



## **On Beauty**

*Zadie Smith*

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## On Beauty Zadie Smith

Howard Belsey, a Rembrandt scholar who doesn't like Rembrandt, is an Englishman abroad and a long-suffering professor at Wellington, a liberal New England arts college. He has been married for thirty years to Kiki, an American woman who no longer resembles the sexy activist she once was. Their three children passionately pursue their own paths: Levi quests after authentic blackness, Zora believes that intellectuals can redeem everybody, and Jerome struggles to be a believer in a family of strict atheists. Faced with the oppressive enthusiasms of his children, Howard feels that the first two acts of his life are over and he has no clear plans for the finale. Or the encore.

Then Jerome, Howard's older son, falls for Victoria, the stunning daughter of the right-wing icon Monty Kipps, and the two families find themselves thrown together in a beautiful corner of America, enacting a cultural and personal war against the background of real wars that they barely register. An infidelity, a death, and a legacy set in motion a chain of events that sees all parties forced to examine the unarticulated assumptions which underpin their lives. How do you choose the work on which to spend your life? Why do you love the people you love? Do you really believe what you claim to? And what is the beautiful thing, and how far will you go to get it?

Set on both sides of the Atlantic, Zadie Smith's third novel is a brilliant analysis of family life, the institution of marriage, intersections of the personal and political, and an honest look at people's deceptions. It is also, as you might expect, very funny indeed.

## On Beauty Details

Date : Published August 29th 2006 by Penguin Books (first published June 4th 2005)

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Author : Zadie Smith

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## From Reader Review On Beauty for online ebook

### MJ Nicholls says

This is a book full of unbeautiful people: obnoxious teenagers, philandering academics, stuffy professors, right-on street rappers, wispy rich kids and more obnoxious teenagers. Zadie takes a scalpel to Anglo-American academic relations, probing away at the race/class issues with her usual mordant unflinching cruelty and compassion. She plants a series of depth charges in the lives of her wobbling characters, watching them each explode in turn into quivering heaps of gloopy suet. As ever, the ride is a scream.

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### Fabian says

Smith accomplishes much in this, her third novel. "Autograph Man" was sadly not memorable enough & "White Teeth", the novel that quickly turned her into the valedictorian of all modern young writers, was epic but also did not engage me too much.

"On Beauty" is exceptionally readable, relevant/modern, complicated, witty. She's honed her skills, & one must be a 'lil jealous.

Like I told G. just yesterday: it contains that Middlesexian moment of profound awe. Modern novels, at least those that are implemented into the canon (think: *The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Corrections*...), must either have that moment where a tear kinda materializes because emotions are too vivid, or because the scene contains awesomely understated beauty. "On Beauty," on second thought, has both. If I reveal that the scene where once was there was a closet-full of colorful clothes and now only a suit remains... well I don't reveal too TOO much. This is well written, poignant.

I must say that I AM a fan of Smith. Before I would say it too bluntly, I guess because that was en vogue. But after reading this novel, in close competition with "The Corrections" as the Great (American....British) Novel (version: 21 st century), I honestly say I can't wait for the next one. On "On Beauty"'s fate: It will be harvested for its amazing prose, insightful jewels of paragraph, and transplanted onto Sophomore-level English textbooks to be read by future generations.

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### Sally says

I think *On Beauty* is brilliant. I loved the extra layer of meaning that my reading of E.M. Forster's *Howards End* provided -- but I don't think it's necessary to do background reading to enjoy this novel. The characters are "messy," as Zadie Smith would say -- most of them make a lot of mistakes, but, for the most part, you love them, or sympathize with them for all of their deficiencies. It's a book with many layers, which is just the kind of fiction I love the most!

Zadie Smith has experience in many worlds, crosses many boundaries, and has interesting things to say from a variety of perspectives (including as both a fiction writer and as an academic). She's not only an extremely talented novelist, but she is super educated and smart, with interesting opinions on art, writing, and reading

that can be appreciated by anyone. For example, her stance on the value of reading fiction in one sentence, which I really like: "When we read with fine attention, we find ourselves caring about people who are various, muddled, uncertain and not quite like us (and this is good)." (Read "Love, Actually," published in the UK *Guardian*, Nov. 1, 2003, to understand the fullness of what that means.)

