

# White Teeth: A Conversation with Author Zadie Smith.<sup>1</sup>

*Kathleen O'Grady*

Zadie Smith is living the fairy-tale story dreamed of by young (and aged) writers everywhere. Her first novel, *White Teeth*<sup>2</sup>, received a rumored £250,000 advance based on only two chapters and a plot-synopsis; the completed novel (of epic proportions) was written while completing a Bachelor of Arts program at Cambridge University; her literary debut has been hailed a formidable achievement by none other than Salman Rushdie, with whom she recently completed a New York book tour; rave reviews have appeared in the British and the North American Press alike; and all of this has been achieved by the ripe old age of twenty-four.

The circumstances of Smith's sudden rise to literary darling seem as unlikely as the comic hyperbole that fills the pages of *White Teeth*. As an undergraduate student of Cambridge University, Smith penned regular short stories for the University's *May Anthologies* - an annual two volume compilation of prose and poetry on which I was a regular board member during my own doctoral studies at the University.

I remember well my first year on the editorial board for the *Anthologies*, rushing home with a carrier bag bulging with hundreds of stories and poems that I thought would offer nothing less than a literary feast from the most promising writers of my generation. Instead it was an endurance test since the submissions turned out to be rather typical student stories of failed romance, existential angst and literary pastiche.

Except for Zadie Smith. At twenty years of age, Smith was already writing opening paragraphs that give readers that goosepimples sensation that starts somewhere at the base of the spine and spreads rapidly to alight the entire body. It was from one of Smith's annual contributions to the *May Anthologies* that a literary agent became interested

in her work and the distinguished Andrew Wiley Agency took her on board.

With the publication of *White Teeth*, a number of critics have taken the opportunity to herald the coming of a new age of British novelists - the sophisticated, urban polyglot and polyphonic progeny of Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie et al. - with Smith as the prototype. But Smith, the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a Caucasian English father, is as disarmingly witty and charming in speech as in her writing. In a recent conversation we discussed her sudden rise to literary darling, and the vicissitudes of the writing process.

## **Kathleen O'Grady**

Each of your characters in *White Teeth* comes complete with family genealogies, but also with a full historical and cultural weight bearing upon their perspective of the world around them and their subsequent actions in this world.

It seems it is precisely this elaborate lineage - personal, familial and cultural - that both enables and disables them, particularly when they are transplanted from their originary cultural roots into the cold and damp British soil.

But this "unrootedness" seems not to dissipate with the second generation immigrants but to become more complex, even to go on repeating the mistakes of the previous generation.

## **Zadie Smith**

All that is is an elaboration of things I thought of from a very younger stage. If you take the whole of human history as a body or as a person, then there are events within that which are like trauma, like childhood traumas. The Second World War is a trauma like being abused as a child, being slapped over the head with a brick, or whatever. It's a trauma, and it's something that takes generations to

get over. And as you know any abuse in the family can be passed down again and again and again. My mother used to work in social work and she definitely saw that process of passing on and how desperate and depressing that is when families pass on their traumas from one generation to the next. And I think you can have historical traumas. The second World War is an obvious example. I can't think of a book by a peer of mine - when I say peer of mine I mean people in their early thirties or that age - which doesn't include some holocaust reference. I just can't think of one, of any book of any significance that doesn't have that. Even if it is deeply sublimated it is impossible to escape. Feels like it is impossible to escape. But there are also a lot of writers who are trying to inch out of it, myself included. You just feel like the weight of all of this is just too much sometimes.

And likewise the characters in the book are [traumatized]. That whole kind of 60s, 70s, liberation ethic that you will be released by knowing your roots, that you will discover yourself. I just always thought was a crock basically, and it's partly true, but your roots come with baggage. And the baggage isn't always fun. At the same time I kind of have, not contempt, but when you look at highly Western families, white, Western families who cultured individuals so strong in them, for generations of inculcation of that idea, they always think of themselves as separate individuals and they get very far that way. I think it is a helpful attitude if you want to get on in life in the ways that you are meant to get on in the Western world. But for people from the East every person is their family. There is a good line I was just reading in a poem earlier today by a guy called Don Patterson, a Scottish poet, which is "Everything is in everything else." I think that is how immigrants feel. And it might seem irrational or fundamentalist to other people but it feels like "everything is in everything else."

When I see kids walking down the street, the first thing I think is, if they are slightly brown, or have slightly Asian eyes, I want to know where their parents are from, how they got here; I do that all the time. I'm totally obsessed with it. Partly because it may be because people asked me so often when I was child: where I was from, what my parents were about, how come one was black and

how come one was white. It makes you attentive to those details.

