

# Zadie Smith's *The Fraud*

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2023-10-16

<http://cforster.com/2023/10/the-fraud>

So, I recently finished Zadie Smith's latest novel, *The Fraud*. I am an ardent Smith fan, and... I liked this book a lot! This is how literature professors talk about literature, right?

I was waiting until I'd finished *The Fraud*, to read Andrea Long Chu's review, which I had seen making the rounds a few weeks ago. Chu faults Smith's "humanism" for the novel's "realism." Rather than a properly political perspective, Chu suggests, the novel professes only the realist novelist's milquetoast: empathy. Chu finds something (though exactly what isn't clear; perhaps "its audacious unreality") more exciting and biting in Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*. But to call the novel "realist" oversimplifies things—probably as much as simply calling Smith a "humanist."

While I like *White Teeth*, I have taught *White Teeth*—using it, in the ruthless metonymic calculus of the syllabus (wherein every work must also show us some more general trend), as an instance of *postmodernism*. And it works well! I found myself comparing it instead to my preferred Smith novel: *NW*. It shares with that novel a juggled narrative chronology as well as short chapters, with commentary-like titles (moments where authorial wit often peeks through). It shares with *NW* a preoccupation with certain neighborhoods in northwest London. The two novels share a number

of touchstones: John Ball's sermon ("When Adam delved and Eve Span"), Our Lady of Willesden Church, and even a key secondary character named Bogle(!). And they are both fundamentally novels of social encounter. *The Fraud*'s central character asks, what can we know of others? And that question is riven by class and race. This is the Forsterian theme of *Howards End* that Smith has pursued in *On Beauty* and elsewhere.

*The Fraud* bears marks of the last decade of politics. The account of the debates and class politics of the Tichborne case (which are one of the novel's greatest accomplishments) recall our own Trumpist/Brexit era. References to antivaccination conspiracies only further cement the parallel.

While most discussions of the novel center the Tichborne case; Josephine Tey's *Brat Farrar*, while fictionalized, is a novel more centrally concerned with the Tichborne's identity plot., the Tichborne case is merely the occasion for the novel, rather than its central concern. It is irrelevant to large stretches of the novel, but it provides the key thematic strand around which the rest of the novel is woven. The novel's most interesting move is to try to unite a novel of nineteenth-century England with the wider context of slavery and the economic base which provided the Empire with its wealth.

*The Fraud* has absorbed Edward Said's reading of *Mansfield Park*, and in its most formally daring move, it tries to reintegrate the geographically disparate elements of the British 19th century into a single narrative whole. This is accomplished chiefly through its treatment of Andrew Bogle in the novel's second half (in volumes 6 and 7). It is a provocative move, and one that invites me to teach it alongside Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I found myself wishing this move had been a little more formally daring—that these chapters had more completely abandoned the novel's earlier narrative mode, or that these chapters had more completely dislocated Eliza. They instead offer something like a hiatus rather than completely

(to use a metaphor the novel repeats) turning the novel's world upside down.

Like *NW*, this is a novel that is fascinated by sexuality but which never fully engages it. In *NW* a sort of sexualized racial masquerade emerges late in the novel, as Keisha's character enters a moment of crisis. Here Eliza's relationships with both Ainsworth's first wife and with Ainsworth himself (to speak nothing of the inchoate but unrealizable cross-race romance between Eliza and Andrew Bogle), gesture towards *desire*. Such desire complicates the social relationships of the novel. But it also complicates the empathy that Chu fairly identifies as central concerns of this novel and of Smith's work more broadly. Yet sexuality, in neither *The Fraud* or *NW*, ever takes center stage. This may simply confirm the degree to which sexuality has always been a troubling force for any essentially humanist view of the world. That Smith engages sex in this glancing way may suggest a failure to tackle fully the queerness that the novel courts. But it also suggests that Smith is her own best critic of humanism's naivetes. That doesn't mean, however, that the novel offers a fully coherent account of sexuality, anymore than it offers a totally satisfying politics. (Whether one would *want* such a thing from a novel may be fundamental point of disagreement.)

Finally, a note on character. Chu suggests that, "The irony of Smith's career is that she has never actually excelled at constructing the kind of sympathetic, all-too-human characters she advocates for." Another critic reports, "her characters this time around—Eliza, Ainsworth, Sarah, and the rest—feel more like archetypes than like people." Now, "how *real* is this character?" seems like a losing game no matter how it is played; but I'll play for a moment: I simply don't agree with these assessments. I don't know what grounds there could be for justification of such claims beyond the lousy proffering of mere examples, so, I'll try that. Sarah Ainsworth (the second Ainsworth wife) is a rich and sympathetic "Trumpist" character. (The sort of character in whom one may catch glimpses of people you've known.) And the account,

near the novel's closing, of Eliza discovering William Ainsworth's dead body I found utterly compelling. It has stuck with me and feels like a consummation; it repeats the representation of Ainsworth's fundamental superficiality, but more crucially of Eliza's self-alienation—her misrecognition of her feelings even of someone so fundamentally superficial. It is a compelling moment. Fine, I'll say it, it is a *touching* moment! The empathy got through! This is a novel that does not blithely offer empathy as a salve for fascist politics. Smith shows Eliza's capacity for empathy, but more crucially (in another late scene—a very Victorian scene of inheritance), she shows the ways that empathy fails, and the ways that empathy escapes and complicates any coherent sense of selfhood.