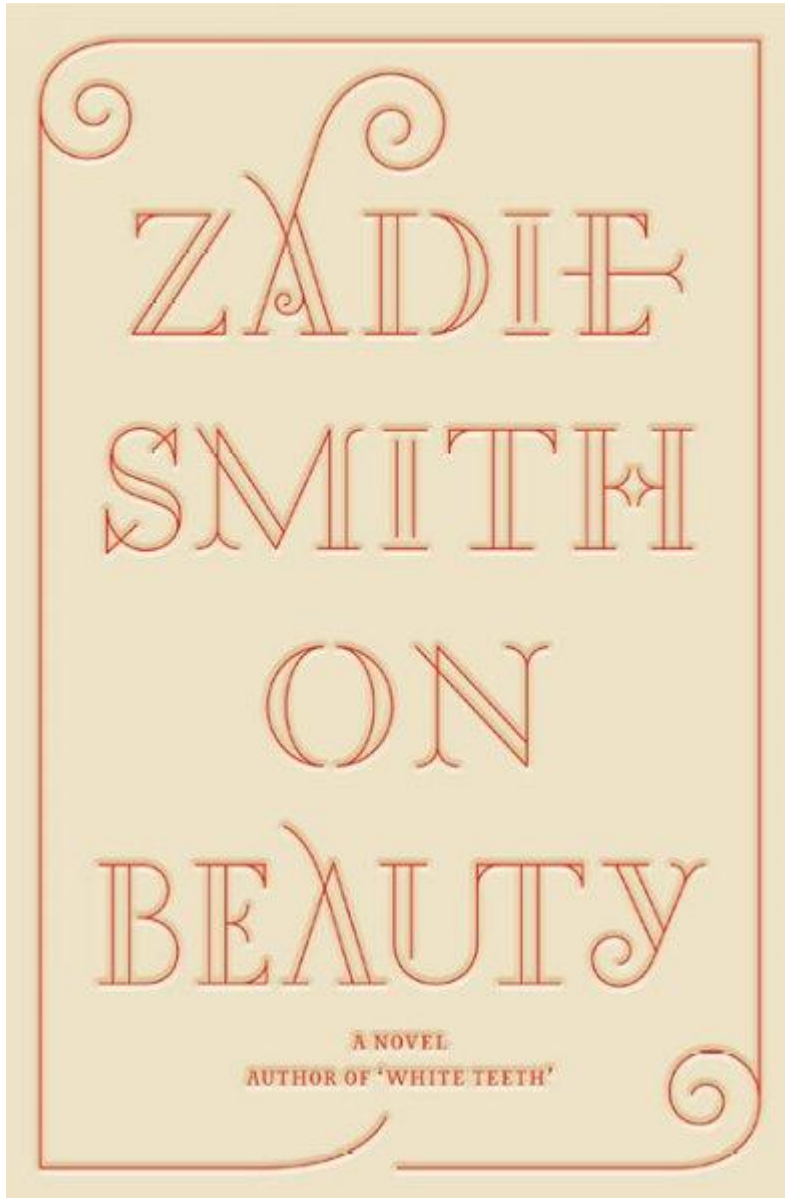


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

### About the Book



Struggling with a stale marriage and the misguided passions of his three adult children, long-suffering art professor Howard Belsey finds his family life thrown into turmoil by his son's engagement to the socially prominent daughter of a right-wing icon.

### About the Author *Source: NoveList*

Zadie Smith was born into a North London neighborhood in 1975. Her father was a white Englishman who served in World War II, while her

mother was from Jamaica. Smith grew up among working class families of varied and intermixed ethnicities that would later play such a role in her fiction. At age 14, she showed her flair for the dramatic by changing her name from "Sadie" to "Zadie" in order to make it more exotic.

