



The Empire Strikes Back

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Review by: Kathleen O'Grady

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The Empire strikes back

by Kathleen O'Grady

White Teeth by Zadie Smith. New York: Random House, 2000, 448 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.



When the renowned Andrew Wylie literary agency secured a rumored \$400,000 advance for a first-time author, based on only a plot synopsis and two completed chapters, the British literary world took a serious look at the young woman who could command such numbers for the mere *idea* of a novel. The media tagged along, too, having already fueled the sudden rise of J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series. As it turned out, 24-year-old Zadie Smith did not disappoint. *White Teeth* has summoned (accurate) comparisons to Salman Rushdie and David Foster Wallace, and has stolen a bit of the limelight from the infamous British "lad lit" of Martin Amis, Irvine Welsh, Will Self, Nick Hornby et al.

White Teeth seems an unlikely first novel from a student who, during its composition, was completing her BA in English literature (with modest grades) at Cambridge University. Stylistically, it is epic in scale and does not shy away from the biggest issues of urban living: cultural identity, assimilation, exile and estrangement. Set in polyglot and multiracial London, the novel is a comedic charge through the Post-Colonial theory camp. But this is terrain that Smith knows well; the daughter of a black Jamaican mother and a white English father, she has lived most of her life in London and continues to make it her home.

As she writes in *White Teeth*:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete with-

in them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checkups.... [I]t makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*. (pp. 271-272)

I first came across Smith's writings during my own doctoral studies at Cambridge University in the mid-1990s, when I sat on the editorial board for the *May Anthologies*, a two-volume compilation of prose and poetry by Oxbridge students that is published each academic year. I well remember sitting on the floor in my damp flat, tea at the ready, papers strewn across every conceivable surface, searching rather desperately through hundreds of poems and stories for a single piece that did not read like a pseudo-autobiographical account of failed romance or the literary pastiche of a budding student of literature. It took only two paragraphs of my first Zadie Smith short story to experience the visceral charge that comes when you read one finely turned sentence after another. In this early work, Smith already managed a complex and sophisticated plot line with vivid characterizations etched in clean, clear prose. And it was from one of her subsequent publications in the *May Anthologies* that an agent "discovered" her.

In a recent conversation with Zadie, I asked her how she managed the media attention. She remains remarkably unseduced by the glowing reviews she has been receiving (enthusiastic sentiments from Salman Rushdie, with whom she recently completed a New York book tour, adorn the cover of *White Teeth*). She conceded that few women of late have secured the spotlight for serious novel writing, and it sometimes gets lonely among the literary lads. "It does feel like a boy's gang," she told me. But she

is equally frustrated at the kinds of fiction that women are writing at the moment, noting that it's "the kind of 'Bridget Jones-ish' school [which] is about being looked at and observed and judged by other people. And that is not a good state of mind to be in if you want to write fiction.... Women need to feel that they are the subjects and the person who is doing the writing and not the thing who is being looked at or judged or observed by other people."

Undoubtedly, *White Teeth* is a far cry from *Bridget Jones* or the equally popular *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*. Smith pays scant attention to the crises of the single, white, thirty-something female of the Prozac generation. Her novel jostles between the patois of London's Raggastani gangs, the lyrical consonances of Jamaican immigrants, the clipped tones of second-generation Londoners and the Bollywood hyperbolic expressions of the Indian diaspora. It was written with a poet's ear for cadence, nuance and rhythm, and constitutes nothing less than an ode to contemporary London living.

White Teeth is framed by the story of two rather ordinary middle-aged men—Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim transplant to London who waits tables, and Archibald Jones, an unprepossessing native Englishman who folds paper for a living. These seemingly banal companions, World War Two veterans, spend their free hours at O'Connell's, the local Irish pub. Typical of hybrid London, O'Connell's is owned and operated by a Middle Eastern family, Ali and his five sons (all named Abdul). Abdul-Mickey, as one of the sons is familiarly known, serves eggs, beans and beer; on the wall of the pub hang fragments of the Quran, alongside pictures of Irish racehorses and the pub license, registered under the name "Andrew O'Connell Yusuf."

