

BOOKS

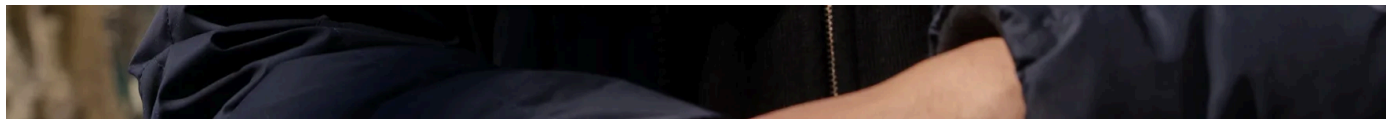
AMITAVA KUMAR AND THE NOVEL OF THE TRANSLATED MAN

In "My Beloved Life," a father is resurrected by his children, and an ordinary life transcends its station.


By James Wood

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Kumar's details have the vitality of invention and the resonance of the real; the novel's recounting of life is also its justification of its own existence as a form. Photograph by Patrick Driscoll for The New Yorker

 Save this story

For years I have been haunted by a sentence from V. S. Naipaul's great tragicomic novel "A House for Mr. Biswas" (1961): "In all, Mr Biswas lived for six years at The Chase, years so squashed by their own boredom and futility that they could be comprehended in one glance." A *sentence*, indeed: imagine handing down this summary verdict, and then imagine writing a novel whose every page rises up against the very summation. The verdict belongs to historical time: it tells us that Mr. Biswas's life, seen from above, is knowable only in its very unimportance, as an existence steadily disappearing into the careless comprehension of the cosmos. Historical time tells us that Mr. Biswas's life was not worth writing. Novelistic time is more forgiving. Naipaul's novel takes in Mohun Biswas's life episode by episode, telling it from inside his protagonist's comprehension, as a story of tremulous ambition and anxiety. How terrible it would have been, Mr. Biswas thinks, "to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated."

Naipaul had good reason to accommodate Mohun Biswas in his full necessity, because he was essentially writing the life of his own father, Seepersad Naipaul. Unlike his brilliant son, who left Trinidad for Oxford and did not live at home again, Seepersad never left his birthplace. A multigenerational novel of father and son might bend all the way from the rural poverty of Seepersad's origins in the Caribbean to the sparkling Stockholm hall in which Vidia Naipaul received the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 2001.

I thought often of “A House for Mr. Biswas” while reading Amitava Kumar’s new novel, “My Beloved Life” (Knopf). Kumar, who has written eloquently about his complicated indebtedness to the Indian Trinidadian writer, here tells the story of “an ordinary life”: one that, in its Biswasian quietness, might not seem to claim the loud space of a novel. Jadu Kunwar, Kumar writes of his gentle hero, “had passed unnoticed through much of his life.” His experiences “would not fill a book; they had been so light and inconsequential, like a brief ripple on a lake’s surface.” The realization that Kumar, like Naipaul, might also be writing a fictionalized version of his own late father’s life breaks like a slowly cresting wave over the sad and joyful ground of this story.

