

# *White Teeth*

ZADIE SMITH

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zadie Smith was born in north-west London in 1975, and continues to live in the area.



PENGUIN BOOKS

But the old man shook his head like a bird in a bird-bath. 'No, no, I really won't be intimidated into purchases on my own doorstep. I don't know what you are selling - please God let it not be encyclopedias - at my age it is not *more* information one requires but *less*.'

'But it's free!'

'Oh . . . yes, I see . . . why?'

'SGod's harvest,' repeated Magid.

'Helping the local community. Mr Hamilton, you must have spoken to our teacher, because she sent us here. Maybe it slipped your mind,' added Irie in her grown-up voice.

Mr Hamilton touched his temple sadly as if to retrieve the memory and then ever so slowly opened his front door to full tilt and made a pigeon-step forward into the autumn sunlight. 'Well . . . you'd better come in.'

They followed Mr Hamilton into the town house gloom of his hall. Filled to the brim with battered and chipped Victoriana punctuated by signs of more recent life - children's broken bikes, a discarded *Speak-and-Spell*, four pairs of muddy wellies in a family's variant sizes.

'Now,' he said cheerily, as they reached the living room with its beautiful bay windows through which a sweeping garden could be seen, 'what have we got here?'

The children released their load on to a moth-eaten chaise longue, Magid reeling off the contents like items from a shopping list, while Mr Hamilton lit a cigarette and inspected the urban picnic with doddering fingers.

'Apples . . . oh, dear me, no . . . chickpeas . . . no, no, no, potato-chips . . .'

It went on like this, each article being picked up in its turn and chastised, until the old man looked up at them with faint tears in his eyes. 'I can't eat any of this, you see . . . too hard, too bloody hard. The most I could manage is probably the milk in that coconut. Still . . . we will have tea, won't we? You'll stay for tea?'

The children looked at him blankly.

'Go on, my dears, do sit down.'

Irie, Magid and Millat shuffled up nervously on the chaise longue. Then there was a click-clack sound and when they looked up Mr Hamilton's teeth were on his tongue, as if a second mouth had come out of the first. And then in a flash they were back in.

'I simply cannot eat anything unless it has been pulverized beforehand, you see. My own fault. Years and years of neglect. Clean teeth - never a priority in the army.' He signalled himself clumsily, an awkward jab at his own chest with a shaking hand. 'I was an army man, you see. Now: how many times do you young people brush your teeth?'

'Three times a day,' said Irie, lying.

'LIAR!' chorused Millat and Magid.

'PANTS ON FIRE!'

'Two and a half times.'

'Well, dear me, which is it?' said Mr Hamilton, smoothing down his trousers with one hand and lifting his tea with the other.

'Once a day,' said Irie sheepishly, the concern in his voice compelling her to tell the truth. 'Most days.'

'I fear you will come to regret that. And you two?'

Magid was midway through formulating some elaborate fantasy of a toothbrush machine that did it while you slept, but Millat came clean. 'Same. Once a day. More or less.'

Mr Hamilton leant back contemplatively in his chair. 'One sometimes forgets the significance of one's teeth. We're not like the lower animals - teeth replaced regularly and all that - we're of the mammals, you see. And mammals only get two chances, with teeth. More sugar?'

The children, mindful of their two chances, declined.

'But like all things, the business has two sides. Clean white teeth are not always wise, now are they? Par exemplum: when I was in the Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid

business. Dark as buggery, it was. And they died because of it, you see? Poor bastards. Or rather I survived, to look at it in another way, do you see?

The children sat silently. And then Irie began to cry, ever so quietly.

Mr Hamilton continued, 'Those are the split decisions you make in war. See a flash of white and bang! as it were . . . Dark as buggery. Terrible times. All these beautiful boys lying dead there, right in front of me, right at my feet. Stomachs open, you know, with their guts on my shoes. Like the end of the bloody world. Beautiful men, enlisted by the Krauts, black as the ace of spades; poor fools didn't even know why they were there, what people they were fighting for, who they were shooting at. The decision of the gun. So quick, children. So brutal. Biscuit?'

'I want to go home,' whispered Irie.

'My dad was in the war. He played for England,' piped up Millat, red-faced and furious.

'Well, boy, do you mean the football team or the army?'

'The British army. He drove a tank. A Mr Churchill. With her dad,' explained Magid.

'I'm afraid you must be mistaken,' said Mr Hamilton, genteel as ever. 'There were certainly no wogs as I remember - though you're probably not allowed to say that these days are you? But no . . . no Pakistanis . . . what would we have fed them? No, no,' he grumbled, assessing the question as if he were being given the opportunity to rewrite history here and now. 'Quite out of the question. I could not possibly have stomachached that rich food. No Pakistanis. The Pakistanis would have been in the Pakistani army, you see, whatever that was. As for the poor Brits, they had enough on their hands with us old Queens . . .'