She attended King's College, Cambridge, and took a first-class honors degree in English literature, but did not content herself with simply reading great books from the past. She wrote her own novel. The result was *White Teeth*, which Smith wrote when she was only twenty-one and sold for a reported £250,000. *White Teeth* sold over a million copies and put Smith on the literary map. It's a big book, crammed with a multiethnic cast of North Londoners in a story that also mixes in cloning, the Jehovah's Witnesses, racism, and a bomb (among other things).

For her second novel, she tackled instead the quest for fame in her book *The Autograph Man*, the story of a professional autograph seeker. It was not well reviewed, and for her third book, Smith turned her gaze on classic literature: in this case, E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*. Following Forster's basic structure but updating it for the 1990s and setting it in America, Smith's *On Beauty* put two families in conflict at an elite Boston area university that bears a suspicious resemblance to Harvard. This is not accidental. Smith herself spent a year at Harvard teaching creative writing and lecturing on the novel.

The book was also inspired by her marriage to the poet Nick Laird, whom Smith met at Cambridge (some of his work appears in *On Beauty*). She wanted to write a novel about a long marriage, to explore the forces that bind people together and those that tear them apart. The result was highly successful; *On Beauty* was shortlisted for Britain's premier literary prize, the Man Booker.

Smith continues to live in North London with her husband, and is currently at work on a set of essays about contemporary authors that she hopes might one day earn her a PhD from Cambridge so that she can return to the classroom.

## **Awards**

*On Beauty* was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize (<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/>).

## Reviews

### *Booklist*

Smith's first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), won prizes and comparisons to Dickens and E. M. Forster. In her current novel, she even uses a couple of plot devices from *Howard's End* to brilliant effect. The Belsey family is multicultural as well as multinational. Howard is English, teaching art history at liberal Wellington College near Boston. His wife, Kiki, is from Florida, and as practical as her husband is intellectual. Although they love each other dearly, Howard's waning career and wandering eye have caused a strain. Their children follow their own paths: Jerome is a Christian; Zora is a socially concerned intellectual; and Levi is trying to be a black man of the streets. When Jerome falls in love with the daughter of Howard's archrival, Monty Kipps, the two families are thrown together in a personal and cultural battle. Although the romance sours, Howard and Monty's rivalry kicks up a notch, while Kiki and Mrs. Kipps develop an unlikely bond. Intermingled with the analysis of family and marriage are commentaries on affirmative action, liberal versus conservative, and prejudices in many forms. This is a boisterous, funny, poignant, and erudite novel that should firmly establish Smith as a literary force of nature.

### *Kirkus*

Following her sophomore slump with *The Autograph Man* (2002), the British author returns to biting, frequently hilarious form with a novel that concerns two professors who are intellectual enemies but whose families become intertwined. Radical theorist Howard Belsey, a British art historian married to the African-American Kiki, detests the cultural conservatism of Monty Kipps, a Caribbean scholar based in England. Kipps apparently has the best of their rivalry, having raised his profile with a well-received book on Rembrandt that stands in stark contrast to Belsey's attempts to complete a counter-argument manuscript. Through a series of unlikely coincidences, Belsey's son becomes engaged to Kipps's irresistibly beautiful daughter, Kipps accepts an invitation to become guest lecturer at the Massachusetts college where Belsey is struggling for tenure and the wives of the two discover that they are soul mates. As Smith details the generation-spanning interactions of various minorities within a

predominantly white, liberal community, she finds shades of meaning in shades of skin tone, probing the prickly issues of affirmative action, race relations and cultural imperialism while skewering the political correctness that masks emotional honesty. As the author acknowledges in an afterword, her story's structure pays homage to E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, recasting the epistolary beginning of that book as a series of e-mails, while incorporating all sorts of contemporary cultural allusions to hip-hop, academic theory and the political climate in the wake of 9/11. Though much of the plot concerns the hypocrisies and occasional buffoonery of the professors, along with the romantic entanglements and social crises of their offspring, the heart and soul of the novel is Kiki Belsey, who must decide whether to continue to nurture a husband who doesn't deserve her. While some characters receive scant development, the personality that shines through the narrative most strongly is that of Smith's.

