

Naipaul's 'Fraudulent' London Novel: *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*¹

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Between *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) and *The Mimic Men* (1967) V.S. Naipaul produced a novel which is less well-known than either. Critical attention has been lavished on these two novels, and justly so, but the differences in style and subject matter of *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963) account for a large disparity in the treatment of this novel by critics. A search in the *Modern Languages Association Bibliography* for critical articles on *The Mimic Men*, for example, produces forty-one results, whereas a corresponding search for articles about *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* produces only five.²

Mr Stone is a short, spare novel with a rich vein of melancholic comedy. Unlike *The Mimic Men*, it contains little philosophical rumination for a critic to dissect. Another reason for its lack of critical attention could be that it deals, superficially at least, with subjects unlike those Naipaul has treated either before or since. *Mr Biswas* and the three novels leading up to it were set in Trinidad. *The Mimic Men* was set partly in London but the main action takes place in the Caribbean. But *Mr Stone* is set entirely in England and all the characters are English. There is no obvious 'post-colonial' angle to engage the many critics who tend to concentrate on political and historical, rather than formal and stylistic, dimensions in their study of Naipaul's work. And the point of view in this novel is detached and none of the characters can easily be identified with the author: Naipaul himself was concerned that by obscuring his presence as narrator in the novel he betrayed or belied his origins and situation. When critical approaches depend upon the interpretation of the author's political and moral views as they appear in his work, novels like *Mr Stone* appear to provide little scope for analysis. However, there are elements in *Mr Stone* which lend themselves to this kind of examination, as I will show later in this article.

¹This paper is adapted from Chapters 5 and 11 of *V.S. Naipaul: Man and Writer* (Columbia: University of South

In his early study, the first monograph devoted to Naipaul, Paul Theroux claimed that he ‘may be the only writer today in whom there are no echoes or influences.’³ This is a rather extraordinary statement to make about any author, even Naipaul who has felt the need to invent his own traditions to a large degree. Influences from the main stream of English literature are certainly present in *Mr Stone*. It is clear, for example, that he had Oscar Wilde in mind when writing this novel. Early on, Mr Stone’s niece Gwen performs a scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest*,

affecting a deep voice not for the male role but, in imitation of the celebrated actress, for the female. Mr Stone looked on in wonder; up till that moment he had not thought Gwen capable of doing anything. Her sour expression had been replaced by one of blankness, as though she had removed herself from the room. With complete absorption she acted out the scene, turning her head abruptly this way and that to indicate the changing of roles. She never faltered or lost her composure, even when, attempting an excessive throatiness for *In a Handbag*, she emitted *hand* as a squeak.⁴

In addition to this direct reference, some of the novel’s humour seems deliberately to echo Wilde’s famous paradoxes. For example, the head of the firm for which Mr Stone works, Excal, is known as Old Harry ‘to those who did not know him, but Sir Harry to those whom he admitted to converse which they hoped to suggest was intimate,’⁵ and ‘the impression of grandeur and inaccessibility was completed by his reported left-wing leanings.’⁶ And further, Mr Stone’s friend Grace’s ‘radiant’ widowhood⁷ recalls the widow in *The Importance of*

Carolina Press, 2006).

² Search performed 22 August 2008.

³ Paul Theroux, *V.S. Naipaul: An Introduction to His Work* (London: Deutsch, 1972) 7.

⁴ V.S. Naipaul, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (London: Deutsch, 1963) 40.

⁵ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 76.

⁶ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 77.

⁷ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 129.

Being Earnest who ‘looks quite twenty years younger’ and whose ‘hair has turned quite gold from grief.’⁸

The wit of this novel, as well as its brevity, also recalls the satirical novels of Evelyn Waugh, with their themes of decadence and death. Waugh was still a prominent figure on the English literary scene when Naipaul’s writing career began, and Naipaul occasionally mentioned him in this context. For example, he used Waugh as an example to draw attention to the absurdity of some of his own critics:

Imagine a critic in Trinidad writing of *Vile Bodies*: ‘Mr Evelyn Waugh’s whole purpose is to show how funny English people are. He looks down his nose at the land of his birth. We hope that in future he writes of his native land with warm affection.’⁹

