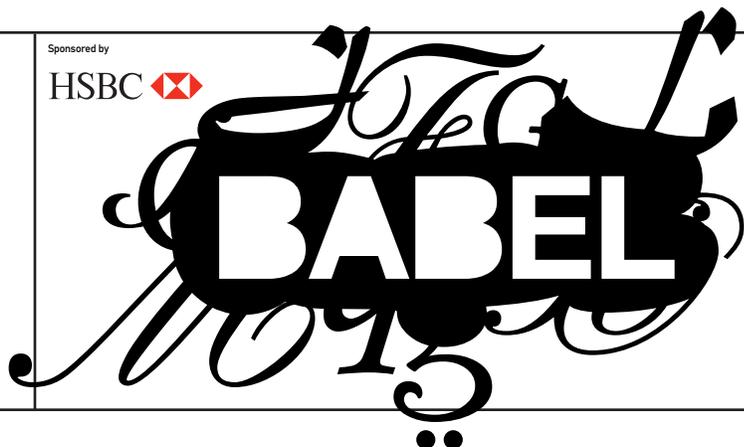
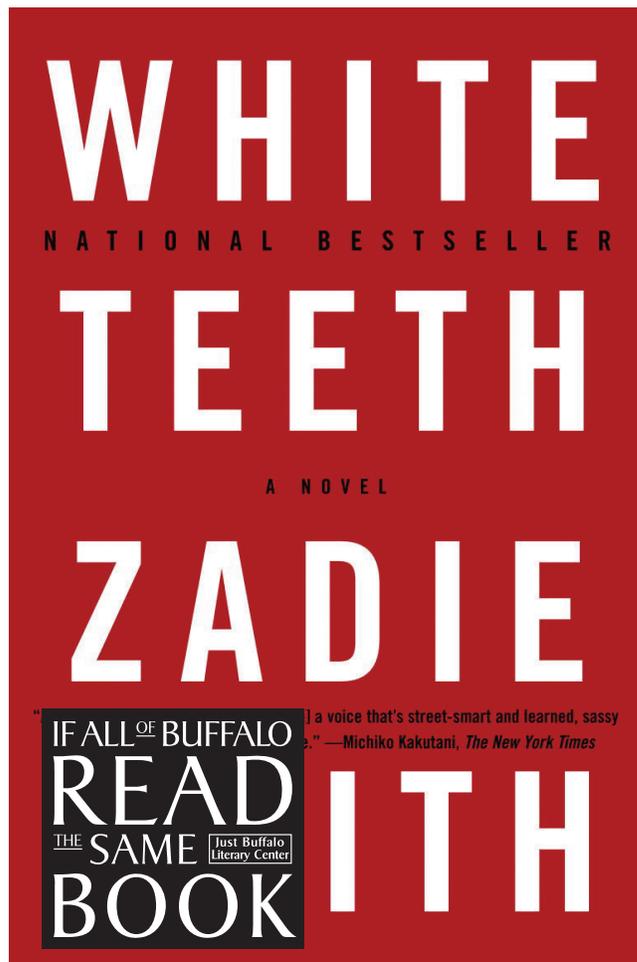


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ZADIE SMITH

READER'S GUIDE



Zadie Smith



At the age of 24, Cambridge University student Zadie Smith drew worldwide attention with her ambitious first novel, *White Teeth*. The novel earned Smith comparisons to Salman Rushdie for her ability to paint rich, multicultural portraits of modern society and family. Today, she is regarded as one of the most celebrated young writers of her generation and is the author and editor of three books and several literary collections, as well as a prolific essayist on literature, music, and pop culture.

Born Sadie Smith in 1975 in the working-class London borough of Brent, Smith grew up in Willesden, the gritty setting of *White Teeth*. She lived in a bustling household that included her mother, Yvonne Bailey, a Jamaican who had emigrated to England in 1969; her father, an Englishman named Harvey Smith; and her two younger brothers, half-sister, and half-brother. Smith went to local schools, took tap dancing, and dreamed of becoming a stage actress. She changed her name to “Zadie” when she was 14.

Smith went on to study English literature at King’s College at Cambridge, where she completed *White Teeth* during her senior year. Success came swiftly; a partial manuscript of the book earned her a lucrative contract with the British publisher, Hamish Hamilton, and *White Teeth* became an international bestseller upon publication in 2000. Two years later, it was adapted for television by Britain’s Channel 4. *Time* magazine named the book to their list of “100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005,” and the *Guardian* called it a “broad, teeming, comic novel of multiracial Britain.” The book also notably won the 2000 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, the 2000 Whitbread Book Award for best first novel, the Guardian First Book Award, the Commonwealth Writer’s First Book Prize, and the Betty Trask Award.

