

Introduction for Zadie Smith

By Joost de Vries

It's always tempting to say "*The guest of this evening needs no introduction*", but that always seems to be the cheap and easy way out.

The guest of this evening published her first book, *White teeth*, when she was just 24, completing her last year at Cambridge University. That book, as well as her second, called *The Autograph Man*, was a satirical portrait of England at the End of the millennium, filled with quips and witticisms.



It was a huge bestseller that propelled the author to instant literary stardom.

She followed up on those two novels with *On Beauty*, I dare to say a warm, tragic, funny novel about a multi-ethnic social climbing academic family in 21st century Boston, almost written in a certain 19th classical tradition.

Her fourth novel could not have been more different, being called *NW* – which refers to the postal code to North West London (where she is originally from). *NW* is an experimental, I would say, modernist approach to the novel, with a story about a group of working class friends in a council estate.

Even though her novels are all wildly different in form and style, you can easily spot the similarities in theme. The recurring dilemma's her characters struggle with are family, identity, ethnicity, class, celebrity and poverty. They struggle with the difference between the way society regards them, and the way they regard themselves.

They ask themselves questions about how to fit in into a family and how to fit into a society, how to stay true to your roots when you are climbing the social ladder. It is fair to say there are very few writers working in the 21st century who write as well about those minor class differences that the untrained eye probably would never even see.

Which is not to say that her novels are just political social realism put into fiction. Perhaps the best way to describe her themes is to use her own words against her.

In her essay on the late David Foster Wallace she wrote that Wallace, I quote, "was always asking essentially the same question, *how do I recognize that other people are real, as I am?* And the strange, quasi mythical answer was always the same too. *You may have to give up your attachment to the 'self'*". I don't mean that Wallace preached this moral in his work' (I'm still quoting her here) "when I think of a moralist I don't think of a preacher. On the contrary, he was writer who placed himself in the hazard of his own terms, undergoing them as real problems, both in life and on the page. For this reason, I suspect he will remain a writer who appeals above all to the young. It's young people who

understand best his sense of urgency, and who tend to take abstract existential questions like these seriously, as interrogations that relate directly to themselves. The struggle with ego, the struggle with the self, the struggle to allow other people to exist in their genuine ‘otherness’.’

End of quote. I think it’s fair to say that all of the above can also be said for our guest of this evening. Her novels are also about the big humanist themes, love, belonging, friendship, despair, what’s it like to be a human, what’s it like to be a ‘Self’ surrounded in a sea of Others.

She published a truly tremendous book of essays called *Changing my mind*. She has written about stand-up comedy, about Brexit, about finding the perfect beach, she has interviewed Jay Z. She was actually invited to the Met Ball, at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which is the kind of event where you run into Taylor Swift and Kanye West.

In case you were wondering, she wore an ecru silk moiré strapless top with vintage pink embroidered overskirt and a cobalt blue silk moiré midi trousers for the Springs/Summer Collection of the 2016 Delpozo Collection.

She’s a tenured professor at New York University, where she teaches creative writing, she’s a frequent contributor to magazines such as *The New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*. And to top all that, she recently found viral internet fame with a video of her suavely singing a Billie Holliday song at the Carlyle Hotel. She is here to talk about her new novel, called *Swing Time*, ladies and gentlemen, will you please give a warm welcome to Ms. Zadie Smith!

Joost de Vries is a journalist and author. He is Arts Editor for the Groene Amsterdammer, where he also reviews Dutch literature. He has written two novels: Clausewitz and De republiek.



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