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White Teeth by Zadie Smith

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an abortion. *Wild Decembers* was inspired by recent stories in the news about violent clashes between rural neighbors over boundaries and property rights. That theme itself is by no means new; John B. Keane's play *The Field* (1965), which tells the fact-based story of a farmer who kills a rival over the auction of a field he has carefully cultivated but does not own, is an obvious literary precedent for Edna O'Brien's tale of a rural community "locked in a tribal hunger that bubbles in the blood and hides out on the mountain," where "fields mean more than fields, more than life and more than death too." Joseph Brennan and his sister Breege occupy a small farm in this remote locality of Cloontha. The arrival of a new neighbor, Mick Bugler, triggers a dispute over rights to parts of "the mountain" — "my mountain," as far as Joseph is concerned — that turns Bugler into Joseph's bitterest enemy and leaves Breege agonizingly torn between her love for her brother, abusive though he may be at times, and her feelings for Bugler, who does not treat her a great deal better.

In spite of O'Brien's claims to topicality, however, critics of her work are increasingly expressing the view that she is stuck, in terms of themes and attitudes, in the 1950s. The opening chapters of *Wild Decembers* certainly make one wonder when the events are supposed to be taking place. Bugler's tractor, we are told, is the first on the mountain, and to Breege, "the machine with smoke coming out of the metal chimney was like a picture of the Wild West." The Celtic Tiger economy with its high-tech infrastructure may have left some remote areas of Ireland unaffected, but this stretches one's credulity. O'Brien's female characters can be fitted a little too easily into the traditional virgin/whore dichotomy, and are either passive, put-upon, and dependent, like Breege, or sexually voracious, like Rita and Reena, the two sisters in this novel who never wear underwear and are in the business of forcefully seducing men and then accusing them of rape. The men, on the other hand, are portrayed as "the warring sons of warring sons" destined to repeat "the insatiate fight in the name of honour and land and kindred and blood."

There are, of course, subtler aspects to this novel, but the richness of O'Brien's language has the effect of heightening contrasts rather than bringing out nuances. Admirers of her prose, however, will enjoy the mixture of earthiness and lyricism.

José Lanthers
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Philip Roth. *The Human Stain*. Boston/New York. Houghton Mifflin. 2000. 361 pages. \$26. ISBN 0-618-05945-8.

PHILIP ROTH HAS LONG been one of the great chroniclers of contemporary American life. There have been a few less-than-great novels, but from *Goodbye Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* through *American Pastoral* (1997; see *WLT* 72:1, p. 136), Roth has given us quintessential portraits of men in their times. In *The Human Stain* he is at the height of his powers. In fact, at one point he has his narrator and recurring alter ego Nathan Zuckerman tell us, "For better or worse I can only do what everyone does who thinks they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do." And indeed, Roth's imagination is as rich and as deep as his prose is textured and brilliant.

Taking as his starting place the intrinsic ability of Americans to reinvent themselves, Roth creates Coleman Silk, a reinventer if ever there was one. By making the microcosm of one man's life his focus and following it through a variety of truly surprising events, Roth manages to skewer academia, intellectual pretense, American politics, and the problems of race and class in America.

Coleman Silk is a victim of the very same America that gave him his opportunities. Intelligence, savvy, and subterfuge lifted him far away from his origins, but he pays a hefty price for his choices. He is living the American Dream, but it is a dream with a dark and demonic underside. A light-skinned black man who has opted to pass as a Jew, Silk struggles with the fear of exposure at every turn. In an ironic twist, he is condemned by the politically correct fervor at the college for innocently using the term "spooks" to refer to several missing students who just happen, unknown to the professor who has never seen them, to be black. The academic downfall of the seventy-year-old Silk is accompanied, through the aid of Viagra and a thirty-four-year-old illiterate janitor, Faunia Farley, by a rise in his sexual passions.

Zuckerman, who is Silk's neighbor, is a few years younger and equally outraged by academic Puritanism masquerading as political correctness. He feels closer to Silk than ever before and functions as something of a voyeur to his life as he tells his story.