Waugh’s style of jaundiced, uncompromising social criticism conveyed by means of devastating comic satire, although on the whole crueller than Naipaul has ever been, definitely influenced the younger writer, particularly in his early days. In his Nobel Prize interview he said, ‘I began when I was about seventeen, much influenced by Evelyn Waugh, writing a farce set in Trinidad.’¹⁰ Although by the time he wrote *Mr Stone* he had written four idiosyncratic and successful novels, in this novel especially, with its London setting and its emphasis on the inexorable passage of time and the approach of old age and death, there are many echoes of this supreme stylist. Waugh’s satire on funeral rites in California, *The Loved One*, was published only a few years before *Mr Stone*, and it is likely that Naipaul would have read and perhaps admired it as well as his earlier novels and travel books. It is unlikely that he found Waugh’s world view entirely congenial, but Waugh had much to teach a young writer interested in the fastidious and exact use of English. Here is Waugh, describing his heroine:

⁸ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’, *Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954) 261.

⁹V.S. Naipaul, ‘London’, *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (London: André Deutsch, 1972) 11.

Aimée walked swiftly down the gravelled drive to the mortuary entrance. In the reception room the night staff were drinking coffee. They glanced at her incuriously as she passed silently through them, for urgent work was done at all hours. She took the lift to the top story where everything was silent and empty save for the sheeted dead. ... She indited no letter of farewell or apology. She was far removed from social custom and human obligations.¹¹

And here is Naipaul, describing Mr Stone:

As he walked up the street to his home with long, hard strides, he felt himself grow taller. He walked as the destroyer, as the man who carried the possibility of the earth's destruction within him. Taller and taller he grew, firmer and firmer he walked, past the petty gardens of petty houses where people sought to accommodate themselves to life.¹²

In both these passages, the language, although direct and concrete, conveys much about the mood of the character. It is detached and cool, with a hint of ironic amusement at the delusions it describes. The subjects, respectively a young American woman about to commit suicide, and an elderly English office worker walking home after a disappointing day at the office, may not have a great deal in common, but they share a feeling of distance from the rest of the human race, and an illusion of dedication to a higher power, which is in both cases profoundly comic as well as quite disturbing.

At the beginning of the novel, the title character lives alone in his house in London. Mr Stone is an employee – a librarian – with Excal, a large firm. Approaching retirement, he rather suddenly marries a widow of about his own age. Subsequently he achieves some local celebrity by designing a welfare scheme for retired employees of the company – The Knights

¹⁰ Nobel Prize interview with Horace Engdahl, 12 December 2001. http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-interview.html. Quoted in Patrick French, *The World is What It Is* (London: Picador, 2008), p. 87.

¹¹ Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948) 117.

Companion – which he then has to implement with the help of a louche individual named Whymper from Public Relations. It is a remarkable portrayal for a writer of only thirty. Naipaul has said that he was ‘still very shaky’ when he wrote *Mr Stone*.¹³ But, as with his earlier books, there is assurance and, despite the evidence of influences mentioned above, a confident, original voice in this novel. Confidence shows in the muted humour, easy to miss, in his characterizations. Mr Stone’s jokes and funny stories are feeble, and those of his new wife Margaret, despite her noted wit, are not much better. Still they are not made objects of ridicule: their shared jokes and pet names – they call each other ‘Doggie’ – are pathetic, but endearing. Naipaul charts the rapid course of their courtship and marriage delicately. He marries them off in a mere sentence, but devotes more time to their first meeting and Mr Stone’s changing impressions of Margaret; from his initial speechless admiration of her brilliance and glamour, through the difficulties of accommodating a new and unfamiliar presence in his bachelor home, to the ‘affection he had begun to feel for her clothes ... once the arresting attributes of a new person, now the familiar, carefully looked-after parts of a limited wardrobe.’¹⁴ For this couple in late middle age, the marriage is neither the disaster nor the romantic triumph it could have been in a lesser novel. As usual, Naipaul resists the drama of extremes in favor of a perceptive realism. The humour is subtle and occasionally the joke in a passage like the following could be overlooked:

In the bathroom, which before had held his own smell, to him always a source of satisfaction, there was now a warm, scented dampness. Then he saw her teeth. It had never occurred to him that they might be false. He felt cheated and annoyed. Regret

¹² Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 159.

¹³ Bharati Mukherjee and Robert Boyers, ‘A Conversation with V.S. Naipaul’ in *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Feroza Jussawalla (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 78.

