

BETWEEN FATHER and SON Family Letters

BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

Family Letters

V. S. NAIPAUL

EDITED BY GILLON AITKEN



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Acclaim for V. S. Naipaul's

BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

"By illuminating a heritage more emotionally profound than we suspected, these wonderful letters complicate and intensify our understanding of the sensibility behind Naipaul's novels and behind the armor of Seepersad Naipaul's brilliant son."

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"It is hard to think of a literary correspondence full of such rawness of emotion. . . . It is even harder to think of correspondents who have made such a large claim on each other's humanity."

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"The arrangement of material is so skillful, and the narrative drive so strong, that on occasion it is easy to imagine that one is reading an epistolary novel. . . . These letters will bring readers to a better understanding of one of the English-speaking world's most enigmatic and self-effacing writers."

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-Time Out New York



V. S. Naipaul

BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932. He went to England on a scholarship in 1950. After four years at Oxford he began to write, and since then he has followed no other profession. He is the author of more than twenty books of fiction and nonfiction and the recipient of numerous honors, including the Booker Prize in 1971 and a knighthood for services to literature in 1990. He lives in Wiltshire, England.

ALSO BY V. S. NAIPAUL

NONFICTION

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A Turn in the South

Finding the Center

Among the Believers

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The Overcrowded Barracoon

The Loss of El Dorado

An Area of Darkness

The Middle Passage

FICTION

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The Enigma of Arrival

A Bend in the River

Guerrillas

In a Free State

A Flag on the Island

The Mimic Men

Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion

A House for Mr. Biswas

Miguel Street*

The Suffrage of Elvira*

The Mystic Masseur*

^{*} Published in an omnibus edition entitled Three Novels

BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

INTRODUCTION

The task of introducing this extraordinary and moving correspondence is a delicate one. In these letters between a father and a son, the older man worn down by the cares of a large family and the distress of unfulfilled ambitions, the younger on the threshold of a broad and brilliant literary career, lies some of the raw material of one of the finest and most enduring novels of the twentieth century: V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas. Yet the letters also celebrate Seepersad Naipaul's achievement as a writer, not merely in the genesis and evolution of his single published novel, The Adventures of Gurudeva; but also, and perhaps more strikingly, in revealing the dedication of the true artist. For Seepersad Naipaul (Pa), the life of the mind—the writer's life-was everything: to record the ways of men and women, with a shrewd, comical and kindly eye, and to do that from within his own originality, was to live nobly. In his elder son, Vidia, he found a miraculous echo to this belief—miraculous, because there is no sense of a son's following in his father's footsteps, or of a father's urging that he might do so. There is a sense, rather, of the two men's being in step, neither embarrassed by any of the implications of the generation that divided them-and Vidia only seventeen when the present correspondence opens. The difference in their ages, and the fact of Seepersad's early death, have allowed Vidia to acknowledge the debt he owes to his father, and he has embraced the opportunity to do so in manifold ways in his work. In this correspondence, the reader will recognize the subtle, and unwitting, repayment of a father's debt to his son. Pa's deep concern for Vidia is a generous and never-failing tribute to the fine intelligence, and the responsive and sensitive spirit, of the younger man.

The heart of the correspondence covers little more than three years, broadly defined by Vidia's departure from Trinidad, for the first time, in 1950, to take up a Trinidad government scholarship at University College, Oxford, and by Seepersad's untimely death in 1953 and, subsequently, Vidia's going down from the university. By way of a postscript, the book concludes with a selection of letters which reflect his progress in the world during the three years which followed, culminating in the acceptance of his early fiction by a British publisher.

Momentous years . . . The government scholarships were few and far between. Representing a means of escape from the limitations of a narrow and backward island society, they were enormously prized and ardently competed for. 'Looking back,' Vidia wrote in December 1950, after his first term at Oxford, 'I realise the gigantic task I performed.' No less gigantic would have been the journey from an extended family upbringing in Trinidad to post-war England (the mother country), and an Oxford, home to the Morris Motor Works, drawing its undergraduates principally from the English public schools.

In Finding the Centre (1984)—readers of the present volume will note Seepersad's frequent injunction to his son to 'keep your centre'—in the essay entitled 'Prologue to an Autobiography', Vidia writes of his father and of the family's circumstances:

He was a journalist for much of his working life. This was an unusual occupation for a Trinidad Indian of his generation. My father was born in 1906. At that time the Indians of Trinidad were a separate community, mainly rural and Hindi-speaking, attached to the sugar estates of central and southern Trinidad. Many of the Indians of 1906 had been born in India and had come out to Trinidad as indentured labourers on five-year contracts.

In 1929 my father began contributing occasional articles on Indian topics to the *Trinidad Guardian*. In 1932, when I was born, he had become the *Guardian* staff correspondent in the little market town of Chaguanas. Chaguanas was in the heart of the sugar area and the Indian area of Trinidad. It was where my mother's family was established. Contract labour was far behind them; they were big landowners.

Two years or so after I was born my father left the Guardian.

For some years he did odd jobs here and there, now attached to my mother's family, now going back to the protection of an uncle by marriage, a rich man, founder and part owner of the biggest bus company in the island. Poor himself, with close relations who were still agricultural labourers, my father dangled all his life in a half-dependence and half-esteem between these two powerful families.

In 1938 my father was taken on by the *Guardian* again, this time as a city reporter. And we—my father, my mother and their five children, our own little nucleus within my mother's extended family—moved to Port of Spain, to the house owned by my mother's mother. That was when I got to know my father.