## Literary Criticism

*Zadie Smith's World View: The Acclaimed British Author Crosses Racial and Cultural Boundaries*

Zadie Smith burst onto the international literary scene at age 24 with the 2000 publication of her hilarious and dazzlingly hip debut novel, *White Teeth*. Both a runaway commercial success and a stunning artistic achievement, *White Teeth* landed atop bestseller lists in Britain and the United States. Critics hailed Smith as an important new voice of a multicultural generation. In her native Britain, Zadie Smith became a household name.

*White Teeth* is a sweeping narrative that tells the story of three London-based families (one headed by a black Jamaican mother and a white English father, one headed by Bangladeshi immigrants, and one firmly established in the white middle class). Smith follows these families across a quarter century and across difficult cultural divides, as they struggle with the challenges of friendship, love and generational rifts. Smith's debut is a laugh-out-loud-funny hodgepodge that shows people trying their best to find a place in an often confusing world.

The London-born Smith began writing the novel while studying English literature at Cambridge University. Her intimate and compassionate understanding of cultural intermingling comes firsthand. Her mother is a

black Jamaican immigrant and her father is a white Englishman. Crossing racial and cultural boundaries has always been a hallmark of Smith's literary career.

Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002), tells the story of a Chinese/Jewish character, Alex, who collects and sells autographs of the famous. Smith again brilliantly blends popular culture with deeper concerns about the human condition. It's a darker novel than her debut and exposes some of Smith's own ambivalence about her growing celebrity. The critical reception of *The Autograph Man* was mixed, with some reviewers disappointed that Smith hadn't re-created the masterly literary achievement of *White Teeth*.

In 2002, Smith moved to the United States to teach for a year at Harvard University, where she witnessed academic politics firsthand. This Harvard experience helped Smith compose her latest novel, *On Beauty* (2005), which depicts the difficult but amusing relationship between two families--the Kipps and the Belseys. Monty Kipps and Howard Belsey are rival academics specializing in the painter Rembrandt; both teach at a fictional Massachusetts college. Smith offers readers a concoction that is both funny and sometimes profoundly sad, a tale of adults unable to move beyond their preconceived notions.

Like *White Teeth*, *On Beauty* is highly ambitious and crackling with narrative energy. Smith smoothly interweaves high culture and pop culture, lucidly writing about Rembrandt and rap music, Mozart and Eminem with respect for everything along the spectrum.

*On Beauty* quickly became a huge bestseller and earned a multitude of glowing reviews. Writing in *The Washington Post*, book critic Michael Dirda declared, "To this satirical, wise and sexy book, the correct critical response should be either gratitude and admiration or a simple 'wow.'"

I spoke with Smith by telephone during her U.S. book tour for *On Beauty*.

*[Leddy]: The scene in White Teeth where young Irie Jones goes to a beauty salon and undergoes all sorts of hardships to get her hair straightened is one of the funniest scenes I've ever read. Do you have a general approach to writing comedy?*

[Smith]: That scene's interesting. When the book came out, I remember reading it out loud in Brixton, which is like England's equivalent of Harlem-- a mainly black area. The audience was mostly black women. And they found it very moving, as if it were a personal experience for them. When I read it to white audiences, they found it very funny. I find it somewhere between funny and sad. When I approach a scene like that, I never mean to be aggressively comic. Maybe that's just the natural tone of my writing.

*White Teeth is also quite sad, especially the character of the Bangladeshi father, Samad, who tries desperately to preserve his family's cultural traditions. Do you draw from your own experiences when writing about cultural transition?*

A lot of it is personal. I'm always thinking about how it feels to move from one tradition to another. It happened to me when I became a writer and, even earlier, when I was educated at Cambridge and went there as a working-class kid. That's a very small version of what someone like Samad might be going through.

I didn't grow up with religion or any very fierce cultural tradition, apart from my being English. I don't know why I'm continually attracted to the idea [of cultural transition], but I am. I've always felt it as a painful thing. It moves me generally, and also when I see it on film, or in other people's fiction, or in real life on the streets.