White Teeth is the sprawling, often humorous and sometimes heartbreaking story of the 50-plus years of friendship and follies shared between Samad Iqbal, a proud Bangladeshi Muslim and frustrated waiter, and bumbling, happy-go-lucky Archibald “Archie” Jones, whom Samad first met in a tank unit during World War II. Using non-linear flashbacks, *White Teeth* follows both men and their families as they struggle to find happiness and success in the racially diverse but tense modern-day London suburbs. The two are joined by Clara Bowden, Archie’s Jamaican wife and ex-Jehovah’s Witness, and their awkward daughter, Irie; Samad’s feisty younger wife, Alsana, and their troubled twin boys, Magid and Millat. *White Teeth* is also about the folks on the other side of the social tracks: the Chalfens, a white, upper-middle class family whose unconscious sense of entitlement and cultural blindness leads them smack into the Iqbal-Jones clans, with disastrous results.

“*White Teeth* is not really based on personal family experience,” Smith said in an interview when the book first came out. “When you come from a mixed-race family, it makes you think a bit harder about inheritance and what’s passed on from generation to generation. But as for racial tensions... A lot of it is guesswork or comes from reading accounts of immigrants coming here. I suppose the trick of the novel, if there is one, is to transpose the kind of friendships we have now to a generation which was less likely to be friends in that way.”



Using Samad and Archie's shared history and London's urban melting pot as the backdrop, Smith builds a web of plotlines to draw the three families together. While doing so, she employs humor and pathos to explore themes both universal and unique to British society from the mid-1970s through the new millennium: male friendship, generational gaps, fundamentalist religion, genetic modification, drug culture, parenting, fidelity, the British class system and xenophobia (specifically, the trouble with "Pakis" and "Caribbeans"). Throughout the novel, questions of fate and free will crop up, illustrated by Smith's trademark omniscient narration and starting with Archie's favorite flip of the coin for every decision, no matter how insignificant. Samad's grandfather, purportedly intoxicated and waving a rifle, stumbled his way into India's history, and even Clara's Carribean ancestry—and her married life—appear to be determined simply by the "tickle in a sneeze," as Archie is fond of saying. Indeed, many of the plot twists in *White Teeth*

hang on a thread, touched off by the families' internal chaos and ignited by a misguided outburst or unguarded confession. The tragicomic ways in which these displaced immigrants and their second-generation offspring cope with life serve as backhanded compliments that Smith, with tongue firmly in cheek, uses to celebrate their "resourcefulness."

After *White Teeth's* whirlwind press tours, Smith served as a writer in residence at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, during which time she edited an anthology of erotic short stories, *Piece of Flesh* (2001). In 2002 she published her second novel, *The Autograph Man*, which continues her focus on multiculturalism and cults of personality with the story of a Jewish-Chinese man obsessed with a Russian-American actress. In 2005 she published her third novel, *On Beauty*—a work set in Boston about two feuding professors and their multiethnic families. The book won the 2006 Orange Prize for Fiction and was shortlisted for Britain's highest literary honor, the Man Booker Prize.

Smith has published essays on subjects including rap music (her two brothers are rap artists), her family, and the war in Iraq. "An essay is an act of imagination. It still takes quite as much art as fiction," she once wrote in the *Guardian*. She has been working on an unreleased book of essays, *The Morality of the Novel*, that examines the work of several 20th century writers.

Smith visited the United States as a 2002–2003 Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study Fellow at Harvard University, has guest edited the BBC Radio 4 "Today" show, and taught fiction at Columbia University School of the Arts. In 2010 she joined New York University as a tenured professor of fiction and was named New Books reviewer for *Harper's Magazine*.

Smith is married to Irish writer and poet Nick Laird, whom she met while at Cambridge University (she dedicated *On Beauty* to him). The couple splits their time between New York City and London with their two-year old daughter, Katherine.

“HAPPY MULTICULTURAL LAND:” ZADIE SMITH’S LONDON

White Teeth is a story about postmodern London that confronts the cultural traditions, shifting identities, and historical flashbacks of England’s colonial past as an empire that once ruled countries like India and Jamaica. In it, Zadie Smith retells English history, particularly the struggles of minority groups to find their identities within the white majority by reclaiming British traditions as their own. *White Teeth* is the story of how and why modern-day London has become a cultural collage of racial, cultural, and religious identities.