Roth has long been one of our premier revelers in American idiomatic prose, and in *The Human Stain* he surpasses

himself. The language is exciting and exacting, the characters almost universally well drawn and affecting. In fact, the power and pain of this novel is so great that at times the reader might have to take a brief respite, maybe a walk around the reading room, to take it all in. The only character who comes close to being a cartoon is the Yale-educated faux feminist Delphine Roux, who is the cause of Silk's retirement and grief. But even she resembles recent academic reality closely enough to cause a reader with even the vaguest connection to a collegiate environment to wince.

The Human Stain is that rare thing, a totally satisfying novel. With it and his two other recent novels, *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist* (1998; see *WLT* 73:3, p. 528), Roth has emphatically confirmed his position in the front rank of American novelists.

Rita D. Jacobs
Montclair State University

Zadie Smith. *White Teeth*. New York/London. Random House/Hamish Hamilton. 2000. 448 pages. \$24.95. ISBN 0-375-50185-1/0-241-13997-X.

WHITE TEETH IS ZADIE SMITH'S first novel, written while she was an undergraduate at Cambridge University. Its cleverness, linguistic exuberance, cartoonish characters, playfulness, and use of coincidence and incongruity may be as much the heartlessness and energy of youth as second-generation Rushdieism. What is Rushdieish about *White Teeth* is the mocking tone and a story which has a larger political significance. This is a multicultural English novel, set in well-off North London, in which the three main families are Muslim, half-Jamaican, and Jewish, and in which few nonminority characters appear; the Irish bar is run by a Muslim.

The themes are generational and husband-wife conflict, past versus present, assimilation versus resistance, the contrasting directions taken by the children of immigrants, rationalism versus New Ageism, the absurdities of liberals and extremists, even genetic engineering versus animal rights — all treated with irony. The story builds to an apocalypse, a final day of destruction and judgment, which deflates so rapidly that even the lack of clarity about what happens is amusing.

The novel begins with Archie Jones attempting to commit suicide after being left by his high-strung Italian wife. He is saved when Mo Hussein-Ishmael, owner

of a butcher shop, objects to Archie's car being parked in the delivery area: "This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you're going to die around here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first." Archie soon falls in love with and marries Clara, a young second-generation "black" Jamaican, who has left home after her mother, a fanatical Jehovah's Witness, has converted Clara's radical, leftie, beatnik, druggie lover. Clara gives birth to Irie, the one character treated without irony (except for an absurd episode in which she runs off to her grandmother while searching for "roots").

Archie's friend is Samad Iqbal, related to someone who may have started the Indian mutiny. Samad now calls himself a Bengali Muslim, although he has been in England since serving in the British army during World War II. Samad is the acculturated Muslim who has lived mostly in England but who wants his children to follow what he claims to be the ways of the past and his religion. Feeling guilty as a result of an affair with his children's art teacher, Samad sends one son unwillingly to Bangladesh. The son returns years later fanatically rational and British. The other son graduates from leader of London street gangs to crime and to political fanaticism. Then there are the Chalfens, self-centered, well-off, well-educated, bright, secular Jews. They take to Irie and the Iqbal teenagers as a liberal social cause; as a result, their son joins an extreme animal-rights group which intends to destroy the genetically altered mouse created by Joshua's father, as do the fanatical Muslims and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Although brilliantly written, *White Teeth* feels hollow. It is too long for the characters to be merely amusing, and I found myself reacting against many of their stupidities. I am also uncomfortable when minorities are portrayed as non-stop foolish. Naipaul's early satires were shorter, more consistent in tone, and the characters were less harmful in what they did.

