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On, Zadie

Clifford Thompson

WHEN ZADIE strode onto the literary stage in 2000, at all of twenty-four years old, she made short work of a problem whose solution, in retrospect, seems as simple as the wheel. The problem had been how to reconcile the traditional concerns of literature—character development and the beautiful illumination of the human condition, however unbeautiful it might be—with the attempt to be representative of the best of all humanity, i.e., multicultural. To the multicultural movement in publishing and academia, whose extraliterary mission of inclusion could make reading feel like a dose of cod liver oil, Smith brought her hilarious first novel, *White Teeth*, which seemed by comparison like candy—but here was candy with nutritional value: Smith’s characters were well drawn and were, whatever their skin colors or religious beliefs, human beings first and foremost, their racial/social/cultural/political concerns, when they had them, in the service of character definition and story, not the other way around. Rather than putting positive faces on “underrepresented” groups, Smith achieved the democratizing effect that is the real aim of multiculturalism by revealing the not-always-pretty mugs of *everybody*, and in place of the solemnity and earnestness of so much literature given the multicultural label, she brought her much-noted exuberance.

A number of people—including Smith herself—have said that *White Teeth* could have stood more editing (that is, shortening), and yet the novel’s chattiness seems an all but inevitable byproduct of that exuberance, the words themselves a kind of residue—natural, almost incidental—of the sheer force at work. Smith once compared *White Teeth* to a “hyperactive...ten-year-old,” but the novel seems to me more of an adult whose sensuality and zest for life have added a few extra pounds to her frame. Such a spirit is perhaps a prerequisite for what Smith seems to be about: a celebration of the glorious untameability of life. Not since Thomas Wolfe has there been a writer so determined to get his/her arms around life in all its fullness and variety; but whereas we can almost feel Wolfe’s muscles quiver with the effort, as in this passage from *You Can’t Go Home Again*—

[The truck drivers] came in, flung themselves upon the row of stools, and gave their orders. And as they waited, their hunger drawn into sharp focus by the male smells of boiling coffee, frying eggs and onions, and sizzling hamburgers, they took the pungent, priceless, and uncostly solace of a cigarette, lit between cupped hand and strong-seamed mouth, drawn deep and then exhaled in slow fumes from the nostrils. They poured great gobs and gluts of thick tomato ketchup on their hamburgers, tore with blackened fingers at the slabs of fragrant bread, and ate with jungle lust, thrusting at plate and cup with quick and savage gulping.

Oh, [George Webber] was with them, of them, for them, blood brother of their joy and hunger to the last hard swallow, the last deep ease of sated bellies, the last slow coil of blue expiring from their grateful lungs...

—Smith pulls off a similar though less purple feat, with energy left over to laugh with us, maybe even to light up one of those uncostly cigarettes:

O’Connell’s [Poolroom] is the kind of place family men come to for a different kind of family. Unlike blood relations, it is necessary here to *earn* one’s position in the community; it takes years of devoted fucking around, time-wasting, lying-about, shooting the breeze, watching paint dry—far more dedication than men invest in the careless moment of procreation. You need to *know* the place. For example, there are reasons why O’Connell’s is an Irish poolroom run by Arabs with no pool tables. And there are reasons why the pustule-covered Mickey will cook you chips, eggs, and beans, or

eggs, chips, and beans, or beans, chips, eggs, and mushrooms but not, under any circumstances, chips, beans, eggs, and bacon. But you need to hang around for that kind of information.

