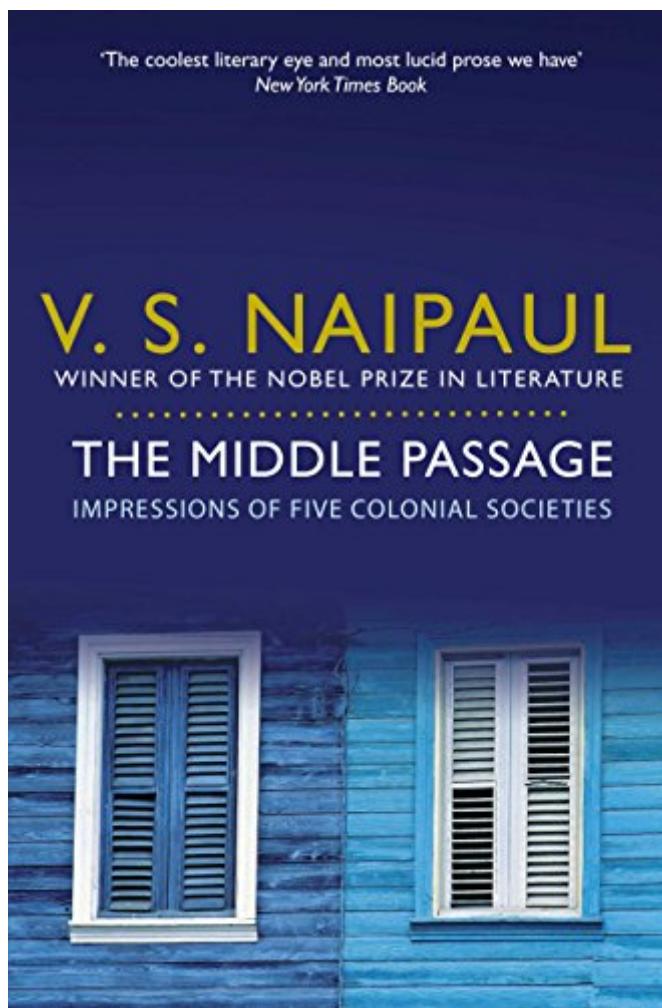


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# The Middle Passage: Impressions Of Five Colonial Societies



## 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 — a perfect subject for the acute understanding and dazzling prose of this great writer. Naipaul travels with the artist's eye and ear and his observations are sharply discerning. Evelyn Waugh Belongs in the same category of travel writing as Lawrence's books on Italy, Greene's on West Africa and Pritchett's on Spain. New Statesman 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. Observer Dazzling reportorial skills and a sharp historical mind. New York Times Book Review

## Book Information

File Size: 928 KB

Print Length: 264 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0330522957

Publisher: Picador; Reprints edition (March 22, 2012)

Publication Date: March 22, 2012

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B007KA1FQ6

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #1,075,570 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #34 in Books > History > Americas > Caribbean & West Indies > Trinidad and Tobago #96

## Customer Reviews

If you want to read more from travel writings than Lonely Planet travel guides (which are excellent), start with American author Paul Theroux and then try his travel mentor, V.S. Naipaul. This book has Naipaul revisiting the home island of Trinidad. As an ethnic Indian, Naipaul can travel the Caribbean and Venezuela and get an honest perspective that perhaps a caucasian travel writer might not. That's a trite and somewhat insulting way to characterize his travel books, but I've bought five on that premise and been happy with every one. If you're not as well read on the classics as Naipaul is, open one of his books and try to keep up with his literary name dropping. Maybe I haven't read the European classics that he has, but it's enough to see a citation in one of his accounts of wanderings. This is one of his shorter books, pick it up for a travel-sized read on your own voyages.

excellent

What can you say! Naipaul's books paint an interesting picture of countries in the Caribbean as per their heritage of slavery and racial harmony. I enjoyed this book and his viewpoint! Can't help but wonder how it would read this many years later, has progress been made?

A wonderful writer with a unique view of everything revisits his homeland. Very unusual. Read slowly, appreciate.

A travel narrative, "The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited" consists of V.S. Naipaul's impressions as he journeys through various nations in the West Indies. The title immediately conjures thoughts of slavery, a practice (along with its partner indentured servitude) that indelibly shaped the framework of these countries. It not only made the inhabitants feel themselves inferior to their whiter brethren but also forced them to identify themselves and others by race. The latter element created chaos in many countries, particularly between Indians and Africans (a problem that persists today). V.S. says early, "racial coexistence, if not cooperation, is of urgent importance to the West Indies." If you can take away just one line from this book, then I suggest you take that one. The first chapter discusses the boat ride from England to Trinidad, which was dominated by lower-class immigrants. The second chapter focuses on Trinidad (Naipaul's homecountry), the third on Guyana

(here called "British Guiana"), the fourth on Surinam, the fifth on Martinique, and the sixth on Jamaica. In between some chapters, Naipaul also briefly ventures into other locations, such as Brazil and Antigua. You would figure that the Trinidad chapter would occupy most of the book, but the Guyana chapter, at almost 100 pages long, takes that honor. Each chapter is equally entertaining, and Naipaul's prose is magically evocative. Some passages are deeply poetical. You will have to stop and reflect to grasp the import, so even though this book runs at 243 pages, you should expect to spend as much time as you would on a typical 350 page book. In other words, don't rush through it! I love this line in the Martinique section: "I was getting tired of the French colonial monkey-game," a summarization of the manner by which the Martinique colony follows the customs of the French in a "monkey-see, monkey-do" style. Haha. Other areas of interest are: (a) - Naipaul's rebuke of the unreasonable, unproductive, and racist Ras Taffarian movement in Jamaica; (b) - the racial politics in Guyana, as elucidated partly by Naipaul's description of Jagan and Burnham; (c) - the diverse yet tolerant demographics in Surinam, making it the only true cosmopolitan country in the West Indies according to Naipaul; (d) - the seemingly cosmopolitan Trinidad, where the races are actually too closed-minded to deserve that distinction; (e) - the Trinidadians' foolish tendency to imitate America in a way that results in the people remaking themselves "in the image of a Hollywood B-man".

This wonderful quick read is V.S. Naipaul's travels from Trinidad, to British Guiana through Suriname and then on to Martinique and Jamaica in the early 1960s. The dated feature makes the read fascinating. Here we see how racial issues have surfaced in Trinidad, where the Urban black population is at variance with the rural Indian one. We see this through the eyes of an English educated Indian returning home to a nation he both loves and hates. He remarks at the outfit, the attire and aspirations of the people. In Guiana he meets Mr. Jagan, the Indian Communist leader who Naipaul will return to in his book "The Writer and his World". In Suriname we learn about a Dutch colony where race has not been the deciding factor. Fascinating and poetic this story is a tour of the culture of the Caribbean. Of transplanted Africans and Indians living on islands and places once inhabited by natives, of the stirrings of colonial peoples and independence. A must read. Full of color, history, insights and amazing characters. Seth J. Frantzman

No writer writes with more pointed anger than the young Naipaul, and this book, along with *An Area of Darkness*, strikes the most strident note of rage. This is not surprising. The young Naipaul reserved his rage for the places, people and things which struck closest to his roots: for *An Area of*

Darkness, India, and for the Middle Passage, even closer, the Caribbean. Although most of the places he writes of in this book have been radically transformed in the forty years since this was written, The Middle Passage is still worth reading. The writing, even when it levels off into casual meanness, is superb. This book amply illustrates Naipaul's complete mastery as a travel writer. Few writers get to the heart of place, its dark muddled center, than Naipaul, and he lays it out clear, crisp, and pointedly, and then moves on.

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