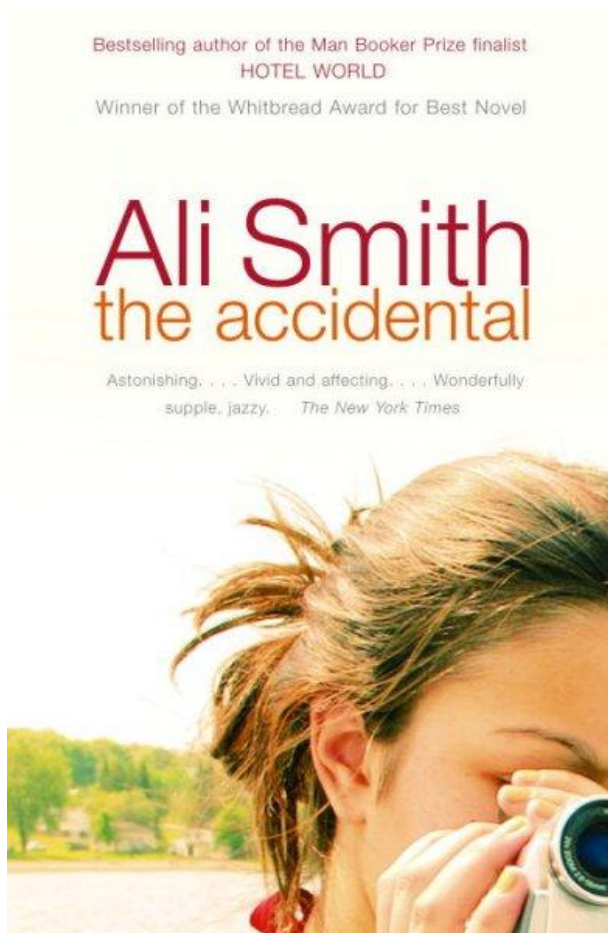


## About the book...



Amber, thirty-something and barefoot, shows up at the door of the Norfolk cottage that the Smarts are renting for the summer. She talks her way in. She tells nothing but lies. She stays for dinner.

Eve Smart, the author of a best-selling series of biographical reconstructions, thinks Amber is a student with whom her husband, Michael, is sleeping. Michael, an English professor, knows only that her car broke down. Daughter Astrid, age twelve, thinks she's her mother's friend. Son Magnus, age seventeen, thinks she's an angel. Everyone is politely confused and Amber is invited to dinner. She is a consummate liar and manipulator who manages to seduce everyone in the family in some significant way.

As Amber insinuates herself into the family, the questions of who she is and how she's come to be there drop away. Instead, dazzled by her seeming exoticism, the Smarts begin to examine the accidents of their lives through the searing lens of Amber's perceptions. When Eve finally banishes her from the cottage, Amber disappears from their sight, but not—they discover when they return home to London—from their profoundly altered lives.

## About the author...



Ali Smith is a writer, born in 1962 in Inverness, Scotland, to working-class parents. She was raised in a council house in Inverness and now lives in Cambridge. She studied at Aberdeen, and then at Cambridge, for a Ph.D. that was never finished. In a 2003 interview with writing magazine *Msllexia*, she talked briefly about the difficulty of becoming ill with chronic fatigue syndrome for a year and how it forced her to give up her job as a lecturer at University of Strathclyde to focus on what she really wanted to do: writing. Openly gay, she has been with her partner Sarah Wood for 20 years.

Her first book, *Free Love and Other Stories* (1995), won the Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award and a Scottish Arts Council Award. Her first novel, *Like*, was published to critical acclaim in 1997. Set in Scotland and Cambridge, the book tells the story of an enduring childhood friendship. A second collection of short stories, *Other Stories and Other Stories*, was published in 1999.

Her second novel, *Hotel World* (2001), won the Encore Award, a Scottish Arts Council Book Award and the inaugural Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year Award. It was also shortlisted for both the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Booker Prize for Fiction. Set during the course of one night, the narrative follows the adventures of five different characters, one of whom is the ghost of a chambermaid killed in a bizarre accident. Ever prolific, *The Whole Story and Other Stories* appeared in 2003.

In 2004, her novel, *The Accidental*, was published, and won the 2005 Whitbread Novel Award and was a

finalist for the Man Booker Prize, the Orange Prize, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. *Girl Meets Boy* came out in 2007. She has also published a play, *The Seer* (2006). *The Book Lover* (2008) is a personal anthology of favorite pieces of writing gathered over the course of her life. *The First Person: and Other Stories* will be for sale in January, 2009 in the United States.

