

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

120

Volume 120

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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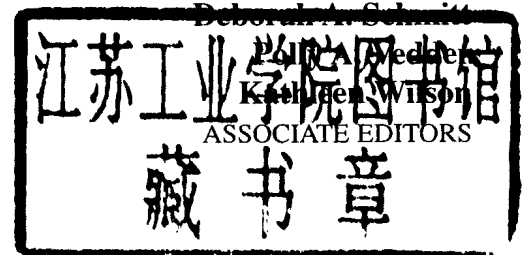
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-46132
ISBN 0-7876-3195-7
ISSN 0091-3421

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on Contemporary Literature

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Format of the Book

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Features

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the author’s name in the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- A **Portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author's full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. To provide users with easier access to information, the biographical and critical essay included in each author entry is divided into four categories: "Introduction," "Biographical Information," "Major Works," and "Critical Reception." The introductions to single-work entries—entries that focus on well known and frequently studied books, short stories, and poems—are similarly organized to quickly provide readers with information on the plot and major characters of the work being discussed, its major themes, and its critical reception. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.
- A list of **Principal Works** notes the most important writings by the author. When foreign-language works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets.
- The **Criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The critical and biographical materials are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- Critical essays are prefaced by **Explanatory Notes** as an additional aid to readers. These notes may provide several types of valuable information, including: the reputation of the critic, the importance of the work of criticism, the commentator's approach to the author's work, the purpose of the criticism, and changes in critical trends regarding the author.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book precedes each critical piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- A concise **Further Reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. Each citation in this section is accompanied by a descriptive annotation describing the content of that article. Materials included in this section are grouped under various headings (e.g., Biography, Bibliography, Criticism, and Interviews) to aid users in their search for additional information. Cross-references to other useful sources published by The Gale Group in which the author has appeared are also included: *Authors in the News*, *Black Writers*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *DIScovering Authors*, *Drama Criticism*, *Hispanic Literature Criticism*, *Hispanic Writers*, *Native North American Literature*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Something about the Author*, *Short Story Criticism*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*.

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- Each new volume of *CLC* includes a **Cumulative Topic Index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *CLC*, *NCLC*, *TCLC*, and *LC 1400-1800*.
- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in the various literary criticism series published by The Gale Group, with cross-references to Gale's biographical and autobiographical series. A full listing of the series referenced there appears on the first page of the indexes of this volume. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death dates cause them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer often associated with him, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which the authors appear.
- An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the titles of long poems are printed in italics.
- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paper-bound Edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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¹Alfred Cismaru, "Making the Best of It," *The New Republic*, 207, No. 24, (December 7, 1992), 30, 32; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 73-4.

²Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 223-26.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors hope that readers will find *CLC* a useful reference tool and welcome comments about the work. Send comments and suggestions to: Editors, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, The Gale Group, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48333-3535.

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Neil Bissoondath

1955-

(Full name Neil Devindra Bissoondath) Trinidadian-born Canadian novelist, short story and nonfiction writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Bissoondath's career through 1996.

INTRODUCTION

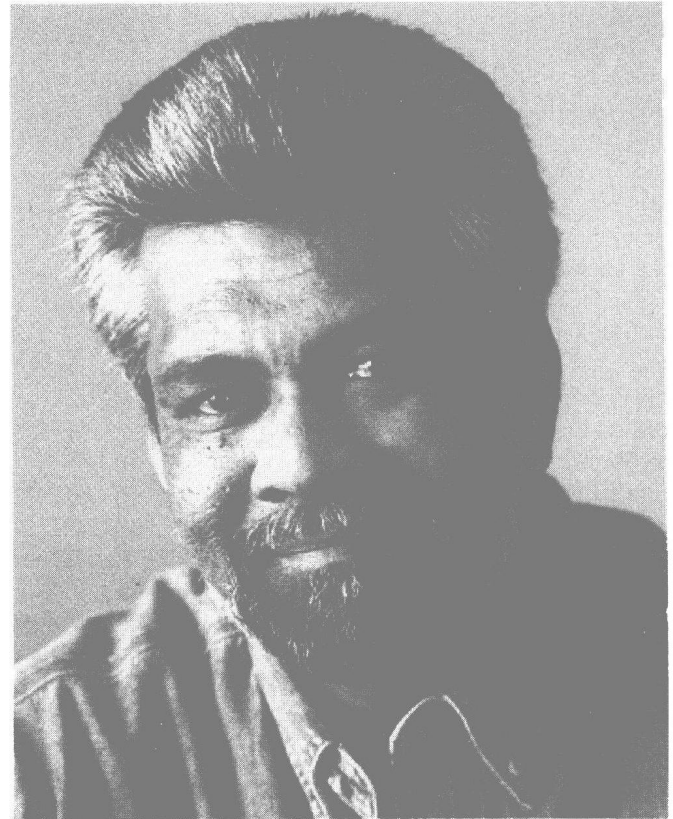
Neil Bissoondath's writing typically focuses on the lives of characters displaced by political violence. In addition to immigrants and refugees, Bissoondath also explores the lives of those marginalized within their own societies, people alienated by their own culture. As Jim Shephard writes, "That spectrum of human response, from the selfless to the despairing, is what Neil Bissoondath writes about. In doing so, he speaks for the silenced voices that continue to fill the margins of our societies, the voices of those so overworked and under rewarded that the term 'disadvantaged' is inadequate to describe them."