¹⁴ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 87.

came to him, and a prick of the sharpest fear. Then he took out his own teeth and sadly climbed the stairs to their bedroom.¹⁵

The irony of his shock at finding that his new wife, as is quite normal for a woman of her age and time, has false teeth is brought home to the reader very gently with the passing mention of his own. But this incident shows more than Mr Stone's illogical attitude: it vividly conveys the unexpected emotions gripping a man in his early sixties embarking on his first marriage.

Naipaul was in unfamiliar territory not only with the age of his characters but also with the setting. He had said in 1958 that he couldn't write about England.

I feel I know so little about England. I have met many people but I know them only in official attitudes—the drink, the interview, the meal. I have a few friends. But this gives me only a superficial knowledge of the country, and in order to write fiction it is necessary to know so much.¹⁶

The London he creates in this novel is, however, recognizable as the same city written about by English writers of the same period. The observations he had made of English society since arriving in 1950 had allowed him to recreate this narrow, middle-class London world where there are scarcely any immigrants to be found – and, if found, to be shunned. It helped him to establish the necessary perspective on his subject, perhaps, that he was away from England, in Kashmir, when he wrote the novel. Nevertheless, years later, in 1994, he was still worried by the errors he felt he had made in *Mr Stone*:

In the past few months, it's been tormenting me more and more. I like the excellent material, still, but I felt it was thrown away by my suppression of the narrator, the observer who was an essential part of the story. To write a book as though you were this third-person omniscient narrator who didn't identify himself was in a way to be fraudulent to the material, which was obtained by me, a colonial, living precariously

¹⁵ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 35.

in London in a blank and anxious time, observing these elderly Edwardian people trying to postpone death.¹⁷

It is revealing that the error of which he accuses himself is fraudulence, the failure to be true to his material, and that it is identified with the absence of himself either as the narrator or a character. His fastidious sense of ethics, very much his own notion of the rights and wrongs of writing, is, remarkably, still exercised by a work from more than thirty years before. He even told this interviewer, Hussein, that he ‘might do something about it, rework it in some way.’

The London section of Naipaul’s 2001 novel *Half a Life* could be seen as his revision of his ‘errors’ in writing *Mr Stone and the Knight’s Companion*. *Half a Life* is certainly not an autobiographical novel in any literal sense. Willie is, for one thing, some years younger than Naipaul himself. He was born in India, not Trinidad: he does not share Naipaul’s family background of indenture in a small colony. However, there are, especially in the London sections of the book, some parallels between Willie’s life and Naipaul’s. Recalling his early years in London, Naipaul has said:

I was a very passionate man. I wasn’t spurned; it was incompetence. I didn’t know how to seduce the girl. ... I didn’t know about the physical act of seduction, you see. I didn’t know, because I had never been told. I was too shy.¹⁸

More than anything, Willie lacks the joy of satisfying sexual relationships. In London, Willie finds that making love to his friends’ girlfriends ‘is quite an easy thing to do. But I know it to be wrong, and it would get me into trouble one day.’¹⁹ He marries first unattached woman who shows a serious interest in him, moving with her to her home in Eastern Africa. Later he

¹⁶ Naipaul, ‘London’ 14.

¹⁷ Amer Hussein, ‘Delivering the Truth: An Interview with V.S. Naipaul’, *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* ed. Feroza Jussawalla (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 156.

¹⁸ Stephen Schiff, ‘The Ultimate Exile’, *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* ed. Feroza Jussawalla (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 145.

¹⁹ V.S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (London: Picador, 2001) 117.

finds satisfaction for a time in an affair with a married neighbour. He finds after a while, however, that ‘some half-feeling of the inanity of my life grew within me, and with it there came the beginning of respect for the religious outlawing of sexual extremes.’²⁰

But the half life is not just sexual. It also includes the placelessness which is Willie’s lot—and to some extent Naipaul’s, especially before his writing career began. Alienated from his Indian family, Willie has no wish to return there after leaving for London to study. After taking his degree he finds, as Naipaul did, that there was no job he could do in England. Unlike Naipaul, however, his writing career, promising at first, peters out. Willie is thus a kind of cautionary tale for what Naipaul’s life might have been without the impulse, or discipline, to keep writing in spite of early discouragement. The frightening sense of the blankness of the life he feels he narrowly missed feeds into the desolation and despair of this novel.