In 1945, a sixth child, Shiva, Vidia's only brother, was born; and, in 1952, news reached Vidia in Oxford, initially in a letter, here reproduced, from his older sister, Kamla, of the impending birth of a seventh, Nalini, fifth daughter of the family. Vidia's mother, Droapatie Capildeo (Ma), was a seventh child, too—and in her case, the seventh of nine daughters. The voluminous Capildeo tribe—and notably Ma's two younger brothers Simbhoo (Capo S.) and Rudranath (Capo R.)—plays a vivid supporting role, often abrasively so, in the contents of the airmail letters that travelled from Port of Spain to Oxford. But the principal parts properly belong within the immediate family—in a personal sense, by Pa's preoccupation with the writing life; in a family sense, by Pa's deep feelings for the well-being of his absent older children, Kamla (in Benares) and Vidia at Oxford—and for the progress and development of his and Ma's variously adolescent daughters, Sati, Mira and Savi.

Kamla occupies a special position in this book. Two years older than Vidia, she was the first to leave home, becoming a student at Benares Hindu University, where life did not always run smoothly for her, and returning to the family, brought low by Pa's heart attack, in 1953. Brother and sister were particularly close. In the letters between them, which are well represented in this book, each invariably rebukes the other for not writing sooner, and Pa rebukes them both in the same manner. While the evenness of the relationship, certainly in their correspondence, between Pa and Vidia has been remarked upon, there is an enlightening carelessness in the absence of reserve between Vidia and his sister.

In terms of Vidia's letters, this is not an 'Oxford' book. While the life

of the university is revealed, and Vidia's part in it, Oxford is of little moment to him. He works hard, suffers ill health and anxiety, poverty and depression; he makes friends and experiences happiness and a growing, if nervous, self-confidence. Two things really matter: the family, Pa and Kamla particularly, but Ma (with all her Capildeo relations) and his sisters, too—and the growing Shiva. And, of course, the ever-absorbing intention to be a good writer . . .

When Vidia left Trinidad for Oxford, Shiva was five. The brothers were not to meet until six years later. In his essay 'Brothers' in the posthumously published *An Unfinished Journey* (1986), Shiva remembers Vidia's letters home and the visit he made to Trinidad:

Sometimes, the postman arrived with blue air-mail letters, the cause of much excitement in our household. Occasionally, I would listen with a kind of dazed astonishment to this notional being—my brother—reading a short story on the radio. When I was about eleven, this mysterious figure suddenly arrived among us. Why he should thus manifest himself, I had no idea. Still, it was an interlude of wonder; of intense excitement for me. I would go and stand in the doorway of his bedroom and gaze curiously upon him as he lay on the bed, smoking cigarettes out of a green tin. The tableau revived my father's fading image. He too, in the warm, quiet afternoons, would lie on that same bed, reading and smoking cigarettes.

This redolent image catches much of the spirit of this fine book, so expressively filled as it is with heart and drama; and it is a moving experience, when reading the letters, to watch the shifting balance, so delicately evolved, of a relationship between a good man and his good son; and of the natural yielding of the one to the other.

In preparing this book for publication, I have adopted a policy of non-intrusion, permitting the sequence of letters to tell its own story. Square brackets—[. . .]—rarely required, indicate a defeated comprehension of the holographic or typewritten word(s). I have, again rarely, revised punctuation to assist meaning; some small, but never significant, excisions have been made for the same reason, or to avoid the arrant duplication of news.

Close family members are noted on their first appearance, but not

INTRODUCTION

thereafter; reference to the family trees will illuminate an understanding of relationships. Casual references to acquaintances and places are not clarified. The footnotes seek to define some aspects of Hindu ritual and practice, and focus to a degree on the names of books and authors—although not if these are 'canonical' or adequately described in the text of the letters themselves.

Particular thanks are due to The McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the repository of the Naipaul archive from which this correspondence has been drawn, and to Mr William Buford of *The New Yorker*, whose initiative and energy were critical to the process of unearthing it; and to Emma Parry for her shrewd assistance in the editorial undertaking. Above all, I am grateful to Kamla for permitting her letters to Vidia to be reproduced; and to Vidia himself, for his understandably disengaged approval of the project. It entertains me to reflect that this is a book he will never read.

Gillon Aitken
July, 1999

FAMILY TREES (Selective)

Seepersad Naipaul—V. S. Naipaul's father (1906–1953)

Persad (or Ramparsad-and

His elder brother

fictionalized as 'Rapooche')

Hari

His younger brother His father's sister

Phoowa Sookhdeo

A rich relation by marriage, the husband

of Seepersad's mother's sister

Droapatie Capildeo-V. S. Naipaul's mother (1913-1991)

The seventh of nine daughters, and the seventh of eleven children, notably:

- 1. Rajdaye
- Ramdoolarie, divorced wife of Dinanath (the source for Seepersad's 'Gurudeva' in The Adventures of Gurudeva)
- 3. Dhan, the mother of Owad (later a lawyer)
- 4. Koonta, the mother of Boysie (later a doctor)
- 5. Ahilla, the mother of Deo and Phoolo
- 6. Calawattee, wife of Ramnarace
- 7. Droapatie
- 8. Simbhoo (Capo S.), elder brother, father of Deven, Suren and Sita (lawyer and politician; in England in 1950/51)
- 9. Tara, eighth daughter
- Rudranath (Capo R.), younger brother (went to England on a scholarship in 1939, became Lecturer in Mathematics at London University)
- 11. Binmatie, ninth daughter

Seepersad Naipaul = Droapatie Capildeo

				101		
KAMLA	VIDIA	SATI	MIRA	SAVI	SHIVA	NALINI
(1930-)	(1932-)	(1934-1984)	(1936-)	(1938-)	(1945-1985)	(1952-)

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