

## Book Reviews

---

### In Need of Braces: A Review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

*White Teeth*. Zadie Smith. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2000; 560 pages; ISBN 0140276335; \$18.99 (paper).

Rambunctious. Hilarious. Wise beyond its author's years. Zadie Smith's debut novel, *White Teeth*, a rambling hodge-podge of a book in which the lives of various immigrants to Britain in the last quarter of the twentieth century improbably intertwine, has been greeted with phenomenal critical acclaim. It's easy to see why: Smith's characters, and their observations on life in a Britain which is still struggling to understand and accommodate multiculturalism, are funny, wry, and sometimes deeply moving. It's hard not to sympathise with the Iqbals and the Joneses as they - and their children, two and three generations down the line - battle through the everyday prejudice inevitably faced by immigrants to that country.

There are so many twists as the novel proceeds, so many sub-themes and plots, that it would be impossible to summarise the story line in a short review. Suffice it to say that Smith's scope is dauntingly ambitious. Following the daily lives of her three generations of characters, her satirical eye moves from the crude sexism of the Jehovah's Witnesses to the murky promises and terrors of genetic engineering, taking a side-swipe at ideals about male bonding in the Second World War, at Sikh heroes, and at the horrors of hair-straightening treatments as it goes on its merry way. In the end, there is very little about contemporary British life, from white middle-class smugness to teenage Muslim fervour-turned-vandalism, that *White Teeth* does not take on.

I found Smith's energy quite compelling for a while, and enjoyed more than a few belly-laughs as I began to read. About a third of the way in, however, I started to feel overwhelmed by the breadth of the novel. I longed for a little more irony than satire, for that capacity to understatement which is the mark of mature reflections on the difficult issues Smith wants to take on.

What I began to wish for, in fact, was that large publishing houses still subscribed to the view that an excellent editor plays a significant part in bringing to its fullest fruition the talent of a young writer as remarkable as Smith. If it had been gently constrained, rather as the protuberant teeth of its protagonist, Irie Jones, need to be, *White Teeth* would have fulfilled every expectation that its blurb-writers claim for it. As it is, it feels too much like an excellent first draft. It's a jolly book, provocative in places, and sufficiently frothy and rich in charm to make it an excellent summer read. What I'm really looking forward to, however, is what Smith will do in the years to come.

Vanessa A. Farr  
South Africa

---

*Becoming Victoria*. Lynn Vallone. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001; 36 b/w + 15 colorplates; xviii +256 pages; ISBN 0-300-08950-3; \$26.95US (cloth).

This book is a delight, with copious illustrations to pore over and scholarship presented in lively prose leavened with contemporary references. It explores the early life of the girl who grew up to be Queen Victoria, drawing upon a wealth of primary material from the Royal Archives. These sources include documents by Victoria herself - her letters, drawings, journals, and stories - and documents about her, including her examiners' tactful reports and her mother's admonitory letters. In addition, Vallone draws upon such material evidence as Victoria's clothes and toys, upon portraits and sketches of the princess, and upon books written for children about the princess. Its chapters take us to Victoria's accession, tracing the influences upon her education, the forces at work and in conflict in her secluded upbringing, and the girl's gradual growing into her status as royal heir.

The implications of the term "becoming" are multiple. In her preface, Vallone remarks on how Victoria chose for her public image an

expression that "is thought more *becoming*" (xviii), in the sense both of attractive in her person and appropriate to her role. Moreover, *Becoming Victoria* might be titled *Constructing Victoria*, for Vallone concentrates on how Victoria was shaped to fill a role that was unprecedented in British history. From her babyhood, it was understood that Victoria was heir presumptive to the throne of England, but that this monarch would be constrained not only by the country's, but also by her own, female, constitution, not to mention the demands and expectations of the public. Vallone shows us the efforts of Victoria's widowed mother, the Duchess of Kent, to educate her daughter to be both woman and sovereign when "womanhood" meant an absence of sovereignty, and to maintain both individual privacy and public visibility for the young Victoria. These efforts provoked considerable conflict with the aging king and alienated her daughter as well. Vallone shows us also how the princess's life was reconstructed and represented to young readers in biographies which reinforced the mutual "belonging" of sovereign and subject, and, curiously, given the discrepancy between monarch and subject, prescribed the Queen's own girlhood as a pattern for the many.

Vallone is nonetheless right to insist on *Becoming Victoria*, for throughout the book she succeeds in her goal of giving voice to the young Victoria. Although her journals and letters were never private, Vallone enables us to see Victoria exploring her choices, as she resists some influences (her mother's) and embraces others (her governess and her Uncle Leopold), and as she writes stories which interrogate the values of the stories they appear to imitate. Her enthusiasms - italics and exclamation marks and all - for the theatre and opera, chiefly, but for other events such as her relatives' visits, burst through the constraints of her upbringing and counteract the prickliness of her mature portraits with the becoming freshness of England's rose.

Susan Drain  
Mount Saint Vincent University

---

***The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony.*** Leigh Gilmore. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001; x +163 pages; ISBN: 0-8014-8674-2; \$16.96US (paper).

My initial interest in reading Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography* was more than met by the care and thoughtfulness of her arguments regarding "the complexity of representing the self in the context of representing trauma." Informed by both feminist and poststructuralist projects, Gilmore's text is an important contribution to efforts to reach and theorize beyond the impasse between second-wave feminist insistence on "breaking the silence" to claim "the voice of experience," and poststructuralist critiques of these foundational terms. Working with a notion of the "productivity of the limit," Gilmore reads texts by Dorothy Allison, Mikal Gilmore, Jamaica Kincaid and Jeanette Winterson as "limit cases" - that is, texts that "reveal and test the limits of autobiography" when what is being represented is trauma.

Before engaging close readings of texts by each of these authors, Gilmore situates her insights in a broader theorization of autobiography, trauma, memory and representation. At the crux of her concern in these first two chapters is how the established conventions of autobiography constrain self-representations of trauma through reliance on what she identifies as "almost legalistic" claims of verifiable evidence and demonstrable truth. As Gilmore argues, such conventions risk inviting shaming or silencing judgements that may be "too similar to forms in which trauma was experienced." She continues, "[i]n this scenario, the autobiographical project may swerve from the form of autobiography even as it embraces the project of self-representation." It is precisely, then, toward texts that have swerved from the conventional form of autobiography that Gilmore turns to learn from and theorize how trauma marks texts of self-representation, and how practices of self-representation are marked by trauma.

Beginning with a reading of Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Gilmore explores how Allison pushes against the limit between "autobiography" and "fiction" to tell a story of incest and illegitimacy beyond the reach of the