Biographical Information

Born in 1955 in Arima, Trinidad, Bissoondath comes from a literary family: his uncles are V. S. Naipaul and the late Shiva Naipaul. His family lived in the town of Sangre Grande, where his father worked at the family store, until Bissoondath reached the age of fourteen. At that time his father built a house in Port of Spain, to be closer to the high school Bissoondath would attend, St. Mary's College. Although Bissoondath was from a Hindu tradition, he was able to adapt to a Catholic high school. Bissoondath describes himself as not very religious and distrustful of dogma. In the early Seventies, political upheaval and economic collapse had created a climate of chaos and violence in the island nation. In a situation similar to Germany in the Thirties, wherein Jews became a convenient scapegoat for the disintegrating economy, the East Indian merchant class became the target of persecution in Trinidad. In 1973, at the age of eighteen, Bissoondath left Trinidad. He settled in Canada, where he studied at York University, receiving a B. A. in French in 1977. Bissoondath taught English and French at the Inlingua School of Languages and the Toronto Language Workshop. He won the McClelland and Stewart award and the National Magazine award, both in 1986, for the short story "Dancing."

Major Works

Bissoondath's first book was the short story collection, *Dig-*



ging Up the Mountains (1985). The title story is set on a Caribbean island which recently gained its independence and is in the throes of political and social upheaval. The story's protagonist, Harry Beharry, wants only to work in his garden and die in his own home. But the escalating violence forces him to flee. "Dancing," told in an autobiographical style, is the story of a Caribbean maid who voyages to Canada with the hopes of bettering herself. Through her a bewilderingly different world is revealed, with skyscrapers, automatic doors, and a coldness of climate and spirit. In "An Arrangement of Shadows," a white schoolteacher from England finds herself, after many years in the Caribbean, suddenly made an outcast by political changes. No longer comfortable but unable to leave, she finds herself stereotyped by others with many traits she despises. Bissoondath's first novel, *A Casual Brutality* (1988), is again set in a troubled Caribbean nation. Casaquemada, the island nation in the book, is a mixture of the politics and history of Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Grenada. Dr. Raj Ramsingh studied and married in Canada. But friends convince him that the intelligentsia owe something to their homeland, and although he knows the political situation is volatile, he returns to

