon & Schuster, 176 pp., $21)

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Watching the Watchmen book. Read 73 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Enjoy the ultimate companion to a comics masterpiece, as awar...Â Start by marking â€œWatching the Watchmen: The Definitive Companion to the Ultimate Graphic Novelâ€ as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦ Want to Read.