The Best Books of 2024

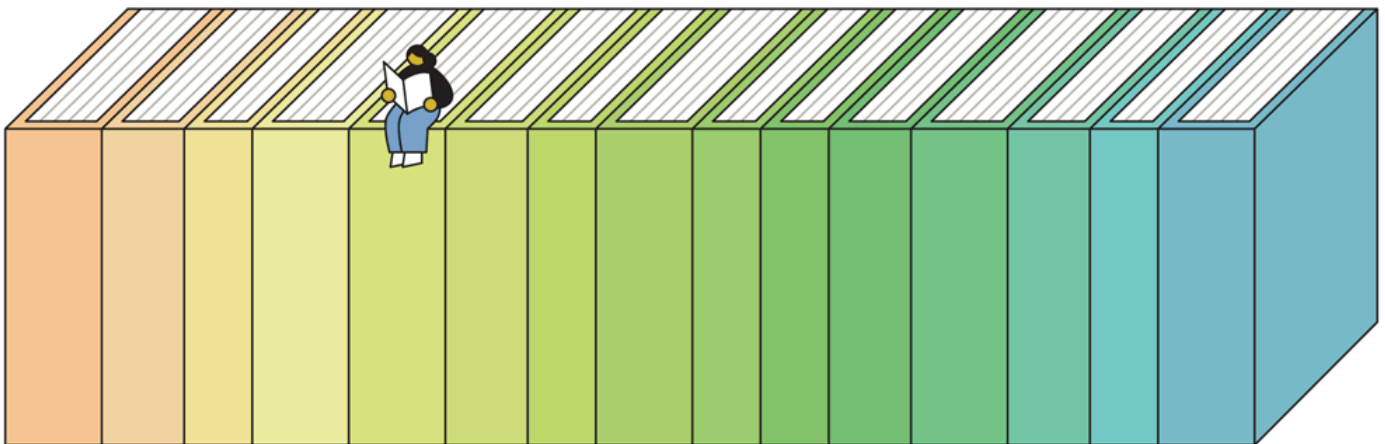


Illustration by Rose Wong

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“My Beloved Life” comprises two large sections and two smaller ones. The first tells the life of Jadunath Kunwar. Jadu, as he is known, is born in 1935 in a backwater of the state of Bihar, in eastern India, to illiterate farmers; moves to the nearby city of Patna for his education, and eventually becomes a lecturer in history at Patna College; marries a woman named Maya and has a daughter, Jugnu; and wins a Fulbright scholarship to study at Berkeley, in the late nineteen-eighties, before returning to India. He dies in 2020, in the first wave of the COVID pandemic. These, you might say, are the facts that can be comprehended in one glance, though the facts are precious and the life remarkable.

The novelist then tenderly sows the hundred and fifty or so pages with a trail of story and detail, and the remarkable life becomes also a beloved life, one compassionately appraised by the noticing novelist. And what noticing! Kumar—who himself grew up in Patna, came to America as a graduate student in the late nineteen-eighties, and now teaches at Vassar College—has never lacked for material. Patna, he tells us in “Bombay London New York” (2002), an early work of criticism and memoir, was a poor city. In the hospital where Kumar’s sister would eventually work as a doctor, stray dogs pull at patients’ bandages and flying ants settle in wounds: “Patna is a place where rats carried away my mother’s dentures.” When he moved, as a student, to Minnesota, Kumar had never seen an olive.

In the fiction that followed “Bombay London New York,” Kumar sometimes demonstrated an uneasiness with letting stories and details speak for themselves, tending to expand and expatiate on them via essay, cultural criticism, long footnotes, and literary allusion—varieties of autofictional expression that teasingly came together in “Immigrant, Montana” (2018). That book’s narrator, sharing Kumar’s trajectory from Bihar to America, and even the author’s initials (in the book, he sometimes goes by AK), writes this about his origins: “My father had grown up in a hut. I knew in my heart that I was closer to a family of peasants than I was to a couple of intellectuals sitting in a restaurant in New York.”

Moments like these pierce, from time to time, AK's comic narrative about American girlfriends, sex, new music, movies, President Obama, and reading Edward Said and Stuart Hall. Reading Kumar, one sometimes has a stronger sense of what he wanted to avoid than of what he was willing to embrace. Satya, the Kumar-like narrator of "A Time Outside This Time" (2021), appears to disdain what he calls the conventional, "eternal" bourgeois novel—which deals with "the human heart in conflict with itself et cetera."

It's not clear, by this rather narrow definition, whether "My Beloved Life" is exactly a bourgeois novel, since it is less about the human heart in conflict with itself than it is about the self in conflict (and sometimes in agreement) with society and history. Certainly, Kumar knows that his own biography, a novelized version of which appears in "My Beloved Life," concerns nothing less than the fabrication of a bourgeois self, however fragile or contradictory that achievement may occasionally feel to him. Above all, his new novel is always deeply human; the heart is everywhere in these pages. It is easily the best thing Amitava Kumar has written, largely because the novelist relaxes into the novelistic, and trusts the tale rather than the teller. Its astonishing details sit in the text like little coiled stories, pointedly revealed but not overpoweringly unpacked by the writer.

Cosmopolitans, Kumar wrote years ago, are not only those people who move between countries or continents but also those who move great distances, geographic or social, within their native countries. Such is Jadu. When he arrives at college in Patna, he has two shirts, one blue and one white. He spends his first night in the city sleeping on the riverbank. His greatest desire, Kumar writes, is to tell his fellow-students about the poverty of his origins. He might tell them, for instance, that he was born in the village of Khewali, where his father and grandfather were also born. That his parents are peasants. That his village school had only one teacher, who was absent whenever he was needed to help with the harvest, and that this teacher was also a wrestler, earning extra rupees from

matches in nearby villages. Often, after these fights, the teacher would “ask two of his strongest students to massage his limbs. When this happened, the other students were asked to loudly recite the multiplication tables.”