In *On Beauty* Smith tells an engaging story centered in a Harvard-like community, with lots of political, social, and academic battles that make you laugh and cringe at the same time. The dialogue is snappy and entertaining. We get the most concentrated view of Howard, a middle-aged, untenured professor (his stalled book-in-progress and unpopular art history lectures argue against Rembrandt's artistic genius), and his practical, down-to-earth, and wise wife and three young adult children. Howard gets himself deeper and deeper into trouble, putting his 30-year marriage on the line for extramarital nonsense, as his career continues to go nowhere. There are lots of controversy-filled themes packed in this novel: race, immigration, class, gender -- along with love, family, friendship, coming-of-age, and aging. Everyone is trying to figure out their place in the world and with each other.

One of the many memorable scenes is when Howard makes an unplanned visit to his father during an emergency trip to London. It has been four years since their last failed visit, and they both can't help -- despite their best intentions -- but clash. Howard and his father speak different languages. It pains Howard to confront his father's ignorance just as his father is shocked by Howard's incomprehensible views of art and puzzled by his interracial marriage and family. Smith skillfully captures the chasm between father and son, painful memories, and the impossibility of successful communication and a meaningful relationship.

Readers of *Howards End* won't have any trouble recognizing the parallels - but Smith goes way beyond the framework provided by Forster, to make this a book that addresses contemporary personal and social contradictions in an entirely fresh, creative, and relevant manner. I highly recommend this outstanding novel!

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## **Audrey says**

I'm beginning to think the problem isn't the books, but me. I was really, really primed to like this book. Not only had one friend spoken favorably of it, another had seen to it that the book was carried all the way from Malawi, Africa to New York and then sent to me.

I am embarrassed to report I had a hard time even finishing it. My primary complaint is contrivances. The dialogue was unnatural to me...and the plot, my goodness. It was hard enough to believe in such a deep academic feud between the father and his rival...but then the rivals move down the street and the feud continues but the moms are friends so when one of them dies and they just all HAPPEN to be near the same part of England the Belsey family attends the funeral and Howard does it with the same girl his son had been in love with. Meanwhile, back in their American lives the family runs into Carl not only at a concert but then he also comes to their house, then sees them again and he just so happens to be a spoken word poet at the place where Zora's poetry teacher loves to go, and for a while Levi is enamored of Carl but then falls in with a group of Haitians and as he gets to know them learns that they also hate Howard's rival and it all has to do with the very same painting that Howard's rival's wife gave to Kiki Belsey but was temporarily misappropriated by Howard's rival. And then it happens to wind up under Kiki's bed.

It was too much for me. I liked the ending, though, in that there was no real redemption for Howard, just a kind of fizzling. Parts were well written. Parts.

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## Heather says

This was a slow read for me. I'm not actually a particularly cerebral person, so I got bogged down in the parts about academic life. But I enjoyed the people in the story. A lot of them were supremely unlikable, but as was once pointed out to me, you don't necessarily want everyone in your fiction to be likable. Kiki is the character who resonated the most with me. I'll definitely read more by Zadie Smith.

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## B the BookAddict says

**Alive** is the word which springs to mind about this novel. It is a **glorious, page-turning, rip-snorter** of a tale through the lives of a white British college professor, Howard Belsey who's married to a black American, their three near-adult children and Howard's nemesis – Monty Kipps.

My favorite part is Howard's reaction while listening to the glee club singers at the formal college dinner; uproariously funny and totally priceless!

