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White Teeth, by Zadie Smith, Hamish Hamilton, Published by the Penguin Group, Toronto, 2000 \$24.99, 462 pages

Book Review by Julian Samuel

Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth' punctures the pus-filled world of the politically correct and the religious. She gives all the major religions and their thinner derivations a jolly good hiding, especially: The Church of Animal Rights Activists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Islam -- which understandably, she is petrified to mock comprehensively. Happily, however, she takes oblique pot-shots throughout.

Smith's publishers have pressed Salman Rushdie's seal of approval right smack in the middle of the cover: 'An astonishingly assured début, funny and serious .. it has bite.' The words 'Salman Rushdie,' in red ink, are set on a light cream-coloured box. Smith must have cringed at this parentalism. Father Rushdie helps to sell the book. Smith has composed beautifully-argued pages on the Bradford Moslems who shower the rose petals of tolerance on copies of 'The Satanic Verses.'

'White Teeth' sails through generations in a now multi-racial Britain as they arrive, leave, come back, clash, merge and intercourse with working class whites, spatially disoriented hippies, scooter nerds, white middle-class English school kids with their well-syntaxed parental parents, and a luminary scientist who copyrights the genetic structure of a mouse. There is a hilarious, well-orchestrated section on why young black women get their curly black hair straightened; politically advanced lesbians laughing in the background.

Smith does not sustain entangled narratives well. Rather, her strength lies in replicating the English spoken in London. With formal expertise she places diverse vernaculars right beside the Queen's -- well, err... more or less somfing like the Queen's. Early Jamaican-English rhymes beside clunky white working-class English; Modern Jamaican-English breathes against historical Jamaican-English with metallic urbanity. Two British Jamaican men prattle in old time Jamaican-English while sitting in O'Connell's pub; the pub owner prattling in an tragicomic working-class Queen's which is more of a knife blade than a ductile tongue.

Sadly, this novel-of-lesser-ideas moves with little consequential cultural or political depth. (Iain Pears', 'An Instance of the Finger Post,' is a more challenging novel of historical, political, and scientific ideas, with substantial characters set in calculated, sinuous plots. But then Pears may not have Smith's comic ability to use Modern 'black' English with similar dexterity.)

Smith's sprawling narratives about fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, brothers and the throbbing adolescent tensions are not set in challenging frameworks. She doesn't 'flash it', as Jamaican-English might have it. One wishes that she had threshed out a more jarring story path. Why? Because Smith is recording cultural life on this European island as it traverses its most radical cultural transformation to date, Roman conquest of 55 BC notwithstanding. The UK of 'White Teeth' was not visible a mere twenty or thirty years ago. Imagine a Fatwa at the time of 'Strawberry Fields'; imagine Gerry and the Pace Makers singing in Urdu (now a national language); much easier to imagine someone copyrighting a mouse's genes at the time of 'Steptoe and Son', though it was still out of the reach of science back then.

The subject matter of her book somehow warrants, or tends to ask, for a hitherto unseen narrative structure. But Smith -- perhaps sensibly, for so much of experimentalism is deathly stupid and uglily formal -- sticks to conventional narrative form, loving nods to Joyce, the lapsed Catholic. One smooth, formally conservative chapter flows beautifully into another. London emerges out of the Roman fog anew, turgid with postcolonial hybridity and rampant with religious superstitions and corollary violence.

Many writers in Europe's most prestigious island (and on the continental mainland itself) have, with tremendous creativity, already confronted the question of complexly-coded multi-racial societies. Amin Maalouf's masterpiece, 'Leon L'African' (1986) comes to mind as well as, Mehdi Charef's 'Le thé au harem d'Archimède' (1985).

'White Teeth' refines the tradition of unearthing what would have without doubt been passed over by the British publishing industry and its indulgent nomenclature narratives. There is nothing new or shocking about 'White Teeth,' but what a pleasure it is to experience Zadie Smith's mastery of European tongues flapping in front of the Queen Mom copyright mouse squeaking and all. Dying to see the film.