*You seem quite comfortable crossing borders and cultures in your fiction. How do you account for that comfort?*

It's not that I'm comfortable; it's more accurate to say that I'm comfortable making mistakes. People who steer away from this material maybe don't want to offend people. In order to write the books I write, there's always going to be mistakes--I'm not an expert on anything. You're feeling things out with your gut. No amount of research can tell you what it's like to be, let's say, a 49-year-old Bengali woman.

I support the idea of taking risks. Particularly in contemporary literature and life, I fear a kind of "identity politics" where you always have to say the correct thing. I quite like the fiction of a previous era when people were braver. I think of E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*--what gave this 35-year-old Englishman the idea that he could write a book about India? What did he know about it? Not very much. But the result was a book that

pleases and offends in equal measure. I can appreciate the risk he took, and I find it a very enjoyable book. I sort of follow that model. My assumption is that people aren't as different as we might imagine they are.

*How did your life change after the success of White Teeth?*

It was an enormous thing. I was very thrown by it and surprised. It was quite unnerving. Suddenly, you represent things such as a certain kind of fiction, or some trend in the publishing industry, and people make "cases" against you, and argue about you. It's insane. It's like you're not even a person anymore--you're just an idea in people's heads. The advice people gave me was that I should be myself in my real life, but have this different persona in order to have this public life. I find that really difficult. There are definitely writers who are much more professional about it than I am.

But success also gives me this great freedom, which means you can write what you like, as you like, and whenever you like. I feel responsible to the idea that if I have these abilities, I should try to work on them as hard as possible. I don't want to sit on my laurels. I want to be a good writer more than anything else and not just write the same stuff I've written before. It's unhealthy when writers turn themselves into a brand, even if it makes their readers happy.

*On Beauty is your third novel. Has the writing gotten any easier?*

I had fun writing it in parts, but the fun is having the idea and talking to people about the idea. The actual, everyday work of writing is always a bit dull, tricky and laborious. I find that I'll have a spark of an idea for the first four chapters, and that's exciting, but then I have to write them out.

I was discussing it with [fellow London-based novelist] Nick Hornby and he said exactly the same thing: The thrill is having the idea, but then it's like "Oh no. I have to write it. Couldn't somebody else do it for me?" [Smith laughs] But the truth is that you have to do the day-to-day work.

I think I'm less self-conscious now about some of the machinery of fiction. When you're an 18-year-old writer, it seems very difficult to bring a character in [a scene] and hard to get them out, to get them walking down the street. You think you have to find all these creative ways to do that, but now that I'm older, I'm much more willing to simply say "he walked down the street," and then I get to the next part. It doesn't need to be some big

performance. But this focus on the machinery of fiction is completely natural when you're starting out, and even necessary.

*Your novels have sometimes been called "brimming with characters" and even "messy." How do you respond to these claims?*

I think it's a superficial idea to think that just because a book has a lot of people in it, it's deficient. You just write in the way your mind works, and my mind seems to work in a "busy" way. But my ambition is to write a novel that is very slim-lined and controlled. I just write the way I write, but when I read other people's novels, sometimes I think to myself, "Oh, I wish I were more like that."

Every time I have a minor character, a part of me wants to write a whole novel about just that character. I don't know if it's common, but I find it very hard to concentrate on just one person in a book. The fiction that I enjoyed reading as a child was very populated as well. The first thing I knew about books was that they had a lot of the world in them. I have to restrain myself constantly. If I don't throw out these minor characters, I'd end up writing books as long as *War and Peace*.

*In On Beauty, public intellectuals such as Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps can act like 10-year old boys in their personal lives. How do you explain this gap between the public and the personal?*

It's also partly my experience. I've never had colleagues and any business [experience]. I'm always interested in the idea that when you're a proper grown-up, you really have to pretend to be a grown-up all the time. My luxury is not having to do that. I mean, the 10-year-old must still be there: It never disappears. When people describe office life to me, there seems to be a lot of "school" in it. There's bullying, there's people lining up against each other.