Smith starts by connecting her protagonists, often ironically, to their own pasts. As a 2002 *Guardian* review of *White Teeth* states, “It is colonialism that has brought almost all the characters to London, and they are sometimes conscious of their post-colonial identities.” Because these identities are so wide-ranging, and so intricately dependent on each other, “Smith seems to be taking and enjoying new liberties rather than plotting the consequences of empire.” There’s the moral schism of Samad Iqbal, a trained scientist and sexually frustrated Muslim, trapped in a low-rent job and an adulterous affair. He prides himself on his ties to his great-grandfather—the Indian revolutionary/buffoon, Mangal Pande—as much as on his right to enjoy a pint at O’Connell’s where he and his white friend, Archie, are comfortably ensconced in middle-class English society. There’s Hortense Bowden, whose unshakable faith as a Jehovah’s Witness makes her a racial purist. Yet she was also the love child of a white English officer posted to the West Indies who was intent on “improving” Hortense’s Jamaican mother, Ambrosia. And there are second-generation characters like Irie Jones, who is half black, half English and whose unborn child is the result of a mixing of “genotype and phenotype” that seems to take place unconsciously among London’s immigrant communities.

From monoculture to multicultural society

Several forces brought about that cultural variety in Britain, especially London, from the latter decades of the 18th century through the Second World War: explosive growth of land and resources in the expanding British Empire, and increasing global trading and treaties with Commonwealth nations, including Britain’s domination in the slave trade and in recruiting a new immigrant workforce from the West Indies, India and Africa. As a result of lax or nonexistent immigration rules, millions

of Indian immigrants arrived in Britain during the First World War—including thousands from Bangladesh alone—bolstering the British military and domestic workforce. Racial tensions increased and led to a series of race riots in 1919.

More immigrants arrived during World War II to help support a shelled and economically battered London. After the war’s end in 1945, the city underwent a major reconstruction with the help of skilled laborers from the West Indies. British leaders gravitated toward making England a “welfare state” that offered equality for all. In 1948, a ship called the Empire Windrush landed in London bearing nearly 500 West Indian men, mostly Jamaicans. Mass immigration to the United Kingdom boomed, along with racial prejudice and violence. The British government felt forced to pass tighter restrictions on non-white immigration, but the 1950s still saw an increase in cross-pollination between Commonwealth nations; London’s immigrant populations swelled as new foreign workers helped build hospitals, schools, and housing. As the 1960s approached, America’s counter-culture crossed the ocean and tensions increased between white and black Londoners, famously illustrated in the 1958 Notting Hill riots where white, mostly teenage gangs attacked the neighborhood’s growing West Indian community.

By the 1970s, immigration was tightly controlled and British residency was allowed only if a passport holder had a native-born parent or grandparent. During the next two decades, a sharp decline in the British economy shut down London’s docks and factories, pitting neighbor against neighbor as unemployment rose. Afro-Caribbeans and other non-whites lived with daily reminders of their “foreign” status, even if they were British nationals, and governmental equality legislation made only modest inroads to combat the race problems. In 1976, a lengthy factory strike in Smith’s Willesden neighborhood made global headlines and revealed London’s struggle to integrate. The city eventually rebounded, and by the 1990s had reclaimed its place as a global capital with a vibrant, diverse population. By the end of the century, 29 percent of Londoners were from a minority ethnic group, as compared to nine percent in Britain as a whole. In fact, more than half of the UK’s non-white population lived in London.

The new “flaneurs”

Like her literary mentors, Charles Dickens, E. M. Forster, and Martin Amis, Zadie Smith seeks to explore cultural disconnection and identity through the specifics of London as a mirror of society. She does so by holding up that mirror to the lives of second-generation immigrants like herself: Irie, Millat, and Magid, all born and raised in England. She understands their struggle to come to terms with their British birthright while acknowledging their ethnic heritage, and she explores this by writing about what she observes and knows best—her hometown. “I love London,” she once told the BBC in an interview. “It’s more like I can’t really survive without it. I certainly couldn’t write without it.”

With her Cambridge background in English literature, Smith employs her literary roots, too, using the places and characters she knew growing up to celebrate the city she adores. Dickens, in particular, influenced Smith with his penchant for “flaneurism,” what she calls “that kind of daily stepping in the town.... He used to walk to school from Camden, which is quite near me, to his grammar school, which was something like five miles away, every single day, through the whole of the city, and then back again.” That intimate, daily interaction with the streets, people, markets, shops, and families of London’s neighborhoods is, Smith feels, “a great way to know something about a town,” and served her well as she describes a 1990s-era London through her own eyes.