Equally, Willie is never certain of his feelings. Especially in London, he lives ‘in a daze ... He was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead.’²¹ He converts this for a time into an opportunity:

Towards the end of his second term, he saw with great clarity that the old rules no longer bound him. ... The possibilities were dizzying. He could, within reason, remake himself and his past and his ancestry.²²

But he finds that this is no basis for a fulfilled life with a sense of belonging, and living on his wife’s farm in eastern Africa brings no improvement. At the end of the novel Willie leaves Ana, his wife of eighteen years, telling her ‘I’m tired of living your life.’²³ He joins his sister Sarojini, her European husband apparently no longer present in her life, at her flat in Germany. No future is projected for them: half their lives have passed in futility, the other

²⁰ Naipaul, *Half a Life* 211.

²¹ Naipaul, *Half a Life* 58.

²² Naipaul, *Half a Life* 60.

²³ Naipaul, *Half a Life* 227.

half is unknown at the end of this novel. The sequel, *Magic Seeds*, takes Willie back to India as a freedom fighter at his sister's urging, but this is also a dead end and he ends up living an aimless life in London again.

Racial tensions play their part in *Half a Life*, but Willie has no allegiance to any group – his radical period in *Magic Seeds*, though lasting for several years, is more a result of inertia and susceptibility to his sister's persuasive bullying than of any political convictions – and his only solution to such situations is avoidance and flight. Asked by a radio producer for whom he had done some work to investigate the Notting Hill riots in 1958, he refuses to pose as 'a man from India who has come to have a look at Notting Hill. ... a man looking for trouble, a man looking to be beat up,'²⁴ and by his caution, or cowardice, foregoes any future radio commissions.

There is one passage in *Half a Life* where Naipaul almost explicitly rewrites *Mr Stone*, describing the London he himself knew during his twenties:

Without knowing what he was being introduced to, Willie was becoming part of the special, passing bohemian-immigrant life of London of the late 1950s. This hardly touched the traditional bohemian world of Soho. It was a little world on its own. The immigrants, from the Caribbean, and then the white colonies of Africa, and then Asia, had just arrived. They were still new and exotic; and there were English people—both high and low, with a taste for social adventure, a wish from time to time to break out of England, and people with colonial connections who wished in London to invert the social code of the colonies—there were English people who were ready to seek out the more stylish and approachable of the new arrivals. They met in Notting Hill, neutral territory, in dimly lit furnished flats in certain socially mixed squares ... and they were gay and bright together. But few of the immigrants had proper jobs, or

²⁴ Naipaul, *Half a Life* 110.

secure houses to go back to. Some of them were truly on the brink, and that gave an edge to the gaiety.²⁵

There are a few glimpses at least of Naipaul's own London in *Mr Stone*. Mr Stone visits his prospective wife Margaret's flat in Earl's Court:

A disreputable, overcrowded area Mr Stone had always thought it, and he thought no better of it now. The entrance to the Underground station was filthy; in a street across the road a meeting of the British National Party was in progress, a man shouting himself hoarse from the back of a van. Behind neon lights and streaming glass windows the new-style coffee houses were packed; and the streets were full of young people in art-student dress and foreigners of every colour.

However,

the address Mrs Springer gave turned out to be a private hotel A small typewritten 'Europeans Only' card below the bell proclaimed it a refuge of respectability and calm.²⁶

Naipaul lived in Earl's Court when he first arrived in England, and would have experienced for himself the other side of Mr Stone's instinctive disapproval of 'foreigners' and his reassurance at the 'Europeans Only' sign. This seedy Earls Court and Notting Hill world, briefly glimpsed in the earlier novel, is the world of Willie and his acquaintances, socially and sexually insecure in the racially mixed London of the 1960s, in *Half a Life*, where the English people who mixed with the immigrants with their 'taste for social adventure' are implicitly accused of a patronizing and self-serving attitude scarcely better than the blatant racism of Mr Stone. These people seem related to characters like Jane in *Guerillas*, 'people

²⁵ Naipaul, *Half a Life* 72.

²⁶ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 32.

who play at serious things, who think they can always escape, run back to their safe world'²⁷ after their inter-racial excitements.