Writers are more connected to their childhoods and get to do things children do, such as spending time alone and having relationships with books--more intense relationships than if they'd had a more serious work life. The main crime of people like Monty and Howard is that they're very certain all the time. The point of fiction is to show that absolute certainty is not the healthiest way to move through the world. The novelist's business is about being uncertain, ambivalent and ironic at times.



*Do you write your novels with a preconceived plan? Do you usually have an ending in mind?*

I write about halfway through, having an idea about what's going to happen next. Then the end is more like winging it, like being in a jazz band. Everyone knows the chords that are being played, but within that there's some room for movement. I set out the basic skeleton, but then I need to be able to change it a bit or be inspired to do something different. I don't make a serious plan--I never have.

For a long time, I don't feel like I'm really writing a book. One writes in bits, with stops and starts. There's a wonderful line by [the novelist] Nathan Englander, who says "writing a novel should be one continuous dream." That only happens to me deep into a book, you know, where I'm eating dinner but really thinking about the novel. That took ages to happen this last time around.

*What are your writing habits? How do you stay motivated?*

I used to be much more slapdash, but I'm getting better because my husband [poet Nick Laird] also writes, and we're in the house all day long. He's much stricter, but sometimes we slack off. Like all writers, we have this hope that we'll do a 9-to-5 day, but it doesn't always work out that way.

Sometimes [motivation] is hard. You get depressed. And other things depress you like a bad review, and then you think there's not much point in going on. I must like it a lot; I know I do. I don't often express that very well, but I surely wouldn't do it if I didn't like it. There are lots of times when I can't write anything good: it seems to be all rubbish. The cause of that is almost always self-consciousness. The idea of having readers, the thing every writer dreams of, can also make you quite tense. The idea that people are waiting for a book, particularly when I'm on a book tour and people come up to me and say, "I can't wait for the next one!" They mean it affectionately, but your stomach goes in knots. I'm almost 30 now, and there are things I want to do other than writing books--domestic things.

*How does being married to a writer influence the way you go about your work?*

It's wonderful! He's a great poet; he has a very different perspective. We can talk about fiction, but I'm high-strung and work in a very detailed way,

so when he reads my work, he's much more likely to see sentences that don't really mean anything. He's quite rigorous, but it's also so nice to have a companion. I know a lot of writers who are married to nonwriters. They drive their nonwriting partners absolutely insane. It's so hard to explain why you have to sit in your room all day long, even if you don't get anything done. With my husband and me, we have an understanding about why we have to sit there, why we sometimes get depressed.

*Do you read book reviews of your novels?*

I read all of them. I feel fine about them. But when they get personal, when they're about me or my life or my husband, then I get really upset. If it's a genuine review of the book, I'm always interested. Though sometimes they really get me down. But I'd rather know what's being said than not know. You also need to have a core of yourself that doesn't change with the wind. I hope I've learned that you can't please all the people all the time.

*Do you think creative-writing workshops are good for fiction writers?*

One thing I used to tell my writing students at Harvard was that if you're going to do a writing workshop, you should separate your ego from what you write. Otherwise, it's going to hurt really badly. If you're going to place your work in front of people and have them talk about it in front of you, it's so painful. It's as if I published *White Teeth* and then went into every house in America and sat in those living rooms and heard them all talk about it. That would just kill me. I can't write to please everyone else. I worry that writing workshops create the pressure to write something that people will like. Obviously, that's part of fiction, but I don't know if it's the biggest part.

*What advice do you give aspiring fiction writers?*

I always say the same thing and it's so very boring. You have to read as much as possible. I can't think of anything better than that. Also, try to live. I don't mean going to Africa or doing a triathlon, but you need to be open to experiences that aren't just about you. You need to be open to other people, and attentive. It's the same quality you need as a reader--to be open and attentive, and not pre-decided. There's a line that Katharine Hepburn says in *The Philadelphia Story*: "The time to make up your mind about people is never." I love that.

