A House for Mr. Biswas: Fifty Years Later

Jeffrey Folks

This year marks the bicentennial of the publication of one of the great novels of the twentieth century. I suppose that the occasion will be noted in academic quarters with the publication of the customary collection of essays, many of the individual contributions ambivalent if not hostile to V. S. Naipaul’s lifelong project of conservative mythmaking. Certainly, in the half century since the appearance of A House for Mr. Biswas, critical opinion toward Naipaul’s fiction would appear to have been much tainted by liberal bias. Writing in The Nation, for example, Michael Wood, apparently oblivious to the fact that there might be cause for concern about the state of contemporary social norms, bemoaned “Naipaul’s serious devotion to his own gloom.”1 In a review of Magic Seeds, one of Naipaul’s more recent novels, Siddhartha Deb allowed that “Naipaul’s novels have often succeeded against the grain of his conservatism,” this after asserting that “the old prejudices [against Maoists and peasants, among other objects] have expanded to devour almost everything appealing about his writing.”2 It would seem to many that a “prejudice” against Maoists is not such a bad thing, but in the groves of academe, in which most literary critics make their living, apparently it is.

Even more unkind is the review-essay that Terry Eagleton published in Harper’s two years after Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. As if to counteract the effect of the award, Eagleton attempts to reduce Naipaul’s career to the predictable terms of the émigré writer, one of those like Conrad, Yeats, or Eliot (not bad company, one would think) who “compensate for their outsider status by becoming honorary aristocrats” within the larger cosmopolitan society. Having laced Naipaul into the straitjacket of Marxist critique, Eagleton proceeds to lay on with ad hominem (“Like Gulliver, Naipaul finds the same pettiness, corruption, and betrayal everywhere he goes”) and sheer derision: writing of Naipaul’s portrayal of guerilla leaders in the novel In a Free State, Eagleton opines that “Naipaul has only to sniff an ideal to detect in it the stirrings of self-aggrandizement.”3 Is it impolitic to remind Professor Eagleton that the

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colonial emancipators in question—as in the section of the novel entitled “Tell Me Who to Kill”—are all too often sinister, ruthless murderers, not “idealists”? Even more extraordinary is the charge that Naipaul’s realism is actually “the lopsided antirealism of one who can hardly bring himself to acknowledge the realities of love and courage.” What else is Naipaul’s heroic career of undeviating devotion to the truth, even in the face of unrelenting attack on the part of the left-wing literary establishment, if not a testament to love and courage? For those who are in any doubt, a reexamination of A House for Mr. Biswas should suffice to clarify the nature of Naipaul’s moral compassion and artistic accomplishment.

Like all great works of art, A House for Mr. Biswas is deceptively simple in its design. Composed in a modest vernacular idiom, the novel is a chronological account of the life of a man who, through a lifetime of aspiration and effort, rises from his status as a village sign painter and store clerk to become a provincial journalist. The ruling passion of this simple man, Mohun Biswas, is to establish a secure abode for his family, separate from his oppressive in-laws. What he seeks on a deeper level, however, as becomes clear in the course of several painful relocations, is not merely physical shelter—a house—but a “home” in which the noblest instincts of humanity will thrive. What he requires is liberty for himself and for his family: the freedom to exercise his mind and to pursue his dream of a decent, purposeful existence. In the course of telling this story, Naipaul expresses a profound sense of the goodness of life, and of its corollary, the virtue of continuity. Based on an underlying belief in goodness, one may be confident that life will continue into the future even after the demise of an individual human being. In the lives of our children and grandchildren, life may continue in much the same way as it has in the past.

