Bigger-Than-Life Lives

THE WORLD IS WHAT IT IS: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF V.S. NAIPUL
by Patrick French, 576 pp., $30

It’s not news, exactly, but the literary world of the 20th century has been rife with antagonism. Hemingway brutalized Fitzgerald; Norman Mailer brutalized nearly everybody else. Still, from the stories told of V.S. Naipul, his venomous misogyny and distinctly unsympathetic views on postcolonial nations already established, only a madman would want to tangle with the Nobel-winning imminent of essayist, and provocateur. You’d have a better chance winning a wrestling match with a giant squid. However, British journalist and biographer Patrick French works some serious juju of his own in his new work—and biography of Naipul.

Born in 1932 in Trinidad as a member of colonial India’s diaspora (India gained independence in 1947), Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipul longed to escape the island nation early on. He soon won a prestigious scholarship to Oxford University in England, where he met his first wife, Patricia Hale, and struggled with bouts of self-doubt and depression. Another decade passed before Naipul’s most famous novel, A House for Mr. Biswas, brought him international acclaim. In 1971, Naipul was the first author of Indian descent to win the Booker Prize (for In a Free State). Because of his polyglot Indo-Trinidadian heritage, his controversial accounts of visits to India and Africa also made history.

French comes to this assignment well-prepared. A powerful writer in his own right, he has published a nonfiction account of the life and times of the Victorian explorer Sir Francis Younghusband and a pair of outstanding, perceptive books on Indian history and Tibet’s struggle for independence. Turning his attention to a living, contemporary subject may have been daunting, but French never shows his nerves. He is gracious, funny, and honest. In a remarkable coup, considering that Naipul himself contacted French to write this “authorized” biography, French highlights Naipul’s cruelty to his first wife and his 24-year, often brutal affair with Margaret Murray. French also offers an account of Naipul’s famously sour relationship with Paul Theroux.

“The best a biographer can hope for is to illuminate the aspects of a life and seek to give substance of the subject, not a story,” writes French. To be his credit, this sprawling, fascinating biography does that and more; no matter what Naipul might say. – Dan O’Keefe

Additional Reading: Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt
by H.W. Brands (Doubleday, 896 pp., $35);

Casanova: Actor Lover Priest Spy
by Ian Kelly (Tarcher, 416 pp., $28.95)

Comics

WATCHING THE WATCHMEN
by Dave Gibbons, Chip Kidd, and Mike Esol.
Titbit Books, 256 pp., $39.95

Being Rorschach is a drag. One day you’re a faceless, ex-superhero vigilante trapped in a preapocalyptic, post-superhero, alternate-reality America, and the next? Well, the next day you’re getting real-world master’s theses written about your subtextual, neo-noir deconstruction of the traditional, long-underwear-and-cowl-wearing superperuymes. Even the Dark Knight himself generates less fanatical devotion than Watchmen (not counting last week’s intriguing “Batman’s gonna die” rumors). Seriously ... why so serious? Partly because Watchmen remains one of the medium’s deepest reads, and we don’t mean deep like the crimson shadow coagulating around the Comedian’s corpse. Those flimsy, pulp-printed 12 issues made up the first (or second) thematically adult and morally complex graphic novel — ever! — when they were bound up trade-paperback style at the end of their run. We’re not busting your chops, peeewee, ‘cause we’ve got a Manhattan Project of our own going on when it comes to Silk Spectre, but let’s not forget how this manic-depressive, smiley-faced dystopia got Mylaired into your permanent collection in the first place. Better yet, let’s let Watchmen artist Gibbons remind us: “I have to say that for all that Watchmen has been seen to be a dark and gritty deconstruction of super heroes, it was actually an act of love by Alan [Moore] and me. We may have taken the genre places it hadn’t been before, but our intention was always honor- able.” Nowhere can that love be seen to better effect than in this, the sumptuous and splendid telling of how the greatest graphic novel in the world came to be. Not only did Gibbons and author Moore’s alienated anitheroes prove to be something of a genre Rosetta stone, pre-dating everything from Heroes to Hellboy, but they also read like they were written and inked last Monday. In a world gone mad, Watchmen holds its own. Gibbons, who admits to having long ago sold off nearly all of his original series artwork, spins an insanely informative and exhaustively detailed tale here, replete with all manner of nascent character detail drawings, photos of Moore’s handwritten script addenda, visual eye-line schematics, and very nearly everything else. All told, it’s just about as spectacular as the comic book itself. Ego ipse custodes custudio? Vos operor. — Marc Savlov

Additional Reading: Marvel Chronicle
by Tom DeFalco, Peter Sanderson, and Tom Brevoort (DK Adult, 352 pp., $50)

Humor

GET YOUR WAR ON: THE DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT OF THE WAR ON TERROR, 2001-2008
by David Rees
Soft Skull Press, 256 pp., $15.95 (paper)

With the reign of President George W. Bush coming to a not-a-minute-too-soon end and with the promise of a “new” day on the horizon with President-elect Barack Obama set to take the helm next month, things look slightly more rosy than they did in the final months of 2001. But not too rosy. The economy is in the shitter, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (and whatever the ultimate fallout they will bring is) are far from over. The world is a strange place, and we are a strange people. Case in point: In the days just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, poking fun at President Shrub or questioning the wisdom of his administration’s response to the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., were dan-
The question “Who watches the Watchmen?” frequently appears in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ graphic novel Watchmen, but the phrase is seen in its entirety only on the closing page of Issue 11. Moore stated in an interview that the title of the series related directly to this question, although at the time of the interview Moore did not know where the.  

“I would only agree that a symbolic clock is as nourishing to the intellect as photograph of oxygen to a drowning man. Dr. Manhattan.  

Watching the Watchmen is a book by Dave Gibbons, Chip Kidd and Mike Eschl. Published by Titan Books, it was released on October 21, 2008 with 256 pages. released for promotional purposes. Enjoy the ultimate companion to a comics masterpiece, as award-winning artist Dave Gibbons gives his own account of the genesis of WATCHMEN in this dust-jacketed hardback volume, opening his vast personal archives to reveal never-published pages, original character designs, page thumbnails, sketches and much more.