## *The Zadie Smith File*

Smith married British poet Nick Laird in 2004. She'd first met him when they were both students at Cambridge University. Smith dedicated *On Beauty* to Laird and even reproduced one of his poems in that novel. Moreover, *White Teeth* contains a minor fictional character named Nick Laird. The couple lives in London and are presently collaborating on a musical based on the life of the novelist Franz Kafka.

The writer didn't always want to be a novelist. In her younger days, she studied tap dancing and even made money singing in a jazz band. She also wanted to become an actress, and has written lovingly about her idol Katharine Hepburn. Hepburn starred in Smith's favorite movie, *The Philadelphia Story*. In 2003, Smith published an essay in tribute to Hepburn, detailing her teenage obsession with Hollywood movie stars such as Hepburn, Jimmy Stewart, Humphrey Bogart and Spencer Tracy.

Her two younger brothers are both rap singers in Great Britain, going by the names of Doc Brown (Ben) and Luc Skyz (Luke). Smith herself interviewed American rap singer Eminem for *Vibe* magazine in 2002. Smith described the Detroit rapper as "sweet, lovely and shy," while he confessed to being a huge fan of Smith's novel *White Teeth*.

*On Beauty* was short-listed for the Booker Prize.

Source: Smith, Zadie, and Chuck Leddy. "Zadie Smith's World View: The Acclaimed British Author Crosses Racial and Cultural Boundaries." *Writer* 119.2 (Feb. 2006): 20. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey Hunter. Vol. 306. Detroit: Gale, 2011. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

### **Discussion Questions** Source:

[http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading\\_guides/detail/index.cfm?book\\_number=1850](http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm?book_number=1850)

1. At the start of the novel, Howard's betrayal of Kiki has already set the family reeling off its orbit. What are the effects of his infidelity on the children? How do they react and whom do they side with? He and Kiki interpret the meaning of his act differently? Can you understand both sides? Why do you think Howard is tempted toward sexual

betrayal? Where do you imagine their relationship is heading at the end?

2. The Belsey children are all searching for an adult identity. Jerome has become religious, Zora is imitating her father, and Levi is in search of what he believes will be an authentic ethnicity. What characteristics do the three children share, and how are they like their parents? Which of their current activities do you see as "phases" in their lives, and which do you think are meant to suggest what they will harden into as adults? Which of them do you identify with the most?
3. The Belseys' house, beautifully evoked by Smith as the calm center around which the whirlwind of family life turns, embodies the family's comfortable middle class stature. What does the home represent, both practically and emotionally, to various members of the family? Think about some of the other living spaces in the book—the Kippses' or Howard's father's—and compare them to the Belseys'. What do you think a good house can provide?
4. Kiki, the most grounded of the characters on the surface, is also struggling to find a place. Her husband and children have embarked on paths different from her own, and she feels alienated by Wellington and Howard's colleagues there. How do people treat Kiki, and what do both her race and size have to do with this? She says at one point that she gave up her life for Howard; what does she mean by this? Do you think she is more empowered over the course of the novel, or less?
5. Howard's academic work is a deconstruction of traditional ideas of genius; he is attempting a book on Rembrandt that is meant to deflate the myth of his originality. His friend Erskine says that "only a man who had such pleasure at home could be . . . so against pleasure in his work." Why do you think that Howard feels so antagonistic toward representational beauty in art? What does this suggest about the rest of his life? Do you find his ideas interesting or persuasive? Or do you think he is missing something crucial about art or life? What does his visit to his father add to your understanding of him?
6. Smith quotes Elaine Scarry saying that "a university is among the precious things that can be destroyed." How would you describe

Wellington University; as precious, or something else? What about it as an educational institution is appealing, for the characters or for you? Which of its practices or people does Smith seem critical of? Consider how this college might be representative of both virtues and failings in American culture. How might a university be precious—or beautiful—and how might this be threatened?