Biswas, who is himself a writer (though a minor one compared to the author who created him), possesses an implicit if unarticulated knowledge of all of this. Because of his implicit knowledge of conservative truths—including the fact that our survival necessitates a continuity of humane values passed down through generations—Biswas is essentially an optimist even as he suffers one maddening setback after another and even as he glimpses the sad insufficiency of his own surroundings. Even with the dismaying raft of social upheavals that unsettle the world represented in the novel, changes arising from Afro-Caribbean politics or the broader convulsions accompanying the breakup of the British Empire, there still exists a continuity of civilization upon which Naipaul chooses to focus. It is not the superficial change of party or even the rise or fall of one ethnic faction that determines the future but rather the continuity of a “universal civilization” as represented by a vital legacy of values and beliefs. Alasdair MacIntyre has analyzed the relationship of this legacy to the system of practical reasoning that is indispensable for the sane and coherent functioning of any society. In the absence of a shared tradition of practical reasoning, civil society descends into a Mogadishu of sheer firepower of one sort or another. As MacIntyre points out, “At this level debate is necessarily barren; rival appeals to accounts of the human good or of justice necessarily assume a rhetorical form such that it is as assertion and counterassertion, rather than as argument and counterargument, that rival standpoints confront one another.” From assertion and counterassertion it is a small step to blow and counterblow. What all modern tyrants from Stalin and
Hitler to Mao and Saddam Hussein have perfectly understood is the impotence of rational argument in the context of a modernizing society with collectivist instincts. In the absence of recognition of the legitimacy of argument within a tradition of practical reasoning, how else can a dispute be decided other than by intimidation of one sort or another?

Naipaul has always displayed an acute awareness of the vulnerability of modernizing societies toward this kind of barbarism. Indeed, one of the chief virtues of his literary imagination—one among a great many, I would say—is the depth of humanity with which he has observed the failure of politics in so many developing countries, and while this matter may seem far removed from the modest domestic tale that he tells in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, it is not. The static defensiveness of the Tulsi family, the lack of opportunity in rural Trinidad, and the shifting politics of Port of Spain are all features of a provincial culture in which no shared tradition of belief or consensus of practical reasoning holds sway. All that holds this fragmented society together is the poorly understood, and increasingly conflicted, rationality of the British Empire, itself at the time of the novel undergoing great challenges both from without and within. Within this turbulent condition, characteristic not only of Naipaul’s fictionalized Trinidad but also, more broadly, of contemporary Western civilization in general, how can there exist a consensus concerning the central purposes and chief good of life? In the absence of agreement, there exist only competing goods and competing conceptions of life’s purpose. As Naipaul implies, this state of conflict leads to demoralization, waste, and decline. There are more than enough images of poverty, disorder, and sheer rot in *Biswas* to underline this perception.

It is hardly surprising that an author as deeply compassionate and perceptive as Naipaul should have been led to record the destructive consequences of the breakdown of a coherent cultural tradition. What is remarkable, and especially so in *Biswas*, is the sheer force of intellectual will with which Naipaul comprehends and confronts the distinctively modern form of apostasy. In doing so, he arrives at a comic vision of contemporary existence that is unprecedented in modern literature. Biswas’s instinct to build a house serves as microcosm for an entire realm of selflessness and humility among men and for the reassertion of a coherent rationality based on these values. His quest for a true home stands as well for the profound awareness of mortality shared by all men and for the consequent instinct for the preservation of a redemptive civilization. Through his noble efforts, Biswas seeks security against not merely the social ills of homelessness or hunger but against mortality itself. In terms of the survival of one individual, this astounding quest, of course, must end in defeat, but by way of the miraculous comedic effect of Naipaul’s art, it also ends in triumph. From one perspective, to be sure, Biswas is a lifelong loser, an easy mark readily imposed upon by those around him; from another and more correct point of view, however, he is a splendid hero worthy of emulation and respect. In essence Biswas is motivated by a resolute faith in the fundamental goodness of creation and in the furtherance of the abiding civilization in which he believes.