Margaret seems to have spent time in India, a fact suggested by a

framed sepia photograph of a dead tiger on whose chest lay the highly polished boot of an English cavalry officer, moustached, sitting bolt upright in a heavy wooden armchair ... with three sorrowful, top-heavily turbanned Indians, beaters or bearers or whatever they were, behind him.²⁸

Once again, Mr Stone's point of view is in the foreground, but in the 'sorrowful' Indians there is a fleeting glance of another perspective. Margaret also enrages Mr Stone by setting fire to some fruit cake on the electric fire before serving it, in imitation of a Hindu ritual.²⁹ Naipaul has written about the beauty of this ritual: 'There is something very beautiful about making an offering to the fire at the start of cooking. Such an ancient kind of worship of fire, the essential god, and so right in a way. But we performed those rituals unthinkingly.'³⁰ Perhaps Margaret Stone understands the ritual better than the Trinidad Indians who carry on the tradition without giving it a second thought, but her husband finds her action pretentious and irritating and it causes their first fight. Mr Stone seems to find Margaret's Indian background threatening and never enquires about it, further confirming the insularity and prejudice of his character.

Despite the detached third-person omniscient narrator and thorough Englishness of Naipaul's characters in *Mr Stone*, beneath the surface there are intimations of common Naipaulian themes. From the beginning, Naipaul's married characters had complicated attitudes towards their spouses. Ganesh in *The Mystic Masseur* showed his affection and respect for his wife Leela by beating her; Mr Biswas welcomed his wife and new daughter

²⁷ Mukherjee and Boyers, 86.

²⁸ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 42.

²⁹ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 42-43.

home by ‘complaining of the very things that pleased him most. ... To these outbursts Shama didn’t reply, as she would have done before. She was morose herself, as though she preferred this bond to the bond of sentimentality.’³¹ The ambivalence of close human relationships is also present here. Mixed with the resentment Mr Stone feels towards his wife after their first two weeks of marriage, is

the feeling that his thoughts about women and his marriage ... were a betrayal of her who sat beside him, not at all fat, not at all parasitic, full only of loving, humiliating, killing concern.³²

Although he said, in his essay ‘London,’ that ‘we are not all brothers under the skin,’³³ he has found enough common ground to draw a faithful picture of the joys and pains of the married state, expressed in an idiom much less exuberant and outspoken than that of his Trinidad characters.

But the chief reflection of Naipaul’s recurrent preoccupations in *Mr Stone* is the one he mentions in his interview with Hussein: the spectre of these people ‘trying to postpone death.’³⁴ The struggle Mr Stone has in common with Naipaul’s other characters is his search for meaning and purpose, which for a person of any intelligence in Naipaul’s world is doomed to failure. In Mr Stone, the mixture of English reserve and a kind of fatalism which, despite his distaste for ‘foreigners of every colour’, could be seen almost as an Indian cultural trait makes for an intriguing character. Naipaul’s feelings about writing can be traced in Mr Stone’s reflections on his own creation:

In that project of the Knights Companion ... the only pure moments, the only true moments were those he had spent in the study, writing out of a feeling whose depth he

³⁰ V.S. Naipaul, Introduction, *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity* (Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982) 6.

³¹ Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: McGraw Hill, 1961) 152.

³² Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 71.

³³ Naipaul, ‘London’ 14.

³⁴ Hussein, ‘Delivering the Truth’ 156.

realized only as he wrote. What he had written was a faint and artificial rendering of that emotion All that he had done, and even the anguish he was feeling now, was a betrayal of that good emotion. All action, all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth.³⁵

Mr Stone is a disappointed creator, looking back, like Naipaul in *The Enigma of Arrival*, on his creation, and feeling ‘mocked by what I had already done; it seemed to belong to a time of vigour, now past for good.’³⁶ This in turn is echoed by Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*, who talks of ‘that moment of success which, after long endeavour, is so shatteringly brief: a moment that can almost be fixed by the clock, and recedes and recedes, leaving emptiness, exhaustion, even distaste: dissatisfaction that nags and nags and at last defines itself as apprehension and unease.’³⁷ Mr Stone and Ralph Singh both, too, find a deep, though temporary, satisfaction in the act of writing.

Mr Stone, then, has more in common with his author and with other characters like Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* than might at first seem likely. This odd, accomplished little book deserves more attention. It shows how highly developed Naipaul’s gifts of sympathy and perception already were, across racial and cultural boundaries, at this relatively early stage in his career. Naipaul suspected that he was ‘being fraudulent’ to his ‘excellent material’ in this book, but only he could have achieved this particular synthesis of Hindu–Indian cultural sensibilities with hidebound English social attitudes.

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³⁵ Naipaul, *Mr Stone* 149.

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