



The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections

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Taking its title from a picture by surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico, this is the story of a young Indian from the Crown Colony of Trinidad, who arrives in post-imperial England. He observes the gradual but profound changes wrought on the English countryside by the march of progress.

The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections Details

Date : Published by Picador (first published 1987)

ISBN : 9780330487153

Author : V.S. Naipaul

Format : Paperback 387 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature



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M. Sarki says

Good writing that bored me to death. Had to abandon.

Cbj says

In *A Wounded Civilization*, V.S. Naipaul criticized Gandhi and Nehru for “their Hindu way of not seeing” – he wrote that neither Gandhi nor Nehru had any perspective about the places they visited and saw during their early days in England. Nobody would ever accuse V.S. Naipaul of the same ignorance after reading *The Enigma of Arrival*. In this autobiographical novel, Naipaul describes his idyllic but melancholic life in an old English manor in Wiltshire. The novel, divided into five parts begins with the narrator (Naipaul) acquiring a sense of the landscape of the old English manor and the town during his daily walks. Even though his life in the manor has just begun, Naipaul immediately gets a sense of the change and decay in Wiltshire. Naipaul expresses sadness at the narrowing in of a previously unfenced walkway by a barbed wire fence in his second year in Wiltshire which he sees as an encroachment of antiquity. Naipaul’s elaborate description of the manor and Wiltshire gave me the impression of a man trying to belong to or make sense of his adopted nation’s landscape (Naipaul’s ancestors were brought to the Caribbean to work in the plantations and it was in the Caribbean that Naipaul spent his early years until he traveled to Britain to become a writer). *The Enigma of Arrival* (named after a painting by Giorgio de Chirico) is also about that first journey to England which Naipaul describes with admirable honesty and self reflection.

In between the elaborate descriptions of the Wiltshire landscape, Naipaul also observes the occupants of the town and the manor, but only from a distance. But this could be a literary technique because even though Naipaul’s detached tone indicates that he does not seek companionship with the servants, the failed writer, the car-hire man and the landlord of the manor, all of them confide in him. Naipaul describes or rather infers minute and delicate details of their lives. The landlord is a man in a state of acedia. The servants, with their petty jealousies and failures have no future. The car-hire man finds solace in religion and a vagrant woman. A gardener kills his beautiful but unfaithful wife. He sees the occupants of Wiltshire and the manor as a people in retreat. People who found the city life too overwhelming and sought emotional refuge in the country life. All of them appear to be doomed. The tranquility and security of the manor is fragile. Naipaul seems to suggest that without proper authority and leadership England (represented by the manor which is a symbol of the old England whose antiquity is no longer sacrosanct) could plunge into decay. This feeling of insecurity about the fragility of social structures and the erosion of values was earlier explored by Naipaul in *A Bend in the River* in which Africa slowly plunges into anarchy.

But *Enigma* is not as grim as *A Bend in the River*. Before the end of his stay, Naipaul finds peace and fulfillment in the ways of the manor (though eventually he has to leave it). This is an interesting aspect of Naipaul’s writing. Naipaul never felt safe within his Hindu community in the Caribbean. He lived in a state of anomie and was ashamed of his community and its ways. Hence, this feeling of insecurity and lack of safety can be found in some of Naipaul’s other works whether it is through a lack of self worth (in *The Mimic Men*), travels to a new world (in *Half a Life*) or the threat of physical violence (in *A Bend in the River*).

Though the descriptions of the landscape (which forms a large part of the book) can be tedious and at times incomprehensible (for me atleast), Naipaul's reflections about his own position in his adopted country and the impact of change on people make *The Enigma of Arrival* worth reading. It is a harrowing novel about the fragility of life and the inevitability of change which spares no one.

James says

The Enigma of Arrival is one of V. S. Naipaul's masterpieces. In this autobiographical novel he successfully conveys to the reader the atmosphere of the English countryside through the meditations of the narrator on his original journey from Trinidad to England. Through the mind of the narrator we experience the fictional reality of the world—a world of Naipaul's making. Echoes from both James Joyce and Marcel Proust are visible in the narration of the novel. This seems a quiet book, but it is a powerful one. The book is composed of five sections that reflect the growing familiarity and changing perceptions of Naipaul upon his arrival in various countries after leaving his native Trinidad and Tobago.