Smith partnered with the Scottish band Trashcan Sinatras and wrote the lyrics to a song called "Half An Apple", a simple, bittersweet love song about keeping half an apple spare for a loved one who is gone. "Half An Apple" was released in 2007, in the album *Ballads of the Book*, a collaboration between some of Scotland's top contemporary writers and poets, and established and upcoming Scottish musicians. It's a project that received enthusiastic support of the Scottish Arts Council.

## **Awards**

*The Accidental* received the 2005 Whitbread Novel Award.

## **Reviews**

*The Washington Post*

"Id est is long for i.e. or rather i.e. is short for id est," explains 12-year-old Astrid Smart in Ali Smith's spellbinding novel *The Accidental*, which won England's Whitbread Award for best novel last month. Astrid is almost as fond of saying "id est" as she is of making mini-documentaries on her very expensive digital video camera, which she uses to record the goings-on at the not-quite-as-nice-as-it-was-billed summer house she's sharing with her mother, brother and stepfather in Norfolk, in the rustic countryside north of London. As they all discover, you can take a vacation from your job, your school or your friends -- but you can't take a vacation from your id, that murky province of the Freud-mapped psyche governed by primitive desires and unsavory impulses. The Smarts have big secrets. Astrid is being bullied at school, and her frustration is morphing into fury. Her teenage brother, Magnus, is so guilt-racked over the tragic result of a prank gone bad that he has convinced himself he is a monster and has privately condemned himself to death. Their stepfather, Michael, seems unaware that the role of the womanizing English professor is a hoary cliché and has thus cast himself in that role with abandon. And their mother, Eve, is still scratching at familial wounds inflicted during her childhood that have stunted her ability to connect with her husband and children. Into this psychological briar patch strolls Amber, a blonde, brazen Rorschach blot of a houseguest who will profoundly shake up each family member before wearing out her welcome. She

arrives one day, unannounced and very much uninvited, and immediately makes herself at home. Michael assumes that she is a journalist there to interview Eve about her best-selling books. Astrid guesses that she is a friend of the family. Eve sullenly figures that she is just an especially nerdy student (and lover) of Michael's, though she is long past the point of feeling anything like jealousy. To be honest, Eve doesn't feel much of anything these days, save the constant, low-grade panic that accompanies her writer's block. When Amber meets Magnus, who has reached the end of his figurative rope and tied a literal one around his neck, her countenance -- "very beautiful, a little rough-looking, like a beautiful used girl off an internet site" -- is enough to lull him down from his noose. Presented with this new reason to live, he rebounds; before long, Amber is regularly escorting him into the village for mid-day assignations in an empty church. Astrid, too, becomes enchanted with this mysterious, magnetic stranger who takes her into town for adventures at the grocery store, where Amber earns the scrutiny of security guards with her odd behavior and tests the loyalty of her much younger friend by intentionally destroying her video camera. Turns out Amber doesn't like to have her picture taken. Or is it that her picture can't be taken? Amber is flippant, caustic and conniving, traits that make her recognizably, albeit unattractively, human. But throughout *The Accidental*, up until the very last words, Smith drops subtle and tantalizing hints that

Amber may in fact be a projection of the Smarts' damaged psyches, a shared delusion whose purpose is to rattle them out of their torpor and compel them to act. For Magnus, a gawky math nerd, she clearly represents the promise of incipient sexuality. When Amber pays a scary visit to the bullying girls who have been tormenting poor Astrid at school, it leads ultimately to the rapprochement that Astrid seems incapable of effecting on her own. Michael, whose extracurricular activities with female students are beginning to attract attention, is stunned to discover that -- try as he might -- he cannot picture himself having sex with Amber. On a train ride, doing his best to think lascivious thoughts of her, he is capable only of imagining her sitting opposite him, "looking out of the train window. She was examining her nails. She was examining the ends of her hair. She was reading a book in a language he didn't know." Despite the fact that she treats him with barely concealed contempt, or perhaps because of it, he has fallen deeply in love with Amber, and the introduction of true love in his life threatens to put an end to his Don Juan ways. Speaking of Don Juan, did I mention that a fair chunk of Michael's interior monologue is written in ottava rima, the stanza used by Lord Byron in his epic poem about the legendary Spanish swordsman? (Other portions self-consciously evoke Shakespeare and e.e. cummings.) Smith's flights of fancy would grate if she weren't so nimble. But like the stream-of-consciousness she employs to describe each