I taught in my old school yesterday; they asked me to go back and teach creative writing. I wasn't really sure what to do with that. But I brought some fiction by various people and read them stuff, but just looking in the class, looking around that school, 2000 kids, it's just the most amazing [thing], it's like the pictures they put on the front of Jehovah's Witness magazines of heaven - there is a person of every different colour standing next to you. It is the most multicultural place I can think of - more than the city - the school is so phenomenal.

You have schools in England which are sixty percent Asian or schools which are eighty percent black, but this school is just absolutely remarkable. Like any school, a kind of microcosm of a larger community and you see how well it works and you see the children walking towards the gate and there's a red head and a Chinese kid, a black kid, an Asian kid and it doesn't even seem to concern them. And it really lifts your spirits. It is amazing. And you just want to drag certain people to the school and say "Look at this, look at how well it can work. Look at how these people are doing."

### **Kathleen O'Grady**

Most critics in North America have focussed on the humorous antics of *White Teeth* and its witty construction. But it is ultimately a very serious novel and highly philosophical.

I was especially tickled by the literary intrusions of the mysterious Horst Ibelgaufts, a character who appears only as the author of the occasional missive sent to Archibald Jones. He appears as if from nowhere - a distant and comic god-like character proffering advice - advice that seems as good as any, and especially as good as Archie's usual decision-making tactic of flipping a coin and leaving all the big decisions to fate.

You satirize this kind of fatalism. But you also take the piss with fundamentalist tendencies - of animal rights activists, of some Islamic political groups, with the eschatology of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the rational faith of Professor Chalfens.

At the same time *White Teeth* establishes

a web of connections between characters that binds them together into a seemingly inevitable homogenous motion toward what? History? Destiny? God's plan? An accidental collision of random particles?

### Zadie Smith

You've got to find out what your thing is - do you know what I mean?... [*White Teeth*] is about people who are obsessed and who build a kind of world which is entirely rational to them. And I don't have contempt for that; I'm kind of totally impressed by it. That between one void and the other people kind of construct something that makes sense to them. I think it is also interesting... It is a very adolescent idea, but I can't get over it, that even the worst men in the world and the most evil people consider themselves good and can't really do anything else, and that goes for mass murderers and genocidal maniacs and all of the rest of it. These people need to consider themselves good. No one walks around thinking that they are the bad guy. It is impossible.

In fiction you are kind of meant to separate the good guys from the bad guys to show the reader the right path or whatever. I am quite interested in showing a collection of people who all think of themselves as good and are all self-justifying and all have a point within their limited sphere. And that gets very difficult when you are dealing with the Nazi in the book. But it doesn't help me to think of someone like that as an evil man, it helps me to think how did he rationalize, how did what he did make sense to him.

### Kathleen O'Grady

The bulk of *White Teeth* tells the story of men - young men, married men, octogenarians - yet at the centre of the story sits "Irie" - the daughter of a Jamaican-English couple who falls in love with Millat, the son of a Bangladeshi waiter and his wife.

In a sense, Irie becomes the bearer of the third generation; pregnant with the child of Millat (or possibly his twin Magid)...

### Zadie Smith

The idea that she has a child with indeterminate parentage - not sure who's the father - and effectively it could have two fathers, I thought that was a pretty neat idea at the time. And then I read

another person's book, a bit older than me, which also has a child, it is a slightly different situation, but with kind of indeterminate fathers. It seemed to me a funny thing. The reason Irie gets to the centre of the book is not really about her, but about a certain idea of indeterminacy which is in a lot of writing of my generation of my peers, about the centre always being slightly displaced and there are a whole myriad of reasons for that.

I think Irie is in kind of the centre. I don't write women very well and I don't really enjoy writing about them particularly. At the moment. Maybe that will change at some point. I find them quite confusing as a group of people. I think a lot of the women in *White Teeth* are failures more or less in terms of rounded portrayals of people and that is kind of a shame.

### Kathleen O'Grady

We learn of this coming child - Irie's pregnancy - in semi-prophetic, even messianic tones - though not wholly optimistic ones - at the same time that we learn that the cancer-induced, genetically altered FutureMouse escapes from his glass cage. Is this your pronouncement on the coming (third generation) of a polyglot, multi-racial England? Are we the FutureMouse finally escaped from the cage?

### Zadie Smith

It is not pessimistic, but it is a kind of throwing up of hands and all the difficulties with the end of the book, about the end being too fast, and all of the rest of it, are just me not being able to - not having the kind of hardware in my brain - to deal with the software - I couldn't resolve a lot of the issues that the book brought up. In the end I kind of threw up my hands and so do all of the characters really.

I don't think it is particularly optimistic on that front.

But I did want to try and say that there is a lot to celebrate. I find a lot to celebrate in the community I live in and the people I see around me. And it is very specific. I didn't want the community in *White Teeth* to be representative of immigrants in England, that's not my job really, I'm not a politician, and I wouldn't claim such an optimistic vision of other people's experience, but I have a good time. I love living here [London].