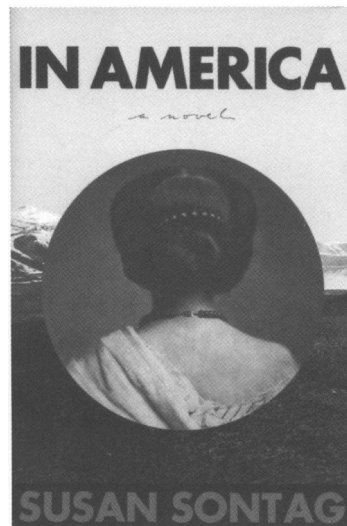
Bruce King
Paris

Susan Sontag. *In America*. New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 2000. 387 pages. \$26. ISBN 0-374-17540-3.

SUSAN SONTAG'S FOURTH NOVEL joins a diverse collection of essays, stories, journalism, and plays, of which her books on the symbolic nature of illness (*Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*)

may be best known to a general audience. As remarkable as the palette of works is Sontag herself, survivor of various brushes with death, including the war in Bosnia (which she covered as a journalist), a near-fatal car crash, and cancer.

Like many of her previous works, *In America* splashes contemporary thought against a historical backdrop, using a Victorian cast of characters to convey a decidedly modern flow of ideas. The plot is dominated by the main character, Maryna Zalenowska, and is not complex. In 1876, Maryna, Poland's most famous actress, becomes discontent with the diva's life. She makes a voyage to America with her son Peter and husband Bogdan, as well as an ardent admirer (Richard) and various friends and servants. After a lengthy stay in New York, they travel to the West Coast, where they buy a vine-



yard in the Santa Ana Valley and attempt communal living. Bogdan, a repressed homosexual trying to remain faithful to his marriage, distracts himself with the economics of the grape market, while Richard pursues Maryna. He does not win her until many months later, when, tired of the pastoral experiment, she has gone to San Francisco, where she soon becomes the darling of the American stage as well. She finally buys a railroad car in which her entire group lives, traveling the route of her theater engagements. As the novel ends, Maryna is beginning a new season and perhaps a new love affair with Edwin Booth (one of the novel's random minor historical figures and brother of John Wilkes Booth).

America represents a new life of "pure future" or "pastlessness." Maryna's travels are motivated by a search for growth and happiness, defined as "not being

trapped in your individual existence, a container with your name on it." Oddly, Maryna goes to great pains to take her container with her, transplanting a good dozen people to the New World, where they continue to revolve around their lovely idol. Thus, her inner reality does not change significantly. She returns to the stage and its illusions that feed her self-absorption and her puzzled feeling that she is truly "real" only when playing a role.

The novel's pace, like Maryna's self-reflection, is sidetracked by elaborate intellectualizing about the theater, conveyed by journals, letters back to Poland, and long discussions. Richard (or Ryszard), Maryna's would-be lover, is the character who comes most alive. A journalist like Sontag, he conveys many of her views about life, journalism, and, most poignantly, death. The author and her biography are poignantly close to the reader in Ryszard: "Even if my life ended now, he said to himself, I would still think, My God, what a journey I have made." The novel is dedicated to "my friends in Sarajevo."

Mona Knapp
Portland, Oregon

Madeleine St. John. *A Pure Clear Light*. New York. Carroll & Graf. 2000. 233 pages. \$22. ISBN 0-7867-0756-9.

DEFT, INTRICATELY NARRATED, and exquisitely sensitive to every subtlety of syntax, Madeleine St. John's third novel (like its predecessors; see *WLT* 74:3, p. 607) is long on form and lean on content. In a puzzling contrast between the narrative skill and the banal plot, *A Pure Clear Light* resembles an overture that fails to be followed by the opera.

Simon Beaufort, a charismatic but shallow and emotionally irresponsible theater director, really does love his smart, pretty, good wife of many years and their three smart, charming children. Despite that, he slips casually into an affair with a blond accountant named Gillian, endangering all that is dear to him. As the weeks go by with Simon coming home after midnight and "working" all weekend, the only question is how long it will take for his wife Flora to catch on. Flora for her part is very religious and spends more and more time in church. She also has a large circle of friends who, naturally, start running into Simon and the girlfriend in public places. Will they tell Flora? What will Simon do? The overused situation contains the entire