Casaquemada. Growing violence claims the lives of his wife and son, and he returns to Canada. Bissoondath's next book is another collection of short stories, *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* (1990). In the title story, a group of refugees from various parts of the world wait together in a boarding house for decisions on their requests for political asylum in Canada. "Security" is a sequel to the story "Uncertainty" from Bissoondath's first collection. The principal character of both stories, Mr. Ramgoolam, has become alienated from his family. His wife now works outside the home, and his sons have become accustomed to the Canadian culture, even eating pork and beef. Seeking a sense of belonging, Mr. Ramgoolam retreats into his religion. But the more he immerses himself in his religious practices and listens to the Hindu radio programs (which he does not understand), the more alienated he becomes. In "Goodnight, Mr. Slade," the caretaker of an apartment building is being evicted and placed in a nursing home. The experience reminds him of his previous displacement, when he was sent to Nazi concentration camps. Instead of once again surrendering his life to the will of others, he commits suicide. The culture conflict of the immigrant is also the subject of Bissoondath's novel, *The Innocence of Age* (1994). The middle-aged Pasco, still grieving over the death of his wife, longs nostalgically for the past. But his son Danny rejects the past, seeing life only in terms of money and power. Danny works for a greedy slumlord whom Pasco despises. Their conflict is brought to a head when Danny begins to renovate Pasco's home, thinking more in terms of future profit than Pasco's comfort. In his nonfiction book, *Selling Illusions* (1994), Bissoondath argues that governmental promotion of a Multiculturalism policy actually harms those it hopes to protect. He suggests that government intervention focuses on superficial differences, at the expense of the more profound similarities people share. Bissoondath makes the case that cultural heritage is best protected by individual efforts.

Critical Reception

Early criticism of Bissoondath's work often compared his work to the writings of his uncles V. S. Naipaul and the late Shiva Naipaul. Most agreed that he shared their sense of linguistic style and attention to detail. Several critics felt Bissoondath's precise attention to surface details was subverted by an emotional detachment to his characters' inner lives. David Evans referred to this in his criticism of *A Casual Brutality*, saying that the narrative style is "replacing emotion with a near-photographic rendering of surface detail." Several critics laud Bissoondath's use of contrasting past and present to illuminate a character's inner conflict. As Merna Summers stated, "Present and past repeatedly illuminate each other in Bissoondath's stories, and the meaning often comes out of the tension between them." Although Bissoondath's stories often focus on the themes of the marginalized and dispossessed, he is frequently praised for

the broad range of protagonists. Not surprisingly, the controversial thesis of *Selling Illusions* generated criticism that examined the policy of Multiculturalism more than treating Bissoondath's ideas. However, many critics appreciated Bissoondath's courage for taking on a politically-charged, complex issue.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Digging Up the Mountains (short stories) 1985
A Casual Brutality (novel) 1988
On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows (short stories) 1990
The Innocence of Age (novel) 1992
Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada (nonfiction) 1994

CRITICISM

Douglas Glover (review date May 1985)

SOURCE: "Continental Drifters," in *Books in Canada*, Vol. 14, No. 4, May, 1985, p. 14.

[In the review below, Glover praises *Digging Up the Mountains* and comments on several of the stories.]

In his first story collection, *Digging Up the Mountains*, Neil Bissoondath reveals an impressive gift for writing prose that is precise and vivid, full of striking turns of phrase and exciting, many-fingered images.

Take, for example, the opening of his story "An Arrangement Of Shadows":

The clock struck once and it was eight o'clock.

Two pigeons, symmetrical slices of black on the blue sky, swooped and touched down abruptly on the red roof of the clock tower. The hands of the clock—broadwords of a brass long tarnished—were locked as always at four seventeen.

"All fine prose," in the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, "is based on the verbs carrying the sentences." These lines of Bissoondath's are so alive that you race through them, scarcely noticing their technical virtuosity, yet they have colored the whole story—the striking, slicing, swooping, tarnishing, and locking is going on before your eyes.

Born in Trinidad in 1955, Bissoondath came to Canada 12 years ago as a university student. While his style bespeaks

a sound British colonial school education, his stories reflect what one assumes is a personal sense of uprootedness and betrayal at the economic decline and social and ideological turmoil of post-independence Trinidad.

In **"There Are a Lot of Ways to Die"** Joseph Heaven, a successful immigrant with a rug installation business in Toronto, returns to Port of Spain expecting "a kind of fame, a continual welcome, the prodigal son having made good, having acquired skills, returning home to share the wealth." Instead, he finds that the shantytown workers don't want regular employment, that the new politics have endowed a class of insufferable nouveau bureaucrats, that old friends have died or lapsed into despair, that even the humid, rainy climate gives the lie to his memories of an idyllic island paradise.

"Might it not," thinks Joseph, referring to the story's central image, a dilapidated mansion symbolic of Trinidad itself, "have been always a big, open, empty house, with rooms destined to no purpose, with a façade that promised mystery but an interior that took away all hope." Finally, he decides to return to Canada, fearing that, in his absence, his memories of Toronto's civility may have turned into lies as well.