Smith also explores London’s class warfare—like Forster did in novels such as *Howard’s End*—what she has called “a good example of the perfectly suburban life led by Leonard Bast and that kind of lower class, suburban life bumping into upper-middle-class city life.” Think of the Chalfens in *White Teeth*, clashing with the two immigrant families in their misguided attempt to “improve” them through exposure to education, culture, and science. Who, Smith’s narrator implies, is actually “educating” whom on culture? *White Teeth* also is indebted to British writer Martin Amis, especially his novel *London Fields*. “It was the first time I had read about a London since Forster where he got absolutely right the random connections that are made,” Smith said in the BBC interview, adding, “Martin understood about the movement in London—the natural passage from one place to another. You can very quickly go very high and very low in the same week and I think it makes London kids very streetwise and very society-wise.” Perhaps no one is more streetwise

than Millat Iqbal, whose unique brand of flaneurism takes him from Chalfen’s well-heeled home one day, to televised suburban riots and the fanatical prayer sessions of KEVIN (the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation).

As the millennium closes in at the end of *White Teeth*, racism in England has become quietly institutionalized and xenophobia—just before 9/11—is resurgent. Science (Marcus Chalfen’s FutureMouse) and religion (KEVIN) represent the mounting tension between new and old ways of combating these social ills—a conflict personified in the Iqbal twins. Despite these problems, the country is more diverse than ever and, through intermarriage, multiple ethnicities have become deeply imbedded into the fabric of British society. According to the UK Office of National Statistics, in 2004, 87 percent of people who identified themselves as of mixed ethnic origin described their national identity as British. In her version of the “London novel,” Smith seeks to recognize and explore Salman Rushdie’s “new empire within Britain,” where immigrants and their descendants are incapable of escaping their pasts but, in recognizing their non-British roots, somehow transcend them. While colonialism enabled the Commonwealth stereotype of British subjects who were indebted to the former empire, post-colonial culture—everything that came after the empire fell—gained new power and freedom from a more fully integrated multiculturalism primarily found in cosmopolitan cities like London.

In *White Teeth*, Smith sets those labels aside altogether. Fully aware of the paradox she creates, she goes back in time to move her stories forward into a future where “the past is prologue,” and where her novel documents London’s painful awareness of its own diversity by taking its characters’ ethnicities a bit for granted. How typically (and paradoxically) British of them to just “get on with it,” in Archie’s words. This is also Smith’s imperative, she says, because “People are people are people, and the sooner the London novel gets to grips with that and stops writing the Indian-English novel or the Black-English novel,” she says, the better. It must be enough to “just to let the novel be itself.”

Reader's Questions

1. One notable aspect of teeth is their longevity—how they remain when the rest of the body's unique identifiers are gone. Why do you think Smith titles certain chapters of this book after teeth, or stages related to teeth?
2. How is fate embraced or refused by each of the book's main characters? By the end of the book, who believes in fate the most? The least? Why?
3. In Chapter 1, Smith describes Clara Bowden as an "accident" that happened to Archie, precipitated by their chance meeting. How does Clara Bowden's entire family—from her child, Irie, to her mother Hortense and their ancestors in Jamaica—fall victim to literal and figurative "accidents?"
4. Why do you think Smith begins the book with Archie's attempted suicide? What about the start of a new year is significant at the beginning and the end of the novel?
5. On page 15, as Archie rejoices his narrow escape from death, Smith writes, "Generally, women can't do this, but men retain the ancient ability to leave a family and a past." What does she mean? Do you think Archie is a "typical" man in this sense?
6. How does Smith portray men and women? How does race play a role in their beliefs about gender? Who has the real power? Give an example of where race and ethnicity as well as gender come into play in directing a character's behavior.
7. When Shiva and Samad discuss Samad's infatuation with Poppy Burt-Jones, what does Samad mean when he exclaims, "I don't wish to be a modern man"? What is Shiva referring to when he warns Samad against having an affair with an Englishwoman because there's "too much bloody history"?
8. How is Glenard Oaks a microcosm of London's ethnic melting pot? How do "fags," or cigarettes with the "stuff that turns white teeth yellow," help bring these social factions together in the schoolyard?
9. Zadie Smith has been called the "postmodern Charles Dickens" because her work is heavily influenced by his depictions of 19th-century working-class England. Where does Smith evoke Dickens in *White Teeth*?
10. *White Teeth* employs humor to great effect, often as Smith's omniscient narrator chimes in to comment and explain the action in the novel. Do you like the narrator's voice? How does her use of comedy impact the novel's emotional power?
11. Give some examples of how religion plays a key role in *White Teeth*. What beliefs stand in for religion for the Chalfens? In the Jones household?
12. Identify some examples of racism and xenophobia (fear of foreigners), throughout the novel. For example, when Hortense rejects Clara's marriage to Archie on grounds of his race, and Samad and Alsana wish their sons to be raised as good Muslim Bengalis (NOT "Pakis"), what is Smith suggesting about London's multicultural communities? Why is it so important to them that their culture stay "pure"?
13. Compare the examples of racism in Question 12 to the scene in Chapter Four, when Archie's boss tries to justify his company's discrimination against Clara. How are they different? How might they be the same?
14. What does becoming a Witness do for Ryan Topps that Clara could (and would) not?
15. Archie and Samad may have missed out on the action in World War II, but what are the key points in Chapter Five that cement their friendship?
16. How did the physical wounds they suffered in the war forever change their lives? How did the decisions they made during the war do the same?
17. Samad is often angry: about the war ending, about his grandfather's reputation, about India, about his job as a waiter. How does that anger mirror his son Millat's? Where else is anger illustrated by immigrants and second-generation characters? Who or what is to blame?