character's peculiar relationship to Amber, these aren't just literary gimmicks. When Michael slips into verse, Smith is revealing much more than her winning way with iambic pentameter. She's showing us how Michael sees his own tawdry situation: as epic, meaningful, worthy of commemoration. To illustrate Eve's style of writing -- she is famous for a series of biographies that imaginatively "extend" the lives of those who died before their time -- Smith has Eve tell the story of her life, and her own premature emotional death, using the same Q&A format as her books. In winning the prestigious Whitbread, the Scottish-born, 43-year-old Smith beat out the likes of Salman Rushdie and Nick Hornby. Good for the judges. Smith is a dazzling talent, fearlessly lassoing different styles and ideas and playfully manipulating them. Though *The Accidental* is not a conventionally funny novel, readers may find themselves laughing -- in surprise and delight -- at the way Smith takes a literary trope and riffs on it until she's turned it inside out, the way a great jazz musician might. (When Amber obliquely tells the story of her childhood through the recitation of scenes from classic movies, the tour-de-force passage gets at the unique symbology of cinema in a way that eludes even our most erudite film critics.) Upon returning to London, the Smarts are presented with evidence of Amber's existence -- which doesn't make her presence in their lives any less spectral, however. Like a mesmerizing image caught on camera and projected onto a screen, she has been both real

and not real at the same time. Her ghost continues to reside in each family member long after she has disappeared, i.e., she'll be haunting them -- and readers -- for quite a while.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Highly touted Brit Smith (*Hotel World*, 2002, etc.) is an original whose choppy perspectives and internal riffs take some getting used to. This third novel, her second to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize, reveals its hand slowly as it switches among Alhambra, a recurrent character, and the separate trajectories of the Smart family, on holiday in Norfolk. Astrid, 12 and bored, sees life at one remove through the viewfinder of her camera; her brother Magnus, implicated in a bullying that led to a school mate's death, is borderline suicidal; their mother, Eve, a writer, is blocked; and their stepfather, Michael, an academic, is a compulsive philanderer. Each of these lives is thrown onto a different track by the arrival of mysterious, mercurial Amber, who is probably not telling the truth when she says she became a vagrant after killing a child in a car accident. Amber is lovely, fierce and unpredictable. She throws Astrid's camera away and seduces Magnus. Indifferent towards Michael's physical charms, she reveals to him the waning of his sexual allure. After Amber kisses Eve, she is thrown out of the house, and takes her revenge by stripping the Smarts' London home of everything,



including faucets and doorknobs. But even bigger things are ahead. Inventive, intelligent, playful, Smith has a pin-sharp ear for her characters' voices. Underneath the glittering surface lies a darker debate about truth and consequences, as well as a magnificent history of the cinema.

### *The New Yorker*

Smith's book concerns an attractive stranger who shows up on the doorstep of an unhappy family and is unquestioningly taken in. The visitor, armed with a perfect combination of candor, free-spiritedness, and rough love, proceeds to manipulate each of her hosts. Just as abruptly, and, perhaps, predictably, she disappears. We never learn much about her—her only purpose, it seems, was to jolt the family members out of their respective messes—and her righteous self-assurance can get tiresome. But the novel is saved by its skillful and touching rendering of the mental state of each family member. Smith's well-honed, even obsessive prose gives a feeling of eavesdropping on her characters' innermost thoughts.

### *Publishers Weekly*/*\*Starred Review\**/

While the Smarts are a happy, prosperous British family on the surface, underneath they are as friable as a Balkan republic. Eve suffers from a block about writing yet another of her popular Genuine Article

books (a series of imaginary reconstructions of obscure, actual figures from the past). Michael, her English professor husband, is a philanderer whose sexual predation on his students has reached critical mass. Teenaged Magnus, Eve's son by first husband Adam, is consumed by guilt around a particularly heinous school prank. And Astrid, Eve and Adam's daughter, is a 12-year-old channeling the angst of a girl three years older. Into this family drops one Amber MacDonald, a mysterious stranger who embeds herself in the family's summer rental in Norfolk and puts them all under her bullying spell. By some collective hallucination—one into which Smith (*Hotel World*) utterly and completely draws the reader—each Smart sees Amber as a savior, even as she violates their codes and instincts. So sure-handed are Smith's overlapping descriptions of the same events from different viewpoints that her simple, disquieting story lifts into brilliance. When Eve finally breaks the spell and kicks Amber out, it precipitates a series of long overdue jolts that destroys the family's fraught equilibrium, but the shock of Smith's facility remains