Naipaul’s ultimate faith in the goodness of life is everywhere in evidence in *Biswas*. Despite his protagonist’s star-crossed relationship with his domineering in-laws, the Tulsi family, Biswas retains an intense belief in the ethos of chivalric love. In the case of a marriage so blindly entered into,
so lacking practical or emotional foundation, so buffeted by antagonistic forces, one can hardly imagine that conjugal love could blossom at all, much less that it could survive for thirty years. Yet faith in domesticity—in the chivalric ideal and in its modern manifestation, the nuclear family—is one of the distinctive aspects of Western cultural belief that Biswas has adopted and that Naipaul celebrates in this novel. Despite all the trials, injustices, and humiliations to which he is subjected by his in-laws, Biswas retains his unconquerable faith in romantic love as one of the necessary foundations of identity. As it seems to the young, as yet unmarried Biswas, “Love was something he was embarrassed to think about; the very word he mentioned seldom, and then as mockingly as Alec and Bhandat’s boys. But secretly he believed.”

From the very beginning, the novel is the record of a remarkable faith, focusing as it does on this aspiration toward goodness and purity. Indeed, Biswas’s enduring sense of loneliness is intimately connected with his greater aspirations, which often separate him from other human beings. During the early years of his marriage, for example, he is constantly involved in arguments with his wife, Shama, who answers with resentful silence. After Shama and Biswas move to a rough, uncivilized sugarcane-growing area (“The Chase”) to operate a shop owned by the Tulis, Shama derides her husband as “the man who wanted to paddle his own canoe,” the phrase that the Tulis have attached to him. Believing that he is irrevocably alienated from his wife, Biswas gives way to an overpowering sense of sadness and grief. At last, however, in line with her own nobler instincts, Shama sets to work cleaning, organizing, and improving the small mud hut that they have occupied as their first attempt at a real home. At this early stage of their life together, their humble furniture itself seems to embody their desperation and struggle for a better existence, as well as the fragility of their dream. The four-poster bed that they inherit from the previous occupant is horribly infested with bedbugs, and the small kitchen table possesses an intensely moving quality of diminutive modesty. These qualities are a reflection of their own lives, and, as if to enforce this reminder of constriction and impurity, the furniture continues for some time to follow them from one house to another, like ghosts of their own inadequacy.

Although Biswas and his wife must struggle to survive financially, they face an even more daunting challenge in their dealings with Shama’s extended family. Everywhere around Hanuman House, Biswas seems almost an invisible man. An unwavering routine exists as part of the Tulsi family’s attempt to defend their inherited privileges. It is precisely this status that has “awed” Biswas upon first encountering the family, and it is preservation of this status that becomes the major sticking point in his relationship with his wife. Still, Hanuman House can never be a home for Biswas, because it partakes of a fragmented, displaced culture outside the larger civilization with which he has aligned himself. Tulsi ritual is an imperfectly remembered version of an ancient way of life and one that requires a brutalizing conformity; it is also a travesty of genuine religious practice. As it turns out, Biswas is not so much at odds with Hindu tradition, as he sometime believes himself to be, as he is at odds with a corrupt version of tradition deployed for present ends.

On one level, Biswas’s search for a permanent home is an attempt to prove himself in relation to the wealthier, more prominent Tulsi family. Yet Biswas’s dream of owning his own house is also a symbolic projection
of a deeper aspiration: a desire to hold at bay the insecurity, indignity, dependence, and constriction of life. It is hardly coincidental that, when he decides to buy a Christmas present for his daughter Siva, he purchases an elaborate dollhouse—a miniature version of his lifelong ambition. This is a gift that evokes immediate resentment from the other residents of Hanuman House. When Biswas returns and finds that the dollhouse has been utterly destroyed, broken up by Shama herself, he is enraged, but in this he does not understand the necessity of his wife’s actions. It is, after all, the only way to preserve her sanity and that of her children at Hanuman House.

The focus in Biswas, however, is not entirely or primarily on conjugal love. To a greater extent, it centers on the extraordinary attachment of Biswas and his son, Anand—a relationship that, in many respects, parallels the real-life bond of Naipaul and his father, Seepersad. As an autobiographical fiction, Biswas is an intensely felt tribute to the man who played such an important role in Naipaul’s development and particularly in his choice of vocation. It seems appropriate that Biswas, the first of Naipaul’s major novels, should focus on this paternal relationship. Knowing that he might never see his father again following his departure for university studies in Britain, Naipaul conjured up the cherished memory of his father through an imaginative act of fiction that attempts to preserve his father’s memory and, indeed, to ensure his immortality. As Patrick French notes, “In his writing, [Naipaul] would revere his father, elevating him as an exemplar and applying a degree of sympathy and compassion to him that was lacking in his treatment of other people.”