**Kathleen O'Grady**

I was surprised to find that the book was conceived and written largely in Cambridge. It strikes me that Cambridge is almost like a museum of itself - with College Fellows bustling across quads exactly as they may have one hundred years ago; it is so very different from the modern, urban vivacity that provides most of the setting for *White Teeth*. Was Cambridge - in its own little glass case - a difficult place to write? Or did the differences permit a creative freedom?

**Zadie Smith**

A very difficult thing about writing if you've been to Cambridge at all is the influence of all these old dead men who wrote so brilliantly and who you have to read all the time and sometimes sleep in their rooms or pass plaques of them and stuff.

Some of the writers I admire the most, people like E.M. Forster particularly, went to Kings, and that can either sit on your head and make you feel like you are never going to write a word or you can think of it as a gift, and I decided to think of it as a gift really. So I found it very inspiring to be in a place he'd been in and that Byron had been in and Wordsworth, and everybody on earth; it made me feel like I was one of them - not one of them, but I'm passing through the same place. And so I had as much of a right to write as they did.

[...] A lot of women who go there - it kind of suffocates them because the history of that University is a male history. Women are a very recent development. About fifteen years or whatever, twenty years. So sometimes it's just excruciating because you are going to the library and it's all men. And the reason it is all men is because there were no women but sometimes it feels like there's no precedent for you and the way you think - and women do think differently and do argue in a different way and they write differently, I think. And it feels like there is no precedent for the person you are and the experience that you have. But in the end I think - and I tried to say this in *White Teeth* - role models are another crock and something which limit you. They don't set you free.

**Kathleen O'Grady**

A number of critics have taken the opportunity, when reviewing *White Teeth*, to herald the coming

of a new age of British novelists - the sophisticated, urban polyglot and polyphonic progeny of Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie et al. Where do you see yourself fitting into what is going on in contemporary British writing? Is there a new movement afoot?

**Zadie Smith**

Writers love to hear all of that shit. The biggest thrill you get in your life is being grouped together with other writers in some kind of imaginary gang. So I love all of that. I read an article in the *New York Times* which put my name with Foster Wallace and some other people and I just danced around my flat for about three days. I have no complaints.

I think it has all been kind of hastily drawn up. I think the Americans are way ahead of us at almost every level.

The only thing I wish is that there weren't so many boys...

**Kathleen O'Grady**

The infamous "lad lit"?

**Zadie Smith**

It would be nice occasionally to go to a party and meet a woman around my age. It does feel like a boy's gang ...

**Kathleen O'Grady**

Do you think there is a dearth of women writers?

**Zadie Smith**

There is no dearth of women writers. There are hundreds of them. I think women are at the beginning of the novel and the end of it. The novel is their form. If you kind of squint and don't look at Samuel Richardson, it was a woman's form and it is [still] somewhere. It has a very intimate connection with women because it was a kind of business they could do even if they had to hide it under a piece of blotting paper like Austin did. They could do it in private, it didn't cost too much money, and the means were there for them. In lots of other industries that wasn't possible.

I sometimes get irritated by recent writings. A lot of women right now are writing about things that don't really mean anything to me. And which seem to me perfectly good for what they

are but are sort of life-style journalism and not really fiction. On the other hand I know there are lots of women I just haven't read really. I haven't read A. L. Kennedy. I hear she is really good. I haven't read the Indian woman who won the Pulitzer Prize; she sounds fantastic. So it is just a matter of ignorance really. Often women's writing isn't promoted and you don't see it, but you only see a certain type.

I'm very optimistic. I know that there are women waiting in the wings. I can't wait for them to jump out.

[...] It is tough for women to write fiction. They need to overcome a lot of stupid attitudes that are enforced upon them and that they were brought up with as well. They need to feel that they are the subjects and the person who is doing the writing and not the thing who is being looked at or judged or observed by other people.

A lot of the fiction I read by women are the kind of "Bridget Jonesish" school [which] is about being looked at and observed and judged by other people. And that is not a good state of mind to be in if you want to write fiction.

[...] I just don't get [Bridget Jones]. But I can see that millions of women do get it. I gave it to my mother but to my mother, a black woman, it just didn't mean anything. That lifestyle she is talking about is very specific to a generation of white, middle class women, who feel the lack of a man or something. Most of the women I know don't really feel that lack so much.[...]

### **Kathleen O'Grady**

Just to come back to this heralded new age of British novelists.

### **Zadie Smith**

If you are talking about the big epic - encyclopedic is a better word, for these novels, I think those are not going to be around for long. I think that is kind of an 80s or 90s phenomena. Even *White Teeth* I think is fairly dated because it is really under the influence of some earlier books.