As the novel's backdrop, the pub provides an escape from the complications of Archie and Samad's family lives, which rival O'Connell's in their composite origins. Archie is the husband of Clara Bowden, a Jamaican woman half his age; Samad marries Alsana Begum, a Bengali Muslim who does not take well to London. Alsana is fond of repeating the story of nineteenth-century Lord Ellenborough, who sent a one-word telegram to declare his conquest of the Sind province in India: *peccavi*, meaning "I have sinned" in Latin. "The English



© Roderick Field

Zadie Smith

are the only people,' she would say with distaste, 'who want to teach you and steal from you at the same time.'" *White Teeth* traverses the complex genealogy of each family and foretells the impact this cultural and familial history will have on their London-born children: Irie, the endearingly awkward daughter of Archie, and Millat and Magid, the sexy twin sons of Samad.

Smith has a talent for constructing extraordinary characters, placing them in extraordinary circumstances, and making it all appear perfectly ordinary. So it goes with Millat and Magid, who are separated by their father Samad as young boys. In order for Magid, the smarter of the two, to learn to respect and cherish his cultural and religious roots, Samad has him raised and educated in Bangladesh while Millat remains in polyphonic London.

Smith handles the contrast between the twins to great comic effect. Magid returns to London an ardent atheist and Anglophile, clad proudly in white Levi jeans. Millat, meanwhile, joins an Islamic fundamentalist group, Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (with the unfortunate acronym KEVIN), a militant anti-Western organization claiming Quranic roots. He bandies about gangster film lines in his head—"As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster"—transforming them for KEVIN: "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim." He struts, Rambo-style, around his prayer mat.

But it is Irie, half-Jamaican, half-English and all Londoner, who is at the core of the novel. We follow Irie's endeavors to make her (mother-inherited) Jamaican proportions and features conform to a wil-

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lowy British femininity, and the extreme pain and self-deprecation she endures in her attempt to make the impossible happen—all the while incapable of seeing her own natural beauty.

Smith writes about the “deathly thing” a black hair salon can be:

Here, the impossible desire for straightness and “movement” fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins, and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission.

“Is it straight?” was the only question you heard as the towels came off and the heads emerged from the dryer pulsating with pain. (p. 229)

Irie’s self-mortification in the quest for beauty is not just an individual battle. As Smith editorializes, mid-novel, there are Iries everywhere striving for European straightness: no curves, no curls, please.

While Millat, Magid and Irie each struggle with their cultural shadows—alternately embracing and rejecting their heritage with an eclectic and haphazard frenzy—other white Londoners are just as frantically trying to reconstruct, create, or steal an “exotic” heritage for themselves: “It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly

mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best—less trouble).” *White Teeth* capers through this minefield of “origins,” satirizing equally the most earnest efforts of those who seek a return to their roots and those desperate for Western homogenization, but with deep sympathy and understanding. We are all in this now, Smith suggests, and the proliferation of differences has only just begun.

It is Irie who becomes the bearer, in almost messianic terms, of the third generation of Londoners. The grand, moralizing finale is the only weakness of Smith’s sophisticated plot structure. Irie becomes pregnant with the promise of the next generation. Herself a “half-caste,” Irie’s progeny adds to her English-Jamaican mixture a Bengalese heritage that is as complex in its origins as her own.

Smith revels in this coming new age of polyracial Londoners, and the novel often has a celebratory tone. In our conversation, she said: “I find a lot to celebrate in the community I live in and the people I see around me.... There’s a red head [walking with] a Chinese kid, a black kid, an Asian kid, and it doesn’t even seem to concern them. And it really lifts your spirits.” In *White Teeth*, the cultural past infuses the present generation, and the future is an experiment already in motion. For Smith, this variegated London landscape promises abundant beginnings for a new age that will never outgrow—nor escape—its many birthrights.

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Please send a cover letter, vita, a short writing sample, and three letters of recommendation by 1 November 2000 to: Caren Kaplan, Chair - Department of Women’s Studies - 3326 Dwinelle #1070 - University of California - Berkeley, CA 94720-1070. For further information, contact the Women’s Studies Department at (510) 642-8513. The University of California is an Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action Employer.

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Past imperfect

by Sandra Zagarell

Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization

edited by Joyce W. Warren and Margaret Dickie.

Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000,

304 pp., \$50.00 hardcover, \$25.00 paper.



