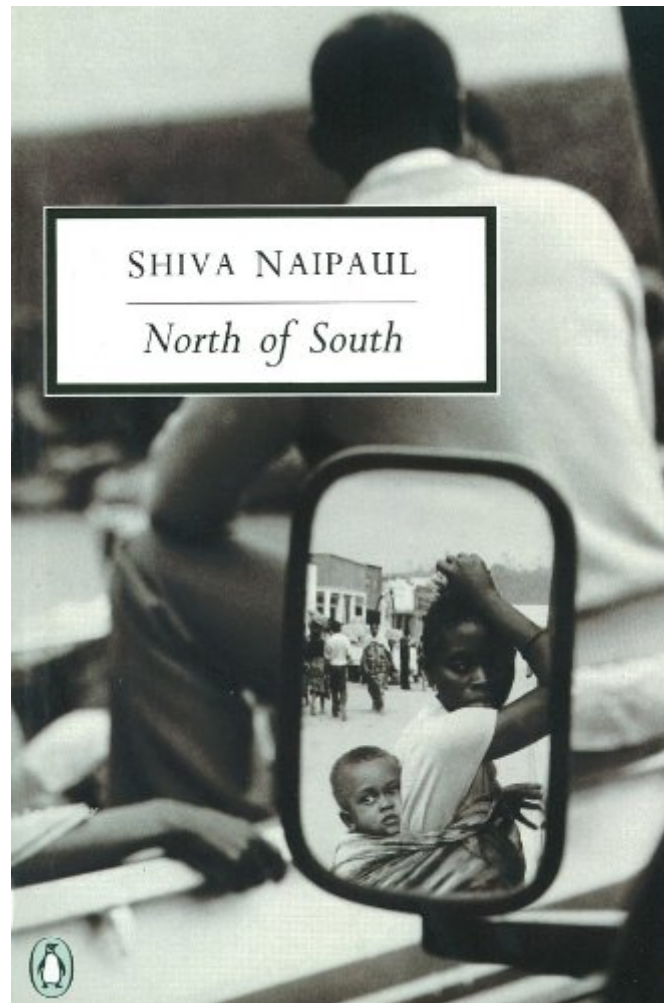


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North Of South: An African Journey (Penguin Modern Classics)



Synopsis

In the 1970s Shiva Naipaul travelled to Africa, visiting Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia for several months. Through his experiences, the places he visited and his various encounters, he aimed to discover what 'liberation', 'revolution' and 'socialism' meant to the ordinary people. His journey of discovery is brilliantly documented in this intimate, comic and controversial portrayal of a continent on the brink of change.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I reread North of South after reading it initially in the mid-1980s. It stands the test of time. I traveled extensively in Africa, especially East Africa in the early 1970s, and Naipaul was one of the first authors I had read who captured what was really going on in Kenya and Tanzania during that era (published in 1978, presumably his travels were around 1976-77). The book also covers Zambia which was terra incognita to me at the time. As an ethnic "Indian" he unwillingly has experiences that I did not have on a continent where people with his appearance were simultaneously needed and reviled by Bantus.

could not put it down

Having been brought up in Kenya, I found this a fascinating read. The author does not pull any punches and lays it out for the reader to judge.

... as in East Africa. The book is Shiva Naipaul's travel narrative, set in the late '70's, when he visited Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia for a couple of months. It was only 15 years or so since these countries gained independence from British rule. Zambia was once known as Northern Rhodesia; Tanzania was created by a mis-matched union, at least in terms of size, if not also culture, between Tanganyika (which had been a German colony until the end of WW I) and Zanzibar (a group of small islands off the coast); and Kenya, well, it had been known as Kenya, when it was a British colony, and underwent no transformation in name, or borders. With the independence of so many African colonies in the late '50's and early '60's, there were high hopes for the future; a better life for Africans once their colonial masters were shaken off. Naipaul's account was one of the first that indicated that those hopes might not be warranted. Shiva Naipaul, who died in 1985, was the younger brother of V.S. Naipaul, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. They were originally of Indian sub-continent origins, born and raised in Trinidad, in the Caribbean, when it was a British colony, and both went into the literary world of London. There is a considerable school of negative opinion about V.S. Naipaul's role in describing "third world countries

North of South describes Shiva Naipaul's journey through Eastern Africa as it emerged from colonialism several decades ago. Optimism and energy prevailed alongside a blind faith in imported philosophies which pundits failed to translate meaningfully to the impoverished, illiterate masses around them. Naipaul is a witty, bold writer with a gift for sharp imagery and an uncanny radar for subtle undercurrents in human interaction - the hypocrisy of the black elite, the jittery desperation of the settlers, the paranoid clannishness of the Asians. He also vividly portrays the deepening poverty and decaying infrastructure that underscored the failure of well-intentioned socialism in Tanzania. While some racists may use it to justify their beliefs, the book is more a compassionate, humorous look at pre-industrial populations trying to forge national identities from scratch. While today's poor countries may not have to follow the painstaking, centuries-long process that western countries did, this is still a reminder that there is no shortcut to institutional development. For Africans, this nostalgic book shows how far we have come, but is also a challenge to craft a fresh vision for the long distance still left to travel.

This is a wonderfully written book; Naipaul's prose flows effortlessly across the page, the connexion between thought and word is seamless. The comparatively small body of work Naipaul produced before his tragic early death has been neglected in favour of that of his less talented, but longer lived, brother (a Nobel Prizewinner). However in this one work, Naipaul's prosody surpasses anything produced either by his brother, or by other twentieth century travel writers like Thoreau. That said, some of the other reviews here are ludicrously jaundiced and do a disservice to the book itself. This is no crude work of 'anti-pc' nonsense (an American political term that the archly European Naipaul would have shuddered at). The prose is not illiberal (in the American sense of the term) but rather aristocratic, in the best tradition of Evelyn Waugh (the writer Naipaul most resembles). Like Waugh, Naipaul's caustic observations rip into the heart of human weakness and frailty, exposing the hypocrisy and cant from all sides. The pretensions of ghastly businessmen disgust him as much as the crudity of the black 'socialists'. Those who seek to defend either Marxism or any form of business enterprise system face Naipaul's perfectly expressed derision. I personally found Naipaul's lack of human feeling at the extent of Africa's poverty a little shocking but it is a rapturous pleasure to be so shocked.

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