### *Booklist*

British novelist and Booker Prize nominee Smith (*Hotel World*, 2001) renders acrobatic prose that seems in a perpetual state of acceleration. At the opening of her mesmerizing new novel, a barefoot, thirtysomething stranger named Amber abandons her

broken-down car and arrives at the doorstep of Eve and Michael Smart, who are summering in Norfolk, England, with Eve's children, 12-year-old Astrid and 17-year-old Magnus. Amber stays for dinner and quickly weaves her way into the Smarts' lives, befriending impressionable Astrid; seducing math-whiz Magnus (guilt-ridden over his unwitting role in the suicide of a fellow student); enchanting their haughty, adulterous stepfather, Michael; and swiftly sizing up their mother, Eve, a writer conflicted over the success of her hack novels. The novel is alternately narrated by each member of the Smart family, but it is candid Astrid who steals the show, wandering through town with digital camera in hand. Some readers may be frustrated by the transparency of Amber, who serves as little more than a catalyst, prompting dramatic changes in the lives of her "accidental" hosts.

## **Literary Criticism**

### *Who's That Girl?*

The story, though familiar, has its appeal: a middle-class family, reasonably well off but held together more by habit and convention than affection, is infiltrated by an enigmatic stranger. The stranger, with eerie cunning, locates the secret latch in each member's psyche and flips it. Cherished secrets,

squelched desires and nursed grudges burst forth. Relationships turn inside out and upside down. The stranger departs, leaving the family irrevocably changed. But as any farmer's daughter or man who walks into a bar can tell you, the premise isn't what counts most. Success is a matter of delivery; at least, Ali Smith's novel "*The Accidental*" -- winner of a Whitbread Book Award and finalist for the Man Booker Prize -- places all its chips on that bet.

The family in question consists of Eve Smart, a writer; her two children, 12-year-old Astrid and 17-year-old Magnus; and their stepfather, Eve's second husband, Michael, an English professor. Into the disappointing summer cottage the Smarts rent in a drab village in an unfashionable part of England walks a woman named Amber, "a bit raddled," to Michael's eye, "maybe 30, maybe older, tanned like a hitchhiker." By the time they realize that no one has invited her, she has already insinuated herself into their lives by a variety of counterintuitive means. Magnus, whom she seduces, has good reason to be smitten, but he marvels that Amber is "ruthless with Astrid," "unbelievably rude to Michael" and frankly "bored silly by his mother," yet she has his family eating out of her hand.

The novel is divided into three sections ("The Beginning," "The Middle" and "The End"), each further divided into four parts, one per family

member. The considerable charm of "*The Accidental*" lies in the way it follows each character's mind for a while, tracing not so much the stream of these people's consciousness as the idling of their thoughts. Astrid is bored, finicky, given to speculating about how things begin and end, and she videotapes daybreaks with the digital camera her parents have just given her. She tapes wildflowers, a dead animal she finds on the road, the housecleaner. She calculates what percentage of her life has been spent during the new century compared with the rest of her family. She wonders what might have happened if Icarus' father had given the wings he made to "a girl instead, who maybe would have known how to use them properly." Her thoughts are a steady and often very funny flow of undifferentiated items; like the camera, she's not wedded to or blinded by any preconceived notions of what's important.

Magnus, by contrast, obsesses. At school, he joined in a prank that led to a classmate's suicide, and the facts of the case drum unceasingly in his thoughts: "They took her head. They fixed it on the other body. Then they sent it round everybody's e-mail. Then she killed herself." His parents barely notice the perilous depth of his despair. Michael, about to embark on another of a long series of affairs with his students, subsists on a sweet, steady diet of self-congratulation: "There was a lecture in this, maybe for the Ways to Read course. Source? clearly French, he would look it up. Larkin, for

instance, the Sid James of English lyric poetry (now that was quite a good observation, Dr. Michael Smart firing on all cylinders) knew the power of cliché."