Mr Hamilton laughed softly to himself, turned his head and silently admired the roaming branches of a cherry tree that dominated one whole corner of his garden. After a long pause he turned back and tears were visible in his eyes again - fast,

sharp tears as if he had been slapped in the face. 'Now, you young men shouldn't tell fibs should you? Fibs will rot your teeth.'

'It's not a lie, Mr J. P. Hamilton, he really was,' said Magid, always the peace-maker, always the negotiator. 'He was shot in the hand. He has medals. He was a hero.'

'And when your teeth rot -'

'It's the truth!' shouted Millat, kicking over the tea-tray that sat on the floor between them. 'You stupid fucking old man.'

'And when your teeth rot,' continued Mr Hamilton, smiling at the ceiling, 'aah, there's no return. They won't look at you like they used to. The pretty ones won't give you a second glance, not for love or money. But while you're still young, the important matter is the third molars. They are more commonly referred to as the wisdom teeth, I believe. You simply must deal with the third molars before anything else. That was my downfall. You won't have them yet, but my great-grandchildren are just feeling them now. The problem with third molars is one is never sure whether one's mouth will be quite large enough to accommodate them. They are the only part of the body that a man must grow into. He must be a big enough man for these teeth, do you see? Because if not - oh dear me, they grow crooked or any which way, or refuse to grow at all. They stay locked up there with the bone - an impaction, I believe, is the term - and terrible, terrible infection ensues. Have them out early, that's what I tell my granddaughter Jocelyn in regard to her sons. You simply must. You can't fight against it. I wish I had. I wish I'd given up early and hedged my bets, as it were. Because they're your father's teeth, you see, wisdom teeth are passed down by the father, I'm certain of it. So you must be big enough for them. God knows, I wasn't big enough for mine . . . Have them out and brush three times a day, if my advice means anything.'

By the time Mr J. P. Hamilton looked down to see whether his advice meant anything, his three dun-coloured visitors had

not much of a thinker, when you get down to it. That's the best I can offer. All right, here goes.'

The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough times to mesmerize a man. Then, at some point in its triumphant ascension, it began to arc, and the arc went wrong, and Archibald realized that it was not coming back to him at all but going behind him, a fair way behind him, and he turned round to watch it fall in the dirt. He was bending to pick it up when a shot rang out, and he felt a blistering pain in his right thigh. He looked down. Blood. The bullet had passed straight through, just missing the bone, but leaving a shard of the cap embedded deep in the flesh. The pain was excruciating and strangely distant at the same time. Archie turned back round to see Dr Sick, half bent over, the gun hanging weakly in his right hand.

'For fuckssake, why did you do that?' said Archie furious, grabbing the gun off the Doctor, easily and forcefully. 'It's tails. See? It's tails. Look. Tails. It was tails.'

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So Archie is there, there in the trajectory of the bullet, about to do something unusual, even for TV: save the same man twice and with no more reason or rhyme than the first time. And it's a messy business, this saving people lark. Everybody in the room watches in horror as he takes it in the thigh, right in the femur, spins round with some melodrama and falls right through the mouse's glass box. Shards of glass all over the gaff. What a performance. If it were TV you would hear the saxophone around now; the credits would be rolling.

But first the *endgames*. Because it seems no matter what you think of them, they must be played, even if, like the independence of India or Jamaica, like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger boats, the end is simply the beginning of an

even longer story. The same focus group who picked out the colour of this room, the carpet, the font for the posters, the height of the table, would no doubt tick the box that asks to see all these things played to their finish . . . and there is surely a demographic pattern to all those who wish to see the eyewitness statements that identified Magid as many times as Millat, the confusing transcripts, the videotape of uncooperating victim and families, a court case so impossible the judge gave in and issued four hundred hours community service to both twins, which they served, naturally, as gardeners in Joyce's new project, a huge millennial park by the banks of the Thames . . .

And is it young professional women aged eighteen to thirty-two who would like a snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua and Hortense sitting by a Caribbean sea (for Irie and Joshua become lovers in the end; you can only avoid your fate for so long), while Irie's fatherless little girl writes affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid* and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings? And could it be that it is largely the criminal class and the elderly who find themselves wanting to make bets on the winner of a blackjack game, the one played by Alsana and Samad, Archie and Clara, in O'Connell's, 31 December 1999, that historic night when Abdul-Mickey finally opened his doors to women?

But surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be to speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect. And as Archie knows, it's not like that. It's never been like that.

It would make an interesting survey (what kind would be your decision) to examine the present and divide the onlookers into two groups: those whose eyes fell upon a bleeding man, slumped across a table, and those who watched the getaway of a small brown rebel mouse. Archie, for one, watched the mouse. He watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his

Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999

hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. Go on my son! thought Archie.

with a map to the  
entrance