7. The opposition between liberal and conservative seems to be encapsulated in the competing ethics of the Belseys and the Kippes. Yet, for the children as well as for the adults, the lived reality turns out to be somewhat more complex. Consider the various members of the two families. How would you describe each one's politics or belief system? How do they struggle to fully act on those beliefs in their daily lives? Does anyone really live true to their ideals?
8. Women's body issues recur throughout the novel; as Kiki says, "It was in the air . . . this hatred of women and their bodies." Kiki finds herself too fat, while fading Carlene is too thin; eighteen-year old Vee wildly explores her newly blossomed figure, while the poet Clare seems infantilized in her childlike body. Are their bodies at all accurate representations of who they are? How do they struggle with, or come to terms with, their physical selves? How does someone like Zora, with dueling models Kiki and Clare, feel about her body? Does anyone have a healthy (and sustainable) physical regard for themselves? Why or why not?
9. The brief friendship between Carlene and Kiki creates a strange but profound connection between the two families, despite the dueling patriarchs. What does Carlene provide for Kiki that her own family does not, and vice versa? Return to their few brief encounters and examine the effect that they have on each other. How does the subject of art and beauty enter into their conversations and thoughts? Do these small moments explain to you why Carlene makes her bequest to Kiki? What is she communicating through that gesture?
10. Some people have described Smith's writing as satire—that is, work that exposes human folly, offering it up for ridicule. Do you think her depictions of characters are satirical? Some more than others? Think over times in the novel when you feel that characters have become ridiculous, or when they seem more like caricatures than real

people. Which characters or moments in the book transcend such stereotype? Are there characters who are both ridiculous and real?

11. All of the character's lives change over the course of the novel—most dramatically, neither the Belseys nor the Kippses retain the same family structure. Whose life is transformed for the better by these changes and who do you feel are still struggling? Who, in the end, finds peace, and by what means? Try to describe this peace or any other satisfactions you think the characters have attained. What are some conclusions that are arrived at concerning art, home, or love? Think about Howard and Kiki's divergent paths, or the possible futures of Zora, Jerome, or Vee. Whose position would you most like to be in?
  
12. The title *On Beauty* refers to many things: Howard's theories about art; Kiki's physical grandeur; the attractiveness of youths like Carl and Victoria; paintings by Rembrandt and other artists; Levi's sense of the organic flow of street life; Zora's frustration at her lack of sex appeal; Jerome's sense of religious transcendence. All of these characters express radically different ideas about the meaning and role of beauty in their lives. What do you think it means, in this novel's terms, to embrace beauty? What does it mean to be without it? What, to Smith and to you, are truly beautiful things?

## Multimedia

### **Zadie Smith, 'On Beauty' (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6260480>

A discussion of the novel on NPR's *Fresh Air*.

### **In Essays, Author Zadie Smith Reveals Her Process (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120320510>

A discussion with Zadie Smith on NPR's *All Things Considered*.

## Further Reading

### **Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays** by Zadie Smith

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1348175>

(Call number: 824 Sm)

A volume of essays is comprised of top-selected pieces from the past decade and considers a broad range of topics organized under such main categories as "Reading," "Being," "Seeing," and "Feeling."

***White Teeth*** by Zadie Smith

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1167197>

(Call number: Fiction Smith)

Zadie Smith's dazzling debut caught critics grasping for comparisons and deciding on everyone from Charles Dickens to Salman Rushdie to John Irving and Martin Amis. But the truth is that Zadie Smith's voice is remarkably, fluently, and altogether wonderfully her own. At the center of this invigorating novel are two unlikely friends, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal. Hapless veterans of World War II, Archie and Samad and their families become agents of England's irrevocable transformation.

***The Autograph Man*** by Zadie Smith

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1194100>

(Call number: Fiction Smith)

Alex-Li Tandem sells autographs. His business is to hunt for names on paper, collect them, sell them, and occasionally fake them--all to give the people what they want: a little piece of Fame. But what does Alex want? Only the return of his father, the end of religion, something for his headache, three different girls, infinite grace, and the rare autograph of forties movie actress Kitty Alexander. With fries.