Much later in life, in an interview with French, Naipaul betrayed a less admiring opinion of the father who might be considered in practical terms largely a failure in life. Yet even fifty years after his father’s death, Naipaul was able to summon up this relationship in the most loving and vivid terms, as he did in his Nobel Prize lecture. His father’s natural curiosity and vitality, and the stories that his father wrote about Trinidad, provided “a kind of solidity,” Naipaul wrote. “They gave me something to stand on in the world. I cannot imagine what my mental picture would have been without those stories.”

But why is the relationship of father and son so essential, one might ask, especially in an era in which single-parent households are more the rule than the exception? Why is it that this, perhaps Naipaul’s finest novel and certainly among the finest novels of the past century, should be so out of step with the direction of society, and yet so important to its future? Why should it be that, in an age in which the paterfamilias has been made the endless butt of feminist derision, one of our great writers should choose to focus on just such a figure? Perhaps it is simply that in banishing from our sight that which we so much need—the presence of a confident, manly, compassionate figure of authority—we have opened a spiritual abyss that has made itself felt more acutely with each decade that passes. In his case, what Naipaul gained from his father was a window into the humanity of a deeply caring individual, and not just any individual but that singular male presence among all the earth’s billions who cared most for his existence. What Naipaul gained from being allowed into the presence of his father’s tumultuous and joyful life was the priceless gift that lies at the root of all civilization: an affirmation of the sacredness of life and of the awesome responsibility to protect it. In his relationship with his son, Biswas is responding to the noblest instincts of concern, nurture, and aspiration.
This intimate relationship of father and son, so essential in Naipaul's writing, is, of course, also a key element of Western civilization. It is part of the relationship of trust across generations that is a crucial aspect of the Judeo-Christian civilization. How else can teachings be passed down if generations are not linked by respect and faith? The paternal relationship is a keystone of that universal “conservative yearning” that Russell Kirk viewed as underpinning the cohesion and permanence necessary for our very survival. In response to what he comes to understand about his father and in the developing relationship between them, Anand works hard at school in order to fulfill his part of the multigenerational bargain.

This bargain between father and son is apparent in the section of the novel that describes Anand’s school examination, as Naipaul manages to convey the tenderness that Biswas feels toward his son as he goes through meticulous preparation for the exam. One imagines that the same preparations are taking place in dozens if not hundreds of households in Trinidad at the same moment, as they do in millions of households throughout the Western world. In this microcosm of human solidarity, with Biswas lending Anand his pen, presenting him with a large bottle of ink and with blotters, pencils, and other necessities, we gain insight into the way in which human civilization itself works. Here is the painstaking care, the mutual concern, the earnestness and emotional support, and that profound bond of domestic love that is one pillar of civilization. To Anand’s surprise, terrified as he is that he has failed, he wins one of the five college scholarships. Biswas’s sensible appreciation of his own opportunities is passed down to Anand, and, as Anand comes to understand, his patrimony—the inheritance of lasting values of courage, constancy, and self-respect—takes on crucial importance.

As he makes his way through life, Biswas tries several times to establish his independence: first at The Chase, then at Green Vale, where he works as an assistant estate manager for the Tulsis, and finally in Port of Spain. At Green Vale, Biswas unknowingly achieves an important step toward securing a permanent home, for here he first begins to communicate deeply with his son, who chooses for the moment to stay with his father rather than return to Hanuman House. In the midst of the fear and loneliness of Green Vale, Biswas attempts to comfort his son, and through this concern he discovers the depth of his love and need for his son, emotions connected with “the most oppressive of all his fears: that Anand would leave him and he would be left alone.” As it turns out, Anand does return to his mother at Hanuman House, but the shared ordeal of his stay at Green Vale results in a new and lasting relationship between father and son. This love, sense of responsibility, and respect continue to develop, proving to be a source of satisfaction and strength for both. Clearly, the love for Anand is one of the transforming elements of Biswas’s life, a force that helps lift him out of the poverty and indignity of his circumstances.