When she's sure no one's looking, Eve lies on the floor of the cottage's summerhouse, viciously blocked. She is the author of a popular series of "autobiotruefictinterviews" called "The Genuine Article," books that start with the profile of a real person, someone who died young at the time of the Second World War. Imagining what might have happened had he or she survived, Eve concocts an "interview" that explores this un-lived life. The series really takes off with the publication of the story of a Jewish woman who posed as a good Nazi wife. Eve, like a lot of authors, has memorized quotes from her critics (Smith gets the nudgy, confiding tone of British reviewers just right) -- although The Guardian's "deeply assuaging read" has been overshadowed by a rant in The Independent accusing the series of "murky self-indulgence." She wonders if it isn't time she followed the rant's advice and stopped dwelling on "mendacious glorified stories of a war which may as well by now have happened planets away from this one." Eve now inflicts upon herself the kind of pointed inquiry she should be applying to one of her quasi-fictional subjects.

Amber's brusque interventions teach Astrid how to challenge arbitrary authority and Magnus how to go

on with life without ignoring his soiled conscience. The besotted Michael she simply ignores, and this unprecedented frustration gives him access to a previously untapped, and Larkinesque, poetic gift. (His "Middle" section is a fractured sonnet sequence.) Eve she accuses of being a fake, of being boring, of being "a dead person." "Is that it?" she retorts after Eve has shared an inane, party-chatter anecdote about meeting her first husband. "Is that the high point, the true-blue, the secret-can't-be-told everything-must-go ultimate all-singing all-dancing story-of-you? . . . Next you'll be telling me the 'story' of giving birth to your babies."

Even after Eve kicks her out, Amber hasn't finished messing with the family, but the hands that finally capsize the Smarts' settled lives are their own. This critique of bourgeois complacency is the weakest aspect of "*The Accidental*," with its too-easy contempt for the family, its tendency to finger-wag and Smith's sometimes cartoonish notions of psychology. (Magnus's story in particular is a farrago of implausibilities.) The novel takes place over the summer of 2003, and the contrast drawn between Britain's fixation on World War II (Michael checks the schedule for a channel called "UK History" to find "The Nazis: A Warning From History" in perpetual rotation) and the characters' inability to think about the war in Iraq feels didactic. In a spasm of rebellion against the Genuine Article formula, Eve tells her

editor she wants to write about "a Palestinian boy, I was thinking, like that 12-year-old the soldiers shot," and she just winds up sounding formulaic in a different way.

Then there's Amber, whose name, to judge from passages of first-person narration inserted between the novel's sections, is really Alhambra, after the theater in which she was supposedly conceived. Smith presents her as somehow vaguely linked to the movies, and the term "persistence of vision," the phenomenon by which an eye perceives a quick succession of still images to be a single, moving image, comes up now and then. But the meaning of this never solidifies, and Amber seems more like a local spirit, a Puckish mischief-maker and milk-pail toppler. She has sprung, perhaps, from the Smarts' blind spot on matters of class, the mean streak that makes them snicker about the housecleaner's name behind her back.

The awkwardness of the novel's moralizing is all the more disconcerting given its fine, lustrous texture on the page. Smith is a wizard at observing and memorializing the ebb and flow of the everyday mind -- Astrid musing that "hurtling sounds like a little hurt being, like earthling, like something aliens from another planet would land on earth and call human beings who have been a little bit hurt." The close-up is Smith's forte. Her long shots need a little work.



Source: Miller, Laura. "Who's That Girl?" *The New York Times Book Review* 5 Feb. 2006: 14(L).

Literature Resource Center. Web. 13 May 2011.

Available at:

<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CA141682356&v=2.1&u=aadl&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>

## Discussion questions

1. Why has Ali Smith chosen *The Accidental* as her title? What accidents occur in the novel? Are these events really accidents? What are their consequences?
2. What effects does Smith create by telling the story through each family member's point of view? How would the novel have been different if told through a single omniscient narrator?
3. In describing her *Genuine Articles*, Eve Smart claims that "fiction has the unique power of revealing something true" [p. 82]. How is it that fiction can often deliver deeper truths than nonfiction? What truths does *The Accidental* reveal?
4. Having dinner with his family, Magnus thinks that "Everybody at this table is in broken pieces which won't go together, pieces which are nothing to do with each other, like they all come from different jigsaws, all muddled together into the one box by some assistant who couldn't care less in a charity shop or wherever the place is that old jigsaws go to die" [p.

138]. In what ways are Astrid, Eve, Michael, and Magnus broken? What has broken each of them? Why don't they fit together?

