

Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith is 28. *The Autograph Man*, her second novel ranks 3,669 on Amazon. *White Teeth*, her debut, at 4,323. She clocked a fair advance on the books – £250,000, people say. She’s smart, thin, and bar her boyfriend, Nick Laird, a poet, the best-looking person in the room. Oh Zadie, Zadie: where did it all go wrong?

For Zadie is disgruntled. She’s sat on a platform. On her left, Ian Jack, editor of *Granta*, which named her in January one of Britain’s 20 best young novelists (bummer!). To her right, more prime fiction-producing talent from the list: Andrew O’Hagan, lately of *Personality*, and Toby Litt, *Finding Myself*. The three are friends. Toby is name-checked as one of Zadie’s ‘valued first readers’. They’ve toured, read and faced public inquisition together. And all three have just published books where celebrity is the key.

Ian yawns and stretches, looks avuncular. There’s a whiff of the dark side about Toby, but it’s a cuddly form of malevolence. Andy competes mildly with Ian, wanting to be an uncle too. But Zadie? Well Zadie mopes. She frowns. She sulks. She shuns eye contact. And we’re not the first to notice it. Her shyness gives her a bad reputation, she tells us. In the past, signings have gone badly wrong, a lack of small talk with bookshop clerks the problem. Her publisher received complaints: Zadie Smith is rude, disgusting, anti-social. What did they expect, she asks us, a chat show host? “I’m an ‘able-to-speak writer’. Most of the writers I meet – the good ones – are like social cripples who don’t speak a word. They write the book; that should be the end of it. But people are expecting some kind of team player. ‘Hey, my book’s so great. How are you doing? Shake my hand.’ It shows in the writing in the end – it can’t help but do so.”

I’m not sure how the rest of the audience is taking this, but the woman next to me is bristling. (She has also drawn a rather good sketch of Mr Litt, face now sunk behind an ugly lectern, on her pad.) I too am impatient. After all, I have not come to

condemn, but to worship. When I read *White Teeth*, I was amazed. It was better even than people said. And I have just snaffled *The Autograph Man* in one late night sitting. 6 hours. No skipping, which is rare these days; most books can be re-edited in real time, a page, a paragraph, a chapter excised here and there.

How not to love a book whose prologue features Big Daddy? And Giant Haystacks. Locked together in one of their Sunday afternoon jousts. "Big Daddy is fat like an inflated ball, with no body hair and no sagging or visible genitals. He is fat like a bouncing, jovial Zeus, skimming the clouds, a circular god. But Giant Haystacks is fat like your average really fat man, covered in raw meat that undulates and shakes and no doubt smells." It's a set piece, complete in itself, but alive with the seeds of all that will happen in the book. The father who dies. The promissory notes that bind. And the boys she follows as they half-grow into men.

It's fashionable, these days, to compliment male novelists on their female characters. (Is this now an accepted strategy – like being ostentatiously good with babies – to worm your way into women's hearts?) Well *Autograph Man* made me want to return the compliment. Alex, the book's main man, seemed oddly familiar and utterly plausible. Zadie is tender as she unpacks and repacks him. Sure, he's pathetic, unreliable, inadequate. But, then, aren't we all? Other critics differ, it should be pointed out. One is unable to imagine "a serious 19th-century novelist writing with comparable levity about an equivalent shallowness." Another – Best British Novelist 1993 and not much heard from since – rather inelegantly accuses her of a "stubbed toe of the mind." The *New York Times* describes the book as flat-footed, grudging, dour, abstract, pompous, tight and preachy. Which is not bad from a newspaper that deserves all these epithets and more.

But perhaps it's Zadie herself that *Times* is describing, rather than her book. Yes, I think that's it. Flat-footed, grudging, pompous etc. catches the tenor of her answers rather well.

Asked why people like lists such as the *Granta* one, for example, she is scathing. "Lists are less trouble," she tells us. "I think it's a slightly depressing English habit. We'd much rather have somebody else's taste to follow rather than having to take any time finding something new; discovering new writers or going to a bookshop without instruction. It is depressing." And this from a woman who has just written a book about the fascination of lists.

She is particularly irked by the exposure *Granta* has given to even fresher talent than hers. Two writers – Monica Ali and Adam Thirlwell – have been selected before their first novels are published and have received the lion's share of media attention as a result. "I want to ask: what's the hurry? Why give the impression – which is a truthful impression – that it's a very closed set of people in a tiny corner of literary England, reading a text that other people haven't even seen yet. It seems peculiar to have people with no books published on the list, particularly in an English publishing environment when it's hard enough to get second and third books published because of the total lack of imagination on the part of publishers...It gives many a lot of people a bad feeling."

At times, I pinch myself to check that Zadie is not talking about herself. "This culture is so in overdrive about any kind of youthful fiction," she fulminates. "Monica doesn't think hers is the greatest book ever written, but you find yourself defending something you never believed. The hype is an enormous psychological pressure on a writer. Not that anyone should weep for a writer who has earned loads of money. But the bottom line, this is not a healthy thing to have in your head at eight in the morning when you're trying to write something. It's just very messy. Even in America you have a better chance of having a basically healthy literary career, at least in the beginning, than you do in England. We're driven by the celebrity mania that this whole country is sunk in."

Meanwhile, the writers just get younger. "The books I get sent," she tuts, tailing off to let us imagine the horror of

adolescent fiction. “I know I was young, I was *too* young. But I get sent books by sixteen or seventeen year olds. The manuscript isn’t even finished. The fucking ink is still wet. They just keep on coming. It’s a shame. We’ve lost that Keatsian idea of an apprenticeship. I think of Keats as a lower class kid, kind of like myself and kind of like Toby. If you’re going to start writing, you’re starting on a long-term game. It’s going to last the rest of your life because it’s a lot of work to get any good at it. But reviewers are not interested in that. I’ll never write a book as popular as *White Teeth* – and partly that makes me think: ‘Thank God!’”

So was there any consolation? Well, apparently so. Toby reassures me later that similar panels have managed even more toxic moans. Apparently, they did their worst in Brighton (where the recent spike in suicides is henceforth explained). And imagine what a panel of the unchosen writers would be like...

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*David Steven listened to Zadie Smith
at the British Council’s Cambridge Seminar.*

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