It is not only in his commitment to family that Biswas reveals his faith in the ultimate purposefulness of life; it is also in his vocation. In the course of the book, Naipaul traces Biswas’s unfolding ambition to become something more than a village sign painter. Biswas’s youthful successes in this craft foreshadow his mature ambition to enter the literary world, but his thorny ascent involves decadelong service to the Tulsis. Beyond that, literary ambition must be pursued in precious moments of leisure stolen from his journalistic duties on the
Port of Spain newspaper as well as those many, often demanding obligations to his extended family. Beyond these practical difficulties, an even greater hurdle exists: Biswas possesses no model for conceptualizing his experience as a stubbornly independent individual living within a remote province of a waning empire. Even as he is instinctively drawn to the classics of the Western literary tradition, he seems to find little in that tradition that relates directly to his anomalous situation. Enigma that he is, Biswas works with unflagging determination, pursuing one false start after another until, stirred by the intense emotion following his mother’s death, he discovers a narrative voice more compelling than all the “models” he has studied in the anthologies. Yet though the directness and simplicity of his newfound mode of expression might seem an escape—an opposition—to the standards and restrictions of the larger literary culture, they are not. Rather, his confident new voice reflects his arrival as a self-assured member of a larger civilization. It is because he has understood and aspired to the virtues of this broader tradition that he is able shape a narrative of his experience within it.

Some four decades ago John Updike pointed out precisely this “bias” in Naipaul’s writing: “an unexamined assumption,” Updike called it, “of metropolitan superiority.” Yet Updike’s objection to the “unreality” of Western civilization actually reveals little more than that critic’s own predisposition based on a disavowal of his own “privileged” status. This sort of liberal disdain of the West, parading as open-minded impartiality toward all cultures, has become all too familiar in the decades since Updike published his disparaging review. Indeed, the fraudulence of this adversary culture was already apparent to Naipaul himself in the years immediately following the Second World War in which it began to make a significant impact. By the time Updike’s review appeared, Naipaul had already commented on the trahison des clercs as he had experienced it in Britain and America. For example, in his essay “What’s Wrong with Being a Snob?” (1967), Naipaul spoke of the “self-violation into which we are continually being tempted by our [liberal] principles.” He also understood clearly enough that the metropolitan society with which Updike identified his writing could not be comprehended in a simplistic manner. “The great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked,” Naipaul wrote in his important essay, “Conrad’s Darkness” (1974). As he stressed at the conclusion of that essay, “the world we inhabit . . . is always new” and must always be comprehended anew by the creative artist. It is not, as Updike believed, that Naipaul simply viewed “the men of the West Indies as poor imitations of Europeans.” True, Naipaul viewed the lives of those of the West Indies and of other regions of the Third World as halfformed, insufficient, and impoverished in cultural as well as material terms; but he also judged the lives of those of the metropolitan culture to be in their own way feeble, self-indulgent, and painfully confused. No one can read Naipaul’s “British” novel, The Enigma of Arrival, with its central images of impermanence and decay, without a disturbing sense that the metropolitan center is at a point of crisis as its own privileged population, particularly the elite who most benefit from its liberties and affluence, seems gleefully committed to undermining the basis of its own happiness.

Yet it ought not to have been necessary to consult essays such as “Conrad’s Darkness”; the clearest evidence of Naipaul’s view and
the strongest evidence of its correctness appear in the extensive body of fiction he had already published by 1970. Updike’s thesis was mistaken, I believe, for the simple reason that in the final analysis Naipaul was not writing about competing cultures but about men as they exist everywhere. Indeed, I do not believe that Biswas ever refers to himself as a “colonial,” though clearly he resides in a deeply flawed environment that he is determined to transcend or to see his son transcend. To understand fully how mistaken the colonial thesis is, one needs to understand the idealism behind the character of Biswas and the enormous aspiration underlying Naipaul’s effort to tell his story. Biswas is a man who lives in expectation “for the world to yield its sweetness and romance.”16 The frustration associated with this quest shadows him all his life and costs him his health, but Biswas can never forsake his quest for liberty.