5. How does Smith capture the angst of early adolescence so vividly in the character of Astrid? What kind of girl is she? What are her most engaging eccentricities? Why does she feel so casually hostile toward the rest of her family? Why is she so captivated by Amber?

6. How is Amber so easily able to ingratiate herself with the Smarts? What makes her such a compelling person for all of them?

7. Amber often tells the truth so directly that she is thought to be joking, as when she comes down to dinner with Magnus announcing that she found him in the bathroom trying to hang himself. Everyone laughs but in fact she is telling exactly what happened. What is the significance of this irony—that the truth, plainly stated, is impossible for the Smarts to believe?

8. Who is Amber? Is she a con artist, a pathological liar, a psychic, a soothsayer, a malevolent force of nature, a witch, an angel? What profound effects, good and bad, does she have on each member of the Smart family?

9. Remembering Bergman's films, Eve asks: "Did dark times naturally result in dark art?" [p. 178]. Do they?

Is *The Accidental* itself a dark novel about a dark time? If so, how so?

10. Why has Smith chosen Smart as the name of the family in the novel? In what ways are they smart and not so smart?

11. Amber appears to bring catastrophe to the Smart family. In what ways could it be argued that she has been good for them? What do they discover about themselves because of her? Have the Smarts unconsciously drawn Amber to them?

12. Magnus tries hard to suppress his feelings about contributing to a fellow student's suicide. He "understands that if he ever let it be known that he feels anything at all, things will fly apart, the whole room will disintegrate, as if detonated" [p. 151]. In what ways is this refusal to feel, to know and acknowledge painful truths, a central theme in *The Accidental*? Do things fly apart when Magnus begins to feel the consequences of his actions?

13. What does *The Accidental* say about family life? In what ways are the Smarts both a typical and an atypical family?

14. Why does Smith choose to end the novel with Eve's journey to America? What is likely to happen in the future to the Smart family?

## **Read-alikes:**

Margaret Drabble, *The Sea Lady: a late romance*, (2006)

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, (2001)

John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation*, (1992)

Tracy Letts, *August: Osage County* (2008)

## **Further Reading**

*Recovering Your Story* by Arnold L. Weinstein  
(Call Number: 823.91 We)

“Great art discovers for us who we are,” writes eminent literature professor and critic Arnold Weinstein in this magisterial new book about how we can better uncover and understand our own stories by reading five major modern writers. Professor Weinstein, author of the highly acclaimed *A Scream Goes Through the House*, has spent a lifetime guiding students through the work of great writers, and in a volume that crowns his career, Weinstein invites us to discover ourselves—our perceptions, our dreams, our own elusive, deepest stories—in the masterpieces of modernist fiction. Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner: the very names sound intimidating. Yet as Weinstein argues with wit and passion, the works of these authors, and of their contemporary heir Toni Morrison, are in fact shimmering mirrors of our own inner world and most intimate thoughts. Novels such as *Remembrance of*

Things Past, Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom!, and Beloved allow us to explore the inner worlds of human feeling and bring us face-to-face with our own deepest selves and desires. Weinstein decodes these great novels, and he shows how to read them to understand human beings—the way our minds and hearts actually work. This is what Weinstein means by “recovering your story.” Weinstein illuminates the complex pleasures woven into these peerless narratives. Beneath the slow, sensual cadences of Proust he finds an edgy erotic tension as well as a remarkably crisp depiction of the timeless world inside the self. Joyce’s Ulysses, in Weinstein’s brilliantly original reading, is a protean linguistic experiment that forces us to view both our bodies and our minds in a radically new—and hilariously funny—light. His analysis of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse circles back again and again on Woolf’s depiction of the importance of relationships in knowing the self. Faulkner, argues Weinstein, is at once our greatest tragedian and our darkest comedian, a novelist who captures both the agony and absurdity of consciousness in a time of social and moral disintegration. Finally, in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Weinstein explores the legacy of modernism in a contemporary novel, as Morrison brings the body into the literary picture, confronting how the body affects not only our fundamental concept of self, but also

consciousness itself. In this magnificent work of literary appreciation and exploration, Weinstein makes the astonishing discovery of the self as a part of the joy of reading great modernist fiction, even as he makes these powerful works understandable, accessible, indeed imperative for all adventurous readers.”

## **Activity**

When meeting as a group, wear name tags with fictitious names and create new personas as well. Pretend to be someone completely different and get to know the new you’s.

*Summaries From AADL.org Catalog*



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