Not that all the students in Patna are wealthier or more privileged than Jadu. Ramdeo Manjhi, for instance, is a Dalit, a so-called untouchable. Ramdeo tells Jadu that his people “did the jobs that the upper-caste people didn’t do—dragging away the carcasses of dead animals, for instance.” Throughout the book, Kumar keeps his eye on questions of class and social stratification. Ramdeo grows up to be a corrupt local politician.

Kumar’s details have the vitality of invention and the resonance of the real, as if echoing with actual family history. When Jadu returns from college in Patna to his parents’ village, he brings gifts. He gives his father a heavy bronze lock, intended for a trunk of precious family papers. So proud is Jadu’s father that he goes about all day with this lock in his hand, “key attached,” ready to answer any questions about the gleaming new acquisition: “The brand name Harrison was etched in the metal. In reality, the lock company owed its name to an entrepreneur named Hari Monga.” Jadu’s father doesn’t know this. “English-make,” he tells any inquisitor. “See the name.”

Gentle comedy like this can turn to tears within a page or two. The scene with the lock is followed by a moving episode in which Jadu and his sister Lata, in order to improve her English, work together to translate a poem from Jadu’s college textbook into Hindi. It is Edward Thomas’s “Adlestrop,” a brief lyric published in 1917 which offers a glimpse of pastoral England. In late June, a train stops at a rural station in Gloucestershire. Mild English summer is everywhere. The train hisses, someone coughs, a blackbird sings. All around are willows, willow herb, and meadowsweet. Lata remarks that she has seen such stations in India, desolate rural platforms. But how to translate the word “Adlestrop,” or the names of these very English flora and fauna? Eventually, they have a poem, less a translation than a reinvention, in which a train stops at a station called Sugauli, to take on water. The

passengers want the train to stay there, because a mynah is singing in the branches of a mahua tree. When Jadu tells Lata that Edward Thomas died in the First World War, before the poem was published, her eyes glisten, but he doesn't want to ask what has moved her so much. "Instead, he congratulated his sister for her poem, and she, finding herself praised by her brother, the college student, spoke to him in English," Kumar writes. " 'Thank you,' she said, before rushing out of the room."

It is a touching and freighted moment. The English poem, not unlike the returning Jadu in relation to his less educated sister, is the bearer of cultural prestige. The translation into Hindi inevitably fails; instead, two fabulously different, almost rivalrous texts sit next to each other. I'm reminded of a moment in Amit Chaudhuri's novel "Odysseus Abroad" when the protagonist, an Indian student adapting to life in London, pauses to reflect on Shakespeare's line "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" The poem had been senseless at home: who would want to be compared to a summer's day in Bombay? Only now, in London, does the simile make sense, but the Indian student had to be himself translated in order to grasp it. In "Immigrant, Montana," Kumar's narrator reads a story by Ismat Chughtai in English, and cannot turn it back into its original Urdu. He feels sad and stranded, far from home in America: "I had become a translated man, no longer able to connect with my own past." But what is notable in the scene from "A Beloved Life" is that Kumar resists this kind of commentary. He does not spell out the source of Lata's tears, instead closing with her rushed departure from the room, her English "thank you" a pained and proper response to the perhaps rare excitement of being "praised by her brother." All the emotion finds its locus in that beautiful human phrase. It is a novelist's scene, an episode that would have been spoiled by a superadded term like "translated man."

From time to time, Jadu attempts to write the remarkable-unremarkable story of his life. A memoir is completed but is never published. He is too much the professional historian. The uncertainty of memoir disturbs him; he is drawn to

collective history over personal drama. His daughter says that he has a tendency to speak as if reciting text from a Wikipedia entry, that he's the sort of person who would rather write about the manufacture of jute than about his own child. When Jadu arrives at Berkeley, in 1988, he is lonely, and cuts a formal figure. When asked what he is researching in California, he stiffly replies, "I'm studying a chapter in history." So, as in "A House for Mr. Biswas," the question of how Jadu's private life is recounted, and by whom, will be humanly and politically important. And, as in "Biswas," the novel's recounting of the life is also the novel's continuous justification of its own existence as a form. This, Kumar signals, is what novels *do*. There is "the chapter in history" that comprises the biographical arc of Jadu's life. And then there are all the private undulations within that chapter in history. For the novelist can then comment, as he now does, using the novelist's privileged insight, "A chapter in history! The language of application forms. Clichés in the dull getup of office clerks. Jadu would have felt a greater sense of ease if he was expressing himself in Hindi. . . . At Berkeley, he now spoke only English; it felt as if he was doing something new or strange, like wearing a hat."