Joseph Heaven is the quintessential Bissoondath protagonist, with a foot in two continents, two worlds, each shifting subtly away from him as time passes, as memory becomes hallucination. In lesser souls, this alienation can cause bitterness, a theme that Bissoondath explores in several stories: **"The Revolutionary"** with its shambling, scarecrow ideologue; **"A Short Visit to a Failed Artist,"** a savage caricature of a woman-hating ("Women are shit") self-styled artist (who photocopies his face) living in a crowded, subsidized Toronto apartment; and **"Dancing,"** which ends in an explosion of anti-white, anti-Canadian racism.

Fearlessly, Bissoondath moves off his own turf, trying his themes on other nationalities—Japanese, Russian, Anglo-Canadian—but with less success than in his Trinidad stories. In **"Continental Drift"** a young Canadian hitch-hiking in Europe meets two Spanish migrant laborers in a hostel and feels "life suddenly electrified." Although the author's craftsmanship is evident, it seems wasted here on a trivial cliché about "real" experience and the noble working man. (This tepid effort is balanced by a couple of striking Central American atrocity stories **"In The Kingdom Of The Golden Dust"** and **"Counting The Wind"** which, though thematically unrelated, are among the best in the book.)

Sometimes, too, a certain stridency or one-sidedness invades Bissoondath's prevailing tone of bewildered fatalism. This is especially evident when he lapses into the old authorial lie of the uninvolved narrator. In **"Christmas Lunch"** the

"I" narrator watches an immigrant man basely torment an unwitting white woman from Newfoundland. The "I" doesn't protest, doesn't attempt to intervene; he flees as soon as politeness permits.

The strength of this fiction (and others like it) trades on the narrator's supposed detachment, his objectivity. Appalled by the cruelty, yet secure in his superior courtesy (smug, bourgeois) and narrative neutrality, he makes a subtly insidious pact with the reader that, yes, man, these are awful degenerate people, not like us. Yet this easy verdict betrays a moral ambiguity, a failure on the part of the "I" to engage his own demons. Silence is complicity.

These reservations aside, however, the publication of ***Digging Up the Mountains*** ushers in a ripe, new talent, a welcome addition to the CanLit émigré pantheon. Bissoondath combines deft prose, major themes, exotic peoples and locales to create a work of surpassing emotional impact.

John Sutherland (review date 19 June 1986)

SOURCE: "Fuentes the Memorious," in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 11, June 19, 1986, pp. 19-20.

[In the following excerpt, Sutherland lauds Bissoondath's writing but criticizes the "radical anger" that infuses several of his stories.]

Neil Bissoondath's ***Digging Up the Mountains*** is a first book and a collection of short stories. The separate pieces are linked by an embittered sense of expatriation. Bissoondath himself was born in colonial Trinidad in 1955 and emigrated to Canada in 1973 after Independence. The title story records the government campaign against the Indian middle class which sanctioned murder, Bissoondath alleges, and eventually drove people like him into exile. The ruling West Indian blacks are generally portrayed by Bissoondath as arrogant and brutal. At home they are grossly incompetent and violent. Abroad they are vulgar and absurd. **"Dancing"** is the autobiographical account of a former fifty-dollar-a-month black maid, Sheila. She comes to Toronto, where she is picked up by a sponsoring relative who takes her to a blues party. A white neighbor complains at the din, and the West Indians insult and threaten him with the "Untarryo Human Right Commission." The "racialists," they explain, "owe us. And we going to collect." Another more spiteful story portrays a black "revolutionary" studying in Canada who cannot read the name "Lenin" or spell "proletariat." More effective is the gentler piece **"Insecurity,"** the comic portrait of an Indian merchant vacillating about whether to buy a house in distant Canada. When Bissoondath

comes to terms with his racial anger he will be a writer worth watching.

Hanif Kureishi (review date 17 August 1986)

SOURCE: "Alistair Ramgoolam Does Well to be Uneasy," in *New York Times Book Review*, August 17, 1986, Sec. 7, p. 10.

[Below, Kureishi favorably assesses the collection *Digging up the Mountain*, describing his favorite stories in the book.]