***Howards End*** by E.M. Forster

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1025189>

(Call number: Fiction Forster)

The disregard of a dying woman's bequest, a girl's attempt to help an impoverished clerk, and the marriage of an idealist and a materialist -- all intersect at an estate called Howards End. The fate of this country home symbolizes the future of England in an exploration of social, economic, and philosophical trends during the post-Victorian era.

**Read-Alikes** *Source: NoveList*

***Foreign Affairs*** by Allison Lurie

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1043530>

(Call number: Fiction Lurie)

The actions and reactions of two American professors in London as they indulge in love affairs with unlikely people.

***The God of Small Things*** by Arundhati Roy

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1119716>

(Call number: Fiction Roy)

With sensuous prose, a dreamlike style infused with breathtakingly beautiful images and keen insight into human nature, Roy's debut novel charts fresh territory in the genre of magical, prismatic literature. Set in Kerala, India, during the late 1960s when Communism rattled the age-old caste system, the story begins with the funeral of young Sophie Mol, the cousin of the novel's protagonists, Rahel and her fraternal twin brother, Estha. In a circuitous and suspenseful narrative, Roy reveals the family tensions that led to the twins' behavior on the fateful night that Sophie drowned. Beneath the drama of a family tragedy lies a background of local politics, social taboos and the tide of history all of which come together in a slip of fate, after which a family is irreparably shattered. Roy captures the children's candid observations but clouded understanding of adults' complex emotional lives. Rahel notices that "at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside." Plangent with a sad wisdom, the children's view is never oversimplified, and the adult characters reveal their frailties and in one case, a repulsively evil power in subtle and complex ways. While Roy's powers of description are formidable, she sometimes succumbs to overwriting, forcing every minute detail to symbolize something bigger, and the pace of the story slows. But these lapses are few, and her powers coalesce magnificently in the book's second half. Roy's clarity of vision is remarkable, her voice original, her story beautifully constructed and masterfully told.

***The Line of Beauty*** by Alan Hollinghurst

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1233146>

(Call number: Fiction Hollinghurst)

In the summer of 1983, twenty-year-old Nick Guest moves into an attic room in the Notting Hill home of the Feddens: conservative Member of Parliament Gerald, his wealthy wife Rachel, and their two children, Toby-whom Nick had idolized at Oxford-and Catherine, highly critical of her family's assumptions and ambitions. As the boom years of the eighties unfold, Nick, an innocent in the world of politics and money, finds his life altered by the rising fortunes of this glamorous family. His two vividly contrasting love affairs, one with a young black clerk and one with a



Lebanese millionaire, dramatize the dangers and rewards of his own private pursuit of beauty, a pursuit as compelling to Nick as the desire for power and riches among his friends.

***Small World: an academic romance*** by David Lodge

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1042936>

(Call number: Fiction Lodge)

Veteran rivals for an exclusive academic chair (recently endowed with \$100,000 a year) do scholarly battle with each other in what the Washington Post Book World called a "delectable comedy of bad manners . . . infused with a rare creative exuberance"

***Disgrace*** by J.M. Coetzee

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1163320>

(Call number: Fiction Coetzee)

Set in post-apartheid South Africa, J. M. Coetzee's searing novel tells the story of David Lurie, a twice divorced, 52-year-old professor of communications and Romantic Poetry at Cape Technical University. Lurie believes he has created a comfortable, if somewhat passionless, life for himself. He lives within his financial and emotional means. Though his position at the university has been reduced, he teaches his classes dutifully; and while age has diminished his attractiveness, weekly visits to a prostitute satisfy his sexual needs. He considers himself happy. But when Lurie seduces one of his students, he sets in motion a chain of events that will shatter his complacency and leave him utterly disgraced. Lurie pursues his relationship with the young Melanie.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