Most of the action of the novel takes place in England where Naipaul has rented a cottage in the countryside. The feeling of the place is palpable and the evocation of place is underlined by the physical effects and the history of the people and their artifacts. On first arriving, he sees the area surrounding his cottage as a frozen piece of history, unchanged for hundreds of years. However, as his stay at the cottage where he is working on another book becomes extended, he begins to see the area for what it is: a constantly changing place with ordinary people simply living lives away from the rest of the world. This causes Naipaul to reflect upon the nature of our perceptions of our surroundings and how much these perceptions are affected by our own preconceptions of a place.

As he re-examines his own emigration from Trinidad to New York, and his subsequent removal to England and Oxford Naipaul's narration illustrates the growing understanding of his place in this new environment and the intricate relations of the people and the land around them. The result is a magnificent read that is encouragement to savor other novels by this Nobel laureate author.

Mmars says

If I were to read this book again, I would read the last section, *The Ceremony of Farewell*, first. Really. The narrator's summation helps the book as a whole make sense. For one thing, Naipaul establishes the hurried, unedited stream of consciousness style he uses. This is most evident in "Jack's Garden," the first section, and my favorite, of the book.

Here, Naipaul in his youthful naivete relates the circumstances that brought him to Wiltshire, England. But more so, in a sing-songing string of prose, he conjure up the nursery rhyme "This is the house that Jack built." Fascinated me. Just as we often rethink our past, adding or subtracting details, so does Naipaul remember the countryside manor in which he establishes himself as a writer. I don't think the nursery rhyme connotation was accidental. The book was about life cycles. Mostly change, decay, and death. But also rebirth and opportunity. I decided to just go with his repetitive memories and read the first section like poetry.

The next section, *Journey*, is the most autobiographical. Here Naipaul uses a painting, "The Enigma as Arrival," (which graces the cover) as metaphor for his life. Being an immigrant, stranger, outsider who can never return.

"Ivy" was the most difficult for me to read. Both because of style and content. It dragged. My mind wandered. As his landlord (the manor owner) ages and recedes inside the manor, the estate and its employees fall victim to inevitable decay, neglect, and loss. The changes of life. An interesting theme here was his observation of the common interchange of the words refuge and refuse. The metaphor for lives small and sequestered, lives wasted and thrown away. Not only that but it's written by an outsider, leaving the reader helpless.

And finally "Rooks," the birds who lose their homes when the elms die forcing them to other trees, serves to indicate survival is possible. But at what cost? Death is inevitable and it is this that drives the narrator to write his story.

I found the book to be both brilliant and frustrating, an ultimately unevenly written. I finished it, but it wasn't compelling, nor was it driven by plot. For serious readers only, and even then, I'd only recommend it to people who have read Naipaul and wish to dig deeper.

Guy Cranswick says

Not quite a novel, it's a type of memoir, which comprises travel as a theme though it is set in one place. It is really about how travel changes those that move, whether emigrants or the permanently restless. Set in an English county, Naipaul is perspicacious to a great degree, the writing is acute, sometimes cruel, but nearly always accurate about people and place. A stimulating read.

Edward says

Naipaul writes that the title of his book is based on Chirico's 1911 painting which shows two muffled figures standing in a deserted street in what appears to be a port city. A ship's mast can be seen in the background. Originally, he says he had intended to write a story set in classical times about a sea journey which ends in a dangerous city. In fact, what emerges in the book is the story of a journey of a traveler from Trinidad who ends up living in Wiltshire near Stonehenge, the journey that Naipaul took himself.

The book seems obviously autobiographical, but Naipaul has called it a "novel" for reasons that aren't clear. . Perhaps it refers the arbitrary decisions that a writer makes in deciding which choices to make. Any choice of words could of course be other words, and the perception that those words create could be other perceptions. Naipaul rents a cottage, apparently, to assure himself of a peaceful place to write. But the place takes on a life of its own and instead of being a backdrop becomes the story itself.

Naipaul sees himself as a "stranger" in his rented quarters, a "literary" stranger who observes the life around him, at first the vegetative and animal life on his long walks,. Increasingly he describes the lives of the people who live nearby, most having something to do with the old estate mansion on whose property he is living. They're ordinary people, but all are connected in one way or another with one of Naipaul's preoccupations, decay and death. While he is there, most live out their lives, either die or move away, and in the end that is what Naipaul does - move away.