And yet, for all that, there is something at work beneath her first novel’s celebration of wildness that runs counter to it. *White Teeth*’s major characters, all living in London, are the white, likeable, dull, constitutionally indecisive Archie Jones; Archie’s much younger black second wife, Clara, the casually rebellious daughter of a Jamaican-born Christian zealot; Archie and Clara’s daughter, Irie; Archie’s best friend, the Bengali Muslim Samad Iqbal; Samad’s no-nonsense wife, Alsana; and their twin sons, Millat and Magid. The importance of character over naturalism in the novel is underscored when one of the Iqbal twins becomes a scientist while the other embraces radical Islam; the dominance of the human over the ideological is perhaps best illustrated by Samad, who acts against his own beliefs—by, among other things, sleeping with the young white teacher of one of his sons—while deploring his sons’ Westernization; and the triumph of humor over earnestness is evident from page three through page four hundred forty-eight. In one passage Millat and Magid watch their parents slug it out in

the backyard, an experience that might scar and haunt characters in another novel; these boys place bets on who will win. The young teacher is dumped by Samad, which might lead her, in another novel, to suicide or long-term depression; in this one, she tells her ex-lover, “Fuck you, you fucking *fuck*.”

The book’s absorbing climax has the major characters and their concerns—science, religion, animal rights—focused on one event, an experiment involving a mouse. Then things get even smaller: by the end of the novel Irie has seduced, within half an hour of each other, both Millat and Magid, one of whom impregnates her; thus two families, with their black, white, and Asian bloodlines, are narrowed like a pencil point to one microscopic, fertilized egg. The matter is safely in hand. *You’re all very interesting*, Smith, the ringmaster, might be shouting at her multicultural creatures. *Now, back in your cages!* The world of *White Teeth* only *seems* wild; it turns out to be a well-run circus.

It is an unsettling business, after all, to follow the idea of life’s wildness past its fun parts to its conclusion: the chaos that exists beneath the veneer of order we try to impose on it, that can swallow us at any time if we’re not careful, and even if we are, that will get us one day, no matter what. Worse, to focus

seek connections to the movies’ ordered world, whose inhabitants need not grow old and die. The theme of meaninglessness, of existential despair, is present in *The Autograph Man*—including the form of despair that (I’m told) can come with great personal success; it is hard not to speculate that Smith, an instant celebrity with the publication of *White Teeth*, is drawing on personal experience when she writes about Alex-Li’s professional triumph:

Feeling the suggestion of a new type of loneliness, one harder to shake than its predecessor, Alex made his way to the bar. Everyone he passed congratulated him; there was suddenly no other subject than his success, no form of conversation but those formal felicitations one overhears at bar mitzvahs and weddings, the ones that sound like bells. But they’re just valedictions, thought Alex with horror. Valedictions wearing a different garment! These people are saying good-bye to me. I am no longer of them. I am dead to them. I have passed on.

The Autograph Man ultimately misses, the body of its story failing to achieve the emotional resonance of its prologue; but as with other scarily talented writers, the beauty of Smith’s swing is such that we almost don’t mind that she strikes out. Apart from a couple of tics, such as the continual references to “the International Gesture for [fill in the blank],” the humor is sharp, and funny observations that might have taken up paragraphs in *White Teeth* are delivered here with concise jabs that contain whole sociological treatises, as in, “Her face was a brazen challenge, the kind no woman in England ever wears unless drunk and talking to her mother.” And while *The Autograph Man* has more going on thematically than it can resolve or, in some cases, even acknowledge—Judaism, biracialism (a staple in Smith’s novels), infidelity (another staple)—those themes’ open-endedness is perhaps a tacit comment on, concession to, true wildness.

In her third novel, *On Beauty*, reexamining the theme of life’s frightening lack of order (this time, the lack that exists even within individuals), Smith has turned for inspiration to E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*. If *White Teeth* was like a person carrying extra weight, then in *On Beauty* the person has seen her weight harden into muscle: the parts exist not for themselves but to strengthen the larger body, which has, paradoxically, learned about its own and others’ vulnerability. Humor is not lacking in *On Beauty*, nor is human folly, but the latter now has its costs: when one member of a family strikes another, we feel it, as it were, and the adultery dismissed with a triple expletive in *White Teeth* results, in *On Beauty*, in possibly irrevocable harm to a marriage and in the heartbreaking image of a large, grown woman weeping loudly and uncontrollably. (From *White Teeth* to *On Beauty* Smith seems to have undertaken a journey similar to that of Clint Eastwood, who shot up bad guys without blinking for two decades before declaring, in his incarnation as William Munny in the 1992 film *Unforgiven*, “Hell of a thing, killin’ a man. You take away all he’s got and all he’s ever gonna have.”)

