

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.

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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