At first Naipaul tends to be philosophical, thinking about the thousands of years that humans have inhabited this area, beginning with the ancient people who built the Stonehenge monuments, the Romans who came

and went, and the hundreds and hundreds of years since that people have lived in this valley and scraped a living from the land.

Gradually, though, he concentrates more on specific individuals, beginning with Jack, a caretaker who carefully tends his garden, as if to ward off his decline. In fact, it is with a mention of Jack that Naipaul closes the book, writing, "It [Naipaul's stay in this location] showed me life and man as the mystery, the true religion of men, the grief and the glory. And that was when, faced with a real death, and with this new wonder about men, I laid aside my drafts and hesitations and began to write very fast about Jack and his garden."

Some of those "drafts and hesitations" have to do with Naipaul's own past, his coming from Trinidad to England in 1950, determined to be a writer, but as yet uncertain as to what was to be the real subject of his writing.. In the end, it is the ordinary people around him, Jack, Jack's successor, Pitton, Mt. and Mrs. Phillips, housekeepers for the semi-invalid landlord whom Naipaul only glimpses on several occasions, allowing him to form a purely imaginative picture, and Bray, a cab driver who serves as a kind of chorus, commenting cynically on the community.

All of these people, even if they don't realize it, are on a "journey" (the heading for one of the five sections of the book), as is Naipaul himself. A journey toward decay and death, yes, but at one point the narrator observes that new life always emerges from dead matter. How and in what form it takes is always a mystery, and the "enigma" of arrival always leads to another mystery, that of departure.

Naipaul's book, would no doubt exasperate some readers - it meanders, deliberately, I think, backtracks, talks about various lives only tangentially connected by place, but in the end it's a profound reflection on what living a life means.

Yrinsyde says

A strange novel, very hypnotising in parts. It is the first circular novel I've read - you can start reading from any chapter. In fact, the first and longest chapter is almost the wrong chapter to start reading this novel and when I read this novel again, I'll start at the second. The first chapter annoyed me a little because I was always trying to picture in my head where all the geographical features were in relation to the buildings. If only there was a map! In the end, I had to ignore my location thoughts and just read straight through. It is a very touching novel, about dissipation and degeneration. Trying to hang onto the past when the future is pushing it away from you ... this is what the author in the novel saw and experienced. The past is another country ...

Josh says

A perfect example of writing that feels very staid and traditional until, about half way through the book, you pick your head up and realize that it's doing something completely original. Not exactly fiction, not exactly non-fiction (not exactly poetry for that matter), but filled with lush sentences that relay the slow, unstoppable movements of a vegetative mind, Naipaul's, thinking about a particular place and a particular time so well that the meditation becomes about Place and Time, rather than 1980s rural England. A book that doesn't call attention to itself and doesn't need to: it's thorough, and so devoted to its subject that the structure feels

organic (not always a good word to use I guess, but this book in particular seems to deserve it). The 20th century Walden: making your house in a world where everything is constantly being torn down. And like Walden, a book in which every word feels completely tangible and completely transparent at the same time.

Patrick says

This is a really odd book. The style is likeable enough that I read the whole thing even though this would be a candidate for the most words ever written about next to nothing.

It's basically an autobiographical novel that focuses on the writer's existence in Salisbury, UK. He skips over the good parts.

The best part of it is a review on the back cover that: "like a computer game leads the reader on by a series of clues....." This is from 1987 so if you liked the Legend of Zelda or Mike Tyson's punchout, you'll love this maybe. Watch out for that piston punch, gotta dodge it in rhythm....

Becky says

I'm pretty sure you can figure out what I think of a book from the page number/time spent to read ratio. I've read so many five star reviews for this book and I've found them baffling. Sure, it's a cyclical narrative. Not that difficult to pull off when absolutely nothing happens. I got so sick of the repetition, which is apparently also a sign of brilliance. Does deciding you're going to be "a writer" really make you see the world any differently? I can understand being a pompous teenager in a new country, but a pompous adult who writes ridiculously overlong purple passages with a complete lack of humour or spark about the English countryside and expects that to form a novel. Nah.

If this is a genius meditation on life, death, and the immigrant experience, then I'm the Queen of Sheba. One of the worst yet.