At age thirty-one, Biswas begins work at the Port of Spain Sentinel, a salaried job not only in the city apart from his in-laws but also connected, however tenuously, with the Western tradition of law, reason, and individualism that he admires. Among other assignments, Biswas is designated special investigator of Deserving Destitutes—or “Deserving Destees,” as he prefers to call them. Here we see Naipaul’s sardonic humor at its most biting. Biswas’s role as investigator of the Deserving Destees—in many cases, in fact, undeserving shams or aggressive bullies—confers power, since he is able to bring certain particularly “deserving” cases to public attention, but it also causes frustration and conflict as he is threatened by those who wish to be singled out as more deserving of charity than others. Biswas has entered the realm of competing victimhood where he discovers that rival victims can be utterly callous toward one another and menacing toward those who refuse to credit their special status.

This stage of his career comes to an end with the departure of Mr. Burnett, the editor who has been especially kind to Biswas, and who has sponsored his efforts at feature writing. Relegated to writing “capital shorts,” Biswas suffers in his job, begins to take more frequent sick days, and searches for a way out of his predicament. He does so in part by attempting to compose his own fictionalized life history: for example, by making the effort to complete the autobiographical tale of Gopi, a “country shopkeeper” who was “at the age of thirty-three . . . already the father of four children.”17 Unfortunately, the story merely marks another stage in the continual postponement of the writing of his life. Then, unexpectedly, the postponement is shattered with the death of his mother, Bipti. Out of the agony of grief that accompanies the death of his beloved mother, Biswas begins to write in earnest, not in the flowery speech that he imagined appropriate to an untested novice in “British Literature” but in a simple, dignified prose of his own: “He addressed his mother. He did not think of rhythm; he used no cheating abstract words. He wrote of coming up to the brow of the hill, seeing the black, forked earth, the marks of the spade, the indentations of the fork prongs. He wrote of a journey he had made a long time before. He was tired; she made him rest. He was hungry; she gave him food. He had nowhere to go; she welcomed him.”18 In this writing, Biswas takes an important step, and one that will undergird his son’s efforts to secure his place in the larger civilization. To express his grief, Biswas finds that he must discard the antiquated literary style through which he has attempted to gain recognition. Now he writes with a piercing honesty. Ironically, it is this
transition from an imperfectly acquired 
style to genuineness and direct observa-
tion that secures his admission, for the first 
time, into a broader literary culture that, 
unknown to Biswas, has long since aban-
doned the “high style” that he has sought 
to emulate.

At this same period, Biswas’s professional 
life undergoes a significant change as well. 
Based on his experience of reporting on 
the Deserving Destitutes, Biswas obtains a 
civil service job with the newly founded 
Department of Community Welfare. Even 
this source of income, however, is precari-
ous because it depends on the vagaries of 
political patronage. Also, Biswas remains 
dependent on the Tulis because he lives in 
the back room of a family tenement house 
in which the front rooms are reserved for 
the younger son, Owad. When Owad 
returns from England to drive Biswas 
from his quarters, Owad no longer resem-
bles the naïve, open-eyed medical student: 
he is now consumed by radical politics, 
worshipful of Soviet Communism and 
of its leaders, especially Stalin, whom he 
defends against Biswas’s skepticism. The 
final break between Biswas and the Tulis 
comes as Biswas and Anand ridicule these 
radical beliefs and the intellectual self-
importance and arrogance that accompany 
them. (Ironically, as soon as Owad starts 
to mix with his medical colleagues at the 
India club, his enthusiasm for Communism 
abruptly abates, thus revealing the shal-
lowness of his radical commitment.)