The superb short stories in Neil Bissoondath's first collection are alive with movement and flight, leaving and returning, insecurity and impermanence. Peopled by exiles and immigrants, deracines and runaways—perhaps the true representatives of the mobile 20th century—these are tales of two worlds, usually the Caribbean and Canada—and of those who are stretched between the two.

Like his uncles, V. S. Naipaul and the late Shiva Naipaul, he has much to tell us about areas that have not been written about before. His stories recall theirs in subject matter, though he promises to have more range than V. S. Naipaul, and he can write plausible women characters.

The title story, "**Digging Up the Mountains**," is set on a recently independent Caribbean island during a state of emergency. Hari Beharry is a successful businessman who wants nothing more than to tend his garden and die in his own house. But the island's former simplicity "had been replaced by the cynical politics of corruption that plagued all the urchin nations scrambling in the larger world." Friends are inexplicably taken away; others are shot; there are anonymous phone calls and letters. Finally there is more violence, followed by flight.

In another story, "**Insecurity**," Alistair Ramgoolam, a similar self-made businessman, the sort who had attended the farewell ball for the last British Governor, is trying to escape by buying a house in Toronto through his son. On this island there are policemen with guns and "students parading Marx and Castro." The walls of his store have been daubed with slogans: "Socialism" and "Black Communism." "His life at the fringe of events, he felt, had given him a certain authority over and comprehension of the past. But the present, with its confusion and corruption, eluded him. The sense of drift nurtured unease." Here the pattern is like that of the title story: decent people who have worked hard are threatened by the smoldering volcano of colonial resentment and disorder. Once more the wrong people will be in charge: independence will have failed and one tyranny, usually the

British variety, will be replaced by the Caribbean kind of autocracy.

What is missing in both stories is also the same: an attempt to explain and understand the revolutionaries and what their grievances and politics are, and to say how their bitter resentments came to be forged.

The shorter piece called "**The Revolutionary**" does present us with Eugene Williamson, a militant student from Trinidad attending a university someplace else. Williamson has a baby son called Tarot, admires Che and Fidel and speaks of "the glorious, liberating path" of what he calls "socialist-proletarian" revolution. But Mr. Bissoondath's contempt for his character is too obvious and the caricature too grotesque for the story to succeed. This is partly because the shorter pieces in the book often drift; they are even more pointless than the lives of his characters. Mr. Bissoondath is a better writer when he is more expansive, when he can combine his marvelous gift for mood and detail with his ability to create character and drama.

These gifts coincide in the long story "**An Arrangement of Shadows**." Miss Victoria Jackson, a white teacher, leaves factory-gray England for the Caribbean only to find herself, years later, marooned on a stifling island where she cannot stay and which she cannot leave. Hemmed in by nationalist resentment, a rejected lover and provincial sexual hypocrisy, she suddenly finds herself an objective enemy of the island: an unwilling representative of everything she hates. She hears a dead colleague's voice say: "Our time is long gone. We are of a different age. We are not, none of us, wanted here. We are not required. We don't belong." Scrupulously selecting details of light, landscape and personality, Mr. Bissoondath builds his story relentlessly to a shattering climax.

In "**Dancing**" he once more tells us what it is like to be a harried stranger. An uneducated Caribbean woman, "just a ordinary fifty-dollar-a-month maid" in Trinidad, suffering from uppityness, joins her relatives in Canada. We get a terrifying, dizzy sense of what our own surroundings—automatic doors, high-rise apartment blocks, subways—are like to the uninitiated.

Mr. Bissoondath left Trinidad to study French at York University in Toronto and has taught both English and French. His scrupulousness and control mean much can be said quickly. Thus each of the longer stories seems full but not crowded, giving the sense of an embryo novel. And the novel will, I think, suit his talent.

In much recent North American writing the tone is insular, self-regarding, even self-obsessed. It is a relief then to run up against Neil Bissoondath's broad outlook and seriousness.

He has startling news from a changing world to tell us. At ease writing about France and Japan, as well as about the Caribbean and Canada, he has the fresh catholicity that is a welcome feature of third-world writing today.

It is also his ability to build the pressures of political context into the attempt of ordinary people to live reasonable lives that gives his work its power, its complexity and its contemporary relevance.