Katelis Viglas says

I bought this book long ago before V.S. Naipoul earn the Nobel Price. The painting of the cover stuck me. The title suits perfectly not with the context but with the painting. Such a cover and such a title were very suggestive. Unfortunately the context just was absent. Very good language, but without something really amazing.

Joana says

Foi a primeira vez que li V. S. Naipul e acho que fiquei apaixonada por ele. Este livro insere-se na gaveta "Literatura de Viagem" no entanto é um livro um tanto complexo. Talvez tenha sido esta complexidade de o definir/classificar que me prendeu. Tem rasgos autobiográficos, tem rasgos de viagem, de ficção, de fragmentação e até de estilo diarístico. Mas nada disso importa, para ser sincera. É um livro muito bom, um

livro sem definição, um livro que nos ensina que as gavetas são ficções e que só podemos viver uma vida plena quando ultrapassamos essas mesmas. Um livro que nos chama a atenção para o perigo de uma "educação abstracta" e de como isso pode trazer consequências.

Naipul tem uma escrita simples, verdadeira no entanto repleta de poesia, ritmo e entrelinhas. Um livro cheio de ironia, filosofia e até elementos cômicos que levam o leitor a pensar, a rir e a colocar-se na posição de Naipul. Muito bom!

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Purposedly boring, yet purposedly exciting. I used to think it is not possible for a book to be both boring and exciting until I read this autobiographical work.

So far, what I know of V.S. Naipul I got only from this book. His parents were from India who had migrated to the island of Trinidad (with the other island nearby, Tobago, it completes the country of "Trinidad and Tobago" near Venezuela where the beauty queens are). Since this was before large oil and gas reserves were discovered there, they had lived in relative poverty and want. But Victor (V. S. Naipul) was apparently a bright kid. He got a scholarship and, at the very young age of eighteen, left Trinidad in 1950 for England, alone. He studied for four years at Oxford then began to write. My copy of the book has this golden sticker saying "Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature" but I do not know (as I'm too lazy to google) what year was it when he was awarded this. In any event, he does not mention it here.

Neither does he mention how he got that life-changing scholarship at Oxford, what sort of a brilliant or promising young lad he was, how hard his life was in that impoverished island, the famous/important people he probably had met, or his successes maybe in Oxford and later as a writer. The usual things a writer of an autobiography would not have missed he ignored or played down. He wrote about his dreams, but they were not those general dreams that translate into ambitions like most of us have had during childhood, but dreams during particular nights, dates forgotten, while he was asleep. While in England, he stayed in a countryside cottage. Remembering this quiet, uneventful episode in his life, he wrote about his neighbor Jack, the car-hire man (taxi driver), his landlord he had seldom seen, the manor house caretakers, the gardener, new neighbors, deaths and departures, the changing seasons, the rooks (birds, not chess pieces), the cows which reminded him of the labels of canned condensed milk they had in Trinidad--things or people or events of daily life often ignored or forgotten, the simple annals of the insignificant, merging them with his lonely reminiscences and thoughts on history. Boring, boring, boring. Yet I kept on reading, reading and reading.

So it was that I discovered another great writer and my amazement was complete.

Arukiyomi says

Once I'd settled into this, it was a beautiful read. Naipaul is a Nobel Laureate and so you expect that the prose will be challenging. But while *A Bend in the River* and *In a Free State* are more "psychologically challenging" as I said in my review of the latter, the challenge with *Enigma* is that is so very, very simple.

The prose is so measured and the descriptions so simple that you can be forgiven for getting bored until you grasp what Naipaul is doing. This is no accident. The prose perfectly fits the intent of the author. This is a book that is all about reflection, all about understanding the significance of the mundane and all about

knowing where you have come from and where you currently are.

In using this construction, Naipaul allows us to read the novel on several different levels. The simplest approach (and the one a British expat in Saudi would most appreciate) is to read it as a beautifully descriptive eulogy to the British countryside. At the most complex level, this is probably beyond me. But there is something here for every mature novel reader.

I say mature because so many readers these days expect novels to consist of a strong plot. This is not what you're going to get here as Naipaul describes in detail the many years he lived in a small cottage on a Wiltshire estate. He also describes his emigration from Trinidad to study at Oxford. While plot is not necessary for a good novel, it does help that there are strong characters. These consist mostly of the inhabitants of the estate and all are crafted with care so that, like the reclusive Naipaul, you only get to know them as well as he did.