On Beauty shares its title with a

BOOKS BY ZADIE SMITH MENTIONED IN THIS ESSAY

White Teeth, Vintage Books, 2001, \$14.95 paper.

The Autograph Man, Vintage Books, 2003, \$14.00 paper.

On Beauty, Penguin Press, 2005, \$15.00 paper.

too long and too clearly on this is to grasp the seeming meaninglessness behind it all, an experience that is profoundly depressing when it is not actually fatal. The novels and stories that successfully take on that theme, directly or indirectly, are celebrated as great works, from *Anna Karenina* to *The Maltese Falcon*, from “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” to *Invisible Man*.

With her second novel Smith seemed to have become aware of all this, which suggests that *The Autograph Man*, which is shorter and was less well received than *White Teeth*, was in a way more ambitious. In the prologue to *The Autograph Man*, Li-Jin Tandem takes his twelve-year-old son, Alex-Li, and two of Alex-Li’s friends to a wrestling match. Unbeknownst to Alex-Li, his father has a brain tumor that is about to kill him. In contrast to the rest of the novel, the prologue is written in present tense, to highlight the eternal nature of our doomed struggle to impose order—perfectly symbolized by that most carefully planned and predictable of all activities, professional wrestling—on chaos, which is about to take Alex-Li’s father from him. The rest of the novel follows the grown-up Alex-Li, who makes his living as a seller of autographs and other items connected, however fleetingly, to movie stars; he finds customers in people who, like him, consciously or (probably) not,

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poem, more or less an ode to elitism and amorality, written by one of the characters, a female celebrity poet and professor whose progressivism disguises a dangerous self-absorption. In *Howards End* the characters see the pursuit of beauty as particularly German behavior, and the valuing of friendship as a more British trait; *On Beauty* sees these behaviors as belonging, respectively, to two groups equally foreign to each other: men and women. The failure—on the part of one character in particular—to reconcile these inclinations, to “only connect,” in Forster’s famous phrase, is what threatens to wreck the New England family of the white, British-born art-history professor Howard Belsey; his African-American wife, Kiki, a nurse; and their three grown or nearly grown children. Still, the battles of *On Beauty* take place within and between individuals, not groups—as, once again in Smith’s

work, the human trumps the sociological. When one character tells another toward the end of the book, “You people aren’t even black anymore,” the line has an ironic ring, spoken in a novel in which blacks represent every political persuasion, economic class, and temperament under the sun.

On Beauty is a rich, funny, moving, satisfying novel, but to understand just how many plot elements it draws from *Howards End*—if my experience is representative—is to feel one’s awe at Smith’s achievement lessened. The coming years, with luck, will bring us a true Zadie original with the zest of *White Teeth* and the qualities on display in *On Beauty* and even *The Autograph Man*: the lessons learned about what faces us all; the knowledge that each word counts, as does each character the words evoke; and the ability to laugh at our condition while sympathizing with us, too. □

Saltine

How well its square
fit my palm, my mouth,
a toasty wafer slipped
onto the sick tongue
or into chicken soup,

each crisp saltine a tile
pierced with 13 holes
in balanced rows,
its edges perforated
like a postage stamp,

one of a shifting stack
sealed in wax paper
whose noisy opening
always signaled *snack*,
peanut butter or cheese

thick inside Premiums,
the closest we ever got
to serving *hors d'oeuvres*:
the redneck’s hardtack,
the cracker’s cracker.

—Michael McFee