Colonial, Early National, Antebellum, Postbellum, Modernist, Contemporary. You probably know the drill. In one version or another, these periods have shaped the contours of American literature as it’s been taught for generations.

This periodization is more than an academic matter. It underpins a troublesome understanding of history that continues to pervade American culture: “history” as a series of tidy segments, each coherent in itself and following neatly after the one before. Feminists, African Americanists and others have long insisted that this assumption reinforces the popular idea that history has mainly been created by white, male figures. This summer’s *The Patriot*, for instance, gives us Mel Gibson as the courageous American freedom fighter who changed the course of history, his appeal spiced up by a newly fashionable commitment to fatherhood and an anachronistic freedom from racism.

American history, however, was made by multitudes, not just heroes, and it never followed a single, simple trajectory. And American literature has always been rambunctiously diverse in style, genre and ideology. The fourteen essays of *Challenging Boundaries* take up the work of a wide array of women writers to get at problems with the periods as currently conceived. This fine collection illustrates that in broad outline the historical periods are quite legitimate: just as important, they are indispensable for getting a grip on the past. But the essays also underscore that the way in which historians and literary scholars have approached historical periods has perpetuated the standard view of history as a uniform affair conducted by a fairly homogeneous set of superstars.

Take the antebellum period. It is still celebrated as the era of heroic “founder” figures like Emerson and Hawthorne and often typified as transcendentalist or romantic. But it actually witnessed the emergence of an extraordinarily varied literature comprising activist slave narratives, sentimental poetry on such “ordinary” (or female) subjects as the death of an infant, and sensational yet semi-realistic novels about young women learning to make their way in the world, including Susan Warner’s 1851 blockbuster *The Wide, Wide World*.

We need to suspend homage to great figures and greatest hits to gain a fuller, more dynamic picture of each period. In *Challenging Boundaries*, essays by editors Joyce Warren and the late Margaret Dickie, and, among others, Susan McCabe, Crystal J. Lucky and Amelia Maria de la Luz Montes, help create this more dynamic view.

Dickie’s “Emily Dickinson in History and Literary History,” one of the volume’s most powerfully provoca-

tive pieces, exemplifies the payoffs and shortcomings of a longstanding feminist strategy that some contributors use: revising literary history by putting a woman writer (or several) at the center instead of a single man or group of men. Dickie shows how a previously unsuspected dimension of a writer can leap off the page once conventional wisdom is suspended—in this case, the presumption that Emily Dickinson’s reclusiveness included a feminine evasion of her own era, something particularly odd given the fact that she wrote her best-known poems during the Civil War. Dickie’s Dickinson is a war poet. Drawing on recent work about trauma and its repercussions, Dickie brilliantly teases out how Dickinson’s poetry expresses the Civil War’s ravaging of domestic life. One small example: Dickinson, who imagined deaths on the front vividly, also plumbed the phenomenon we know as survivor’s guilt: “It feels a shame to be Alive—/When Men so brave—are dead—/One envies the Distinguished Dust—/Permitted—such a Head—”

Yet despite her powerful reading of Dickinson, Dickie duplicates the limits of old-fashioned literary history by insisting on the centrality of a single figure. She argues, perhaps with tongue in cheek: “If Dickinson’s writings during the Civil War are to be placed at the center of nineteenth-century American literary history, the so-called American Renaissance [Emerson and company] could be renamed something more appropriate (perhaps American Nature Writing) and pushed back to 1830-55.” Then the map of American realism would be redrawn to start with Dickinson—except that this statement flies in the face of the facts. As Joyce Warren’s essay “Performativity and the Repositioning of American Literary Realism” shows, American women like Caroline Kirkland, Fanny Fern and Harriet E. Wilson wrote “realistically” well before the Civil War.

Dickie’s approach treats literary history as a form of genealogy, exploring lines of descent, or influence, from a single figure or group to the next, jockeying to award pride of rank to one group over another. When we play this game, we lose sight of the multitude of writers and actors, and sideline too much of the literature of an era.

Several essays here move in a different direction, asking not how feminist work alters the look of history but whether it has succeeded in getting the word out. The news is not good. Mary Loeffelholz’s witty “Essential, Portable, Mythical Margaret Fuller” uses the figure of Fuller to get at how earlier characterizations of antebellum American literature as romantic have been reframed by those major shapers of literary history—antholo-