Along the way, he gives us a great deal of insight into the formative processes of a number of his early works. If you've read some of these, as I have, then you'll find this interesting. If you haven't, then you probably won't. So, this is a book that should be read after you've completed a few of Naipaul's key books.

As will all Naipaul that I've read so far, he is very good at capturing the issues faced by people who find themselves grappling with cultural identity. As I've spent more than half my life out of my passport culture, I very much relate to this. *Enigma* is known as a semi-autobiographical novel, but at times I felt like he was writing my biography!

For the patient, this book has a great deal to offer. It would probably benefit from a couple of readings actually. There's a lot going on behind the simple prose and it is worth spending time taking it all in.

Manish says

I was in college when Naipaul won the Nobel in 2001. I diligently picked up a few of his non-fiction works which surprisingly are still fresh in my memory – his fascination with filth and squalor could be one of the reasons.

'*The Enigma of Arrival*' is much different from his other works. I don't agree with the fiction classification of this work as its heavily auto biographical. The first section of the work was a masterclass on observation of a countryside and juxtaposing it with ruminations on birth and death. The middle section which dealt with his own abrupt migration from Trinidad to the UK in the 1950s was the most riveting piece. His first flight journey, memories of his first night in a big city (The Big Apple in this case), piecing together his first night in a hotel and his slow settling into the city made for some poignant reading.

Jesse says

Zzzzzzzz...

Rick says

Impressive work of fiction that is some high percentage memoir of a writer's life (obviously Naipaul's) in his adopted country. For a book with virtually no plot, just deep observation and precise, attentive description, it is amazingly absorbing reading.

Naipaul, by most, if not all accounts, is not a nice man, perhaps even by many measures a bad one, mean, self-absorbed, and cursed with a bully's violent temper. None of that, however, is a factor, even much of a presence here. There are brief moments of indirect, cold, snobby judgments. But otherwise it is a book about a writer who lives at an observational remove, pursuing material for his art.

In this book, rare is the character who is identified as a friend. Most are neighbors and a few are acquaintances. Perhaps the fiction isn't in what was included but what was left out—no wife, no lover, no visits from family. The book begins with him in Wiltshire, a country village within walking distance of Stonehenge. He is newly arrived and this splendidly written section is called "Jack's Garden" and evolves into a meditation on how geography changes, absorbing human interaction with an appearance of permanence that regardless of its apparent staying power (a lifespan, a few generations, something more or often shockingly less) inevitably decays. Loss, mortality, and the foundation life rule that all is transitory is the elegy recited here.

"Jack's Garden" is followed by a section called The Journey, a more straightforward memoir of the writer's journey from Trinidad to England, from a schoolboy's stereotype of a writer to a real one. The next two sections, "Ivy" and "Rooks" are a return to the examination of the changes in the one-time manor the author lives on, tracking the lives of the Phillips, the manor house caretakers, Bray, the car service driver and owner, Mr. Pitton, the manor gardener—people whose lives change color with the years as leaves do with the season and who, like leaves, over the years of Naipaul's residence, pass on. Once fixtures on the land and mind -scape of the writer's daily existence, then not.

The final section is his farewell, where his departure coincides with his sister's death in Trinidad, bringing an extra emotional impact to this novel of life's tragic beauty. Brilliantly written and completely fascinating.

Lovmelovmycats Hart says

So boring. It could have won the Pulitzer Prize for SO BORING if there was one.

Jim says

Flat - that's the best word to describe how I felt while reading this book. It's unbelievably repetitious. I have nothing good to say about it

William2.1 says

Just a note here. I've read this book twice and have an observation that I haven't come across elsewhere. In short, it's that there is a vertiginous aspect to Naipaul's descriptions of landscape here. I never have a stable sense of the world around the narrator, but one that is always off-kilter, if not spinning. This is something that I've not come across in Naipaul's other books, most of which I've read. I'm thinking now it may just be a function of over-description, in which case the attentive reader—who is a kind of dreamer—is overloaded with stimuli. So a mysterious but very good book which I recommend.

Later note: Yes, It is over-description, which creates a defamiliarizing or alienating effect on the reader. To the best of my knowledge, it was first described as an aspect of Russian Formalism.