I don't think that is what it is at all. It's not the big book or the book which includes all of the information in the world. It's about uniting a certain kind of cerebral experience with something more from the stomach or the gut. And not many writers

have attempted that. Some writers have tried to unite them both but you are dealing with a generation who've been brought up on pop-culture and are completely [??] with their everyday lives or how people think at an everyday level.

I'm very low down on that scale but writers like Foster Wallace who have incredible scientific knowledge, mass knowledge, Internet knowledge, very highly tuned intelligence to specific areas to which they, not always successfully, but they try to bring into their fiction. I aspire to that, but my education is very one-sided. I'm an arts student down the line. Everything in philosophy and math that I try and bring into the book or understand I have to ask friends, look through libraries, beg people to explain things to me, because I don't know any of that stuff. The world is very, very complex and the writers who are going to be interesting and who are going to succeed are writers who have the kind of complexity to match the complexity of the world.

### **Kathleen O'Grady**

I hear you have already begun a new novel. Does it have an urban setting as well?

### **Zadie Smith**

It is set between a suburb in London and Greenwich Village in New York ... and turns up in Florida and some other places.

I don't know about urban. I am a city kid and I've lived in a city all my life and I really don't know anything else. The countryside is a complete mystery to me. Until very recently I hadn't been north of Cambridge so I don't have much experience with my own country. I have quite a specific experience with one city.

I guess it is urban but it is again about some kind of interesting communities which aren't place-specific anymore. It seems to me the allegiance you once had to your country or to a state or to a town you lived in or even the borough you lived in is now transferred to things like being a Star Trek fan or visiting a certain site on the 'Net. Those communities seem just as strong as the old binding ones - the religious communities or whatever. The communities in the second book are about the autograph business of which there are two million - they could cede from the rest of the world and

have their separate island somewhere. There is a lot of them about. So I'm interested in their lives and their particular obsession. And it's kind of autograph people coming up against Kabbalists - Jewish mystics, and lots of fun ensues.

[...] I like it much better [than my last book]. Sometimes I'm at readings and I see little old ladies looking at me with big smiles and thinking, "Jesus you are going to hate this book - I'm so sorry." But you can't take all the people with you all the time, can you? And sometimes you just have to go your own way....I've enjoyed writing a book that lots of people seem to like. But I'm still young enough and perverse enough to write a book which not that many people will like...And the one thing about the money I would say is that it gives me a freedom to write the sort of book which is kind of for me. I like that.

#### **Kathleen O'Grady**

You were recently on tour in New York City with none other than Rushdie. Are you at all tempted, like Rushdie and Amis too, to become a New York resident and forego your London roots? Become a "mid-Atlantic" writer?

#### **Zadie Smith**

Everyone who knows me knows how I hate to travel. I've gone between two places in my life, Cambridge and London and anywhere else makes me... I find it quite traumatic to get on the plane and go anywhere. And going to New York....similarly, I thought, this is going to be terrible; I'd been to New York before and really despised it. But this time I have to admit I really had a great time. And I did think, God it's all here, and the people are nice, and the critics love you, and the food's good, and there are loads of cute people here. New York does everything so well, everything is open till late night, and for the first time in my life I came back to London and thought, "Jesus Christ, it's cold and miserable and nothing works and everything's broken and what's the point." But that has passed actually, the sun's come out again and I'm quite happy to be here.

No, I don't think I'd go to the US. I find it quite a scary place actually. When you turn up, it feels as if New York speaks with one voice, so it's like, "Yes we all like you" or "No we all hate you."

It's lucky when they all say yes, but I'm sure sooner or later they will all say no and I'd come running back home.

It is just an alien thing; a completely different world to me. I kind of like it and I think it is cool but there is no way - I'm going to say it now, I know I'm young - but I can't see myself ever living anywhere else very long. I'm not that kind of person. I'm no adventurer. I don't have the adventurer spirit or whatever it is, I'm just not interested.

#### **Kathleen O'Grady**

Anything else you'd like to add about *White Teeth*?

#### **Zadie Smith**

[...] The book to me is not a dead thing, but it doesn't feel like mine. When people ask me about it I feel like "Oooh, What should I say?" I can't think what to say about it. It feels like somebody else wrote it. And that's the honest-to-god truth. It's not a kind of pose. When I'm reading it out loud sometimes I'm kind of impressed - this is good stuff - but I can't remember much about the writing of it or how it came about. Or how to duplicate it, which I would do immediately if I could.

## ENDNOTES

1. Small excerpts from this interview appeared in article form in *The Globe and Mail*, May 27, 2000, D16-17 and *The Women's Review of Books*, Volume XVIII, No. 1 (October 2000): pp. Cover and 19-20.
2. *White Teeth*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000.