18. Why is upward mobility and social status so important to the immigrant population in London? Give some examples using Alsana and her extended family.
19. How is Millat like his father? How is he different from his own twin brother?
20. Do you think Samad made the right choice in sending Magid to India? Why or why not?
21. What characteristics of the Indian mutineer/hero Mangal Pande do you see in his great-grandson, Samad? Why is finding the book documenting Pande's life so important to Samad?
22. In Chapter 10, how does Samad's version of his great-grandfather's history compare to the English version and to Archie's version? Identify other examples where the characters disagree about past events. What is Smith suggesting about the immutability of history?
23. O'Connell's represents a place where "everything was remembered, nothing was lost." Why is this so important for Samad and Archie? What version of English life does it represent?
24. Diane Abbott, a member of the British Parliament (whose parents were first-generation Jamaican immigrants) has said, "For millions of people all over the world, Britain is the land of tradition, the Royal Family, Beefeaters, Bobbies on the beat and, above all, white people. In much of middle America, it comes as a shock for them to hear that there are any black people in Britain at all." How does *White Teeth* subvert these stereotypes?
25. In various ways, Smith writes about the "gaps" that exist between groups of people, whether these gaps arise within one family, between several families, or among the sexes, the haves and have-nots, the believers and nonbelievers, and various ethnic groups in London. Name some specific examples of these gaps and which characters are able to overcome them.
26. Describe the differences between Alsana and her niece, Neena. Give other examples of where age comes into play for other characters in the book. Who do you think are the wisest, most well-adjusted characters? Why?
27. What are some similarities between Millat's and Magid's obsessions with extremist religion and science, respectively? What about their lives appears to drive them toward these obsessions? What other characters harbor obsessions in *White Teeth*?
28. Smith writes about Irie's self-image problem, "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a strange land." What does she mean? How is that "strangeness" evident during Irie's experience at the hair salon?
29. What does Neena mean when she tells Irie, "The Afro was cool, man. It was wicked. It was *yours*"?
30. Why does Irie choose dentistry as a future vocation? How does her choice connect to the novel's title?
31. Are the Chalfens a realistic example of a white, upper-middle-class family? Why or why not?
32. Give some examples of when Marcus and Joyce Chalfen act politically incorrect at their houseguests' expenses. Why do you think Smith portrays the couple as being so clueless about their impact on Irie, Millat, and their own children?
33. Why do Marcus Chalfen and Magid Iqbal develop such a close bond? What is Smith proposing about human beings and our need to improve upon nature?
34. How do you understand the following statement from Chapter 17: "Not everybody deserves love all the time"? Which troubled relationships in the book support or reject this claim?
35. How are the goals of KEVIN and FATE similar?
36. With regards to Zeno's paradox, do you think humans escape "fate," or the consequences of their decisions? Can science overcome (human) nature? What examples in the novel support your opinion?
37. Why is the "What is past is prologue" a particularly fitting epigraph for *White Teeth*?

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