At the age of 10, Neil Bissoondath made a startling discovery—his uncle V. S. Naipaul was a writer. “I started reading when I was very young, but it hadn’t occurred to me before then that all those people I enjoyed reading were professional writers,” he said. “I saw V. S. as a kind of role model. I started writing stories and I realized that what I was doing could be a profession.”

Those first stories, written as he grew up in Trinidad, were “usually pretty bad.” But he didn’t feel intimidated by being a member of a literary family that also included V. S. Naipaul’s brother, Shiva, who died last year. “I don’t carry the name Naipaul and that’s a blessing,” he said in a telephone interview from his home in Toronto. “And I don’t view writing as a competition. Shiva’s writing was very different from V. S.’s and mine is different from theirs.” The short stories in *Digging Up the Mountains*, his first book, present a dark picture of life in the third world. Yet his own childhood in the West Indies was happy. “There wasn’t a sense of threat,” he said, “just a feeling that there was more to the world.”

His tales also tell of demons, real or imagined, facing strangers in strange lands. But he adapted easily when he moved to Toronto 13 years ago at the age of 18 to attend York University. “As soon as I arrived I felt at home,” he said, adding that V. S. Naipaul had warned him, “England was a place without a future” and the United States “was too big and would swallow me up.”

He is working now on a novel. “It’s nice to have so much space to explore. With a short story I’m always reining myself in.”

Bob Shacochis (review date 19 October 1986)

SOURCE: “Neil Bissoondath: Tales of the New World,” in *Washington Post Book World*, Vol. XVI, No. 16, October 19, 1986, p. 6.

[Shacochis is an American writer and the 1985 winner of the American Book Award. Below, he examines the thematic relations of the stories in *Digging Up the Mountains*.]

Bloodlines can function like a diplomatic passport for a writer making his or her debut, but they can just as easily be excess baggage, the constant unwanted weight of a destiny preordained for shortcomings. Neil Bissoondath, a Trinidad-born writer who emigrated to Toronto in 1973 at the age of 18, is the second-generation prince of an island-bred literary aristocracy, and thus is in the ostensible position of upholding a family’s reputation. As nephew of V. S. Naipaul and the late Shiva Naipaul, Bissoondath is *de facto* an object of our curiosity. We want to know if he has inherited the gift, and the courage to develop it into a talent worthy of his genes. The answer is yes; Bissoondath is as deserving of praise as his uncles. He shares their fearless regard for complexity, and their inability to fool around. His psychological and historical insights are similarly dark, and as accurate as a laser scalpel.

So much for genetic luggage. Perhaps it is ultimately trivial, akin to eye color or shoe size. And yet I hesitate to say that because these stories have too much authority to be thought of as coincidental or derivative, and I realize that as I attempt to isolate the unique strength’s of Bissoondath’s work, I am identifying family trademarks as well.

The first recognizable trait to impress itself upon the reader is an extraordinary range of mobility. *Digging Up the Mountains*, Bissoondath’s first publication, is a frustrating book to discuss in this respect. Its 14 stories seem to be the combined effort of a half-dozen authors, each writing from and about different parts of the planet. There are, of course, stories about life in contemporary Trinidad and the experiences of West Indian immigrants in Canada, powerfully compressed tales of distorted nationalism and cultural divorce. But Bissoondath assumes the freedom to kidnap any culture that intrigues him. Consequently, we have the first-person accounts of Mishi, a young Japanese woman suffocating in the thin male-dominated atmosphere of her ancestors, and Maria Luisa, a Central American teen-age girl about to be crowned Police Queen in the story “*In the Kingdom of Golden Dust*.” In a tone of stunned passivity that may momentarily burst into hysteria, Maria Luisa daydreams of her dead boyfriends as their murderer emcees the bleak pageant, hallucinating their bloody resurrection. In “*An Arrangement of Shadows*,” Bissoondath dredges the enigmatic depths of the misguided and doomed Victoria Jackson, an expatriate schoolteacher from North America who sexually colonizes her black students. “*Continental Drift*” chronicles the sad fellowship of European migrant workers in France, and in “*Counting the Wind*,” the collection’s end piece, a good-hearted graveyard keeper and his family become the unwilling hosts to daily executions during a conflict reminiscent of the Spanish Civil War.

Bissoondath sets loose enough diverse personalities and voices to turn any book into a self-contained Babylon, yet