In fact, Jadu's life is told twice over in this novel—the first large section recounts it in the third person, and then the second large section recounts it in the first-person voice of Jadu's daughter, Jugnu, bringing us to the present day. Jugnu tells us, too, about her own ordinary yet also remarkable existence: she attended Patna Women's College, got her master's degree in journalism in Delhi, and has been living for more than twenty years in Atlanta, where she works for CNN. We discover that her mother, Maya, died young, at the age of fifty-two, and that her father's year in Berkeley is what inspired Jugnu to leave for America. She retells some of the episodes that the first section has already presented, with a daughter's simultaneously forgiving and judgmental eye. As a journalist, she speaks plainly and boldly: "I believe strongly that we are in touch with a great astonishing mystery when we put honest words down on paper to register a life and to offer witness." She tells us about an episode from not long after her father's return from Berkeley. Jugnu, then working at a Delhi newspaper, accompanies Jadu to a local

club, where he is to speak to a group of intellectuals about his Fulbright year. Instead of giving the audience what it wants (tales about peanut butter), Jadu speaks about caste inequalities, racial prejudice against Indians in the United States, episodes of anti-Indian violence by Americans, and so on. Jugnu wonders if others in the room see her father as she does. In his watchful anxiety, he simply cannot play the happy returning sightseer, the grateful Indian visitor: “He wasn’t a tourist or even a traveler at the airport; he was like a patient in the waiting room outside a doctor’s clinic,” someone who is nursing a sickness and knows that others are sick, too. “The poverty of his childhood defined him utterly,” she concludes.

At the club, Jadu told his audience, “I was born in a hut and my village still doesn’t have electricity.” The phrase “born in a hut,” or some version of it, appears often enough in the novel (at least five times) for the reader to register its talismanic importance. Recall those sentences from “Immigrant, Montana”: “My father had grown up in a hut. I knew in my heart that I was closer to a family of peasants than I was to a couple of intellectuals sitting in a restaurant in New York.” Kumar’s felt proximity to his own family origins in poverty has always given his work a tender, corrective power. Indeed, what is it like to be “a translated man”? What is it like when such translation plays on an axis of economic as well as geographic relocation? In Kumar’s work, the question invariably gets caught up in feelings of guilt: the guilt an emigrating child has about leaving his parents behind and so far away, about having had greater opportunities and greater ease than they did, about never returning for good and rarely returning for long. Jugnu’s section is dominated by an American daughter’s grief, and her guilt: she cannot forgive herself for the fact that her father died alone and far away from her, that in his last hours he phoned her in America and left a message, that she did not immediately pick up. By the time she listened to the message, her father had died. Her account, like the entirety of Kumar’s novel, commits itself to a kind of narrative recompense: “I’m trying to understand how to mark the life of my father who died alone.” Jadu’s cousin voices Jugnu’s own guilt when they speak on the phone about

her recently deceased father: “This is the problem with all of you who go so far away,” he chides her.

In a recent LitHub piece, Kumar wrote that his mother died in 2014, and that his father died last year, and not in 2020, as Jadu, the fictional father, does. Kumar was able to reach his father’s bedside before he died, but not quickly enough to find his father still conscious. Kumar’s essay tells us what actually happened but dissipates some of its personal force amid references to Naipaul, Annie Ernaux, Martin Amis, Sharon Olds, and Nick Laird, all writers who have in powerful ways described their dying fathers. Kumar’s novel has far greater autobiographical power than his nonfiction essay does. His beautiful, truthful fiction rings with all the gratitude and anticipated grief that he expressed in 2002, in “Bombay London New York,” when both of his parents were still alive. It is not the immigrants, he wrote then, but the ones who stay behind who are truly heroic: “Each year, I travel to the town in India where my parents live. I am able to spend only a few days with them. And then I return to America.” Kumar says he wants to believe that his parents, “old and set in their ways, anxious, and forever bickering, find in each other the strength that their children do not provide.” This novel finds and provides great strength—too late for Kumar’s parents, but in good time for his grateful readers. ♦

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