Toward the end of the novel, follow-
ing his eviction from the Tulsi tenement 
house, Biswas is convinced that he will be 
reduced to joining the homeless who squat 
in Marine Square, a place that is familiar 
to him as it was one of the first places upon 
which he reported for the Sentinel. In this 
desperate strait, Biswas meets an acquaint-
tance attempting to sell what he represents 
as his own longtime residence. The house 
in Sikkim Street seems the answer to 
Biswas’s prayers—yet like everything 
about his life in Trinidad, his dream home, 
the first accommodation obtained without 
the assistance of his in-laws, turns out to 
be less than satisfactory. Once again Biswas 
sends an easy mark—yet in his faith, his 
inner strength, and his determination, and 
despite all that the world throws against 
him, he remains a noble individual, all the 
more so, in fact, because of his ambition 
to rise to a level of civilization beyond his 
immediate means.

Quite miraculously, this absurdly con-
structed house, on which Biswas has been 
deceived by an unscrupulous speculator, 
is gradually transformed into a true and 
happy home for his long-suffering family. 
As they complete the expensive improve-
ments that are necessary, the structure 
takes on the character of a beloved refuge. 
In describing the actual house into which 
the Naipaul family moved on December 
31, 1946, Patrick French emphasizes how 
the possession of their own home, no mat-
ter how modest, transformed the family’s 
morale: “At once, the dynamic between 
the parents and the children shifted: they 
became a unit, a nuclear family, a father, 
mother, brothers and sisters.” In this 
same way, Naipaul’s semiallegorical narra-
tive suggests, civilization is the hard-won 
product of aspiration and sacrifice, paid 
for by improvement—or, at least, amelio-
ration—of our fundamental nature and 
development beyond our primitive cul-
tural past. In their permanent home, the 
product of their sacrifice and initiative, 
Biswas’s family flourishes: “Soon it seemed 
to the children that they had never lived 
anywhere but in the tall square house in 
Sikkim Street. From now their lives would 
be ordered, their memories coherent.” 
However much it is disparaged by the
intellectual class, this ambition—order and coherence, stability and the possibility of a better life—is, and has always been, the goal of life for most human beings.

The climax of the novel takes place with the acquisition of the house on Sikkim Street and, more important, the family’s acknowledgement of this as their true and permanent home. By contrast, the novel’s final section consists merely of a brief denouement. When Anand leaves for England on a university scholarship, he understands he may never see his father again. Biswas has been increasingly troubled by heart disease, and, indeed, within five years he dies. But though he dies, his house, with all its defects, its questionable foundation, appalling construction, and ludicrous design, continues intact and, in the end, serves as the proper setting for the funeral attended by his extended family. Afterward, Shama, Savi, and the other children return to the house that itself now seems to mourn that “invisible” human being responsible for its creation.

In his great novel, V. S. Naipaul reminds us of the necessity of discerning and securing our true home, especially in an era in which there exists so much confusion concerning the virtues of order and continuity suggested by that image. What Naipaul wrote fifty years ago is nothing less than a narrative dramatization of the necessity of Western ideals of liberty, personal accountability, and respect for individual life. Biswas’s quixotic pursuit of his dream—the dream, quite simply, to live freely and decently as a human being should be allowed to live—causes him to tilt at one windmill after another, but in the end he triumphs beyond his expectations. He not only secures a comfortable home for his family; he also comes to understand the full meaning of “home” in terms of an inherited and operative culture of sustaining values. Such a belief rests upon a larger faith in an overriding system of purpose and order, as well as faith in the role of one’s own civilization within this larger frame of telos. Yet the lessons of A House for Mr. Biswas are not in any sense peculiar to the novel’s protagonist or to his family or transplanted ethnic community: the quest for a settled, purposeful, civilized existence is the shared birthright of human beings everywhere. Like Mohun Biswas, all of us have experienced the pain of dispossession in one sense or another, and all of us must struggle to discover our true home. Yet in an age that appears to value frenetic change above all else, the security that Naipaul’s splendid protagonist seeks can be found. It is there in the prudence, fortitude, and faith that his beloved hero so greatly epitomizes.
11 *Biswas*, 270.
15 Updike, 158.
16 *Biswas*, 76.
17 *Biswas*, 460.
18 *Biswas*, 464.
19 French, 58.
20 *Biswas*, 356.