This is a novel where I would love to read a prequel and a sequel if Ms Smith would be so kind as to write them. I just want more and more of this family and of Smith's gorgeous prose. The review which has the novel in a nutshell and by far the best is:

MJ Nicholls's review

Mar 20, 11

5 of 5 stars

bookshelves: novels, sassysassenachs, tortured-artists, distaff

Read from March 13 to 16, 2011

*“This is a book full of unbeautiful people: obnoxious teenagers, philandering academics, stuffy professors, right-on street rappers, wispy rich kids and more obnoxious teenagers. Zadie takes a scalpel to Anglo-American academic relations, probing away at the race/class issues with her usual mordant unflinching cruelty and compassion. She plants a series of depth charges in the lives of her wobbling characters, watching them each explode in turn into quivering heaps of gloopy suet. As ever, the ride is a scream.”*

MOST HIGHLY RECOMMENDED. I'm with MJ Nicholls; a definite 5★

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## Oriana says

I was deeply displeased with this book. I can't believe I actually finished it; I liked neither the characters nor the language nor the style. I only read it because I got it for free (found it on the street in a pile of other middling titles), but though that excuses my *starting* it, it does not at all excuse my slogging through,

stubbornly determined, all the way to the end. The truth is this: I was too lazy to figure out what to read next, which is incredibly idiotic, so I deserved what I got. There were a few moments right there toward the end when she pulled all the semi-disparate plotlines together and I was fairly impressed seeing how it all fit, but all in all? This book sucked and I kind of suck for reading it.

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## **Paul says**

I find myself liking Zadie Smith more and more. The blurb about this wasn't immediately promising; another novel about a middle-aged academic having an affair resulting in a family and personal crisis. However, there is much more going on. Smith herself has acknowledged that it is an *Homage to Howard's End*. The author creates a multitude of voices, all interesting in their own right. It is set in a fictional American university town, Wellington (a thinly disguised Harvard).

The novel revolves around the Belsey family; Howard, the white male academic described earlier, his African-American wife Kiki and their three children, Zora, Levi and Jerome. Howard is a left wing (ish) liberal and he has an academic rival, Monty Kipps, a Trinidadian who is rather right wing (whilst writing this I am suddenly reminded of Naipaul who is Trinidadian and was a fan of Thatcher; but the resemblance ends there). Monty's wife Carlene and Kiki become friends and the two families become entwined in a number of ways. The Belsey children are really well drawn. Smith captures the right level of warmth, hope, youthful verve and irritatingness for three teenage children.

There is a warmth and humanity to all the characters, even Howard and Monty, both hypocrites. The university and academia types are brilliant and capture the machinations of academic life; thankfully there isn't too much of them and usually the children take centre stage. Smith satirises everyone on all sides of the cultural divides we all inhabit; but without losing the warmth mentioned above. The politics of race and gender are handled here with great humour and Smith maintains a serious moral compass and shows the importance of connections in human relationships. There are some genuinely funny moments; Howard's reaction to the glee club and his relating of it to his wife for example. There are also moments of great perception; Howard simply does not seem to understand the reactions to his infidelity. As for the second infidelity; it is breath-taking in its timing and inappropriateness. His family around him understand him all too well and let him know.

This is a good comic novel, which has great humanity and is a seriously good read.

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## **Aubrey says**

When I say I am not a people person, I mean I can find five reasons to hate someone, anyone, within ten minutes of meeting them in real life. As consequence of this and the desire to not let overwhelming anger ruin my life, I am always putting myself in the other's place, years of which have both calmed me down and sharpened my analysis to the quick. However much I initially dislike you, I will always, always, *always* respect you, and if you're not a complete and utter asshole and/or hypocrite who never seriously considers what others have to say, I will reconcile myself with you in short order. The same goes for personas in books, which is why the whole concept of "likable" characters makes me laugh. If I factored that into my evaluation of literature, I'd be left with very few successes.

Despite what many of these reviews complain about, most of these characters are not assholes. Hypocrites,

yes, but with a realness with which neither they nor the author may be condemned for. One of them is indeed a very typical asshole, but in such a fully explicated way that he is wielded as a veritable scythe through the ivory tower insipidity that is academia. This straight white male is a professor, a critic, a derider of custom and slayer of sentiment, so liberal in politics and so solipsistic in existence, able to get by in a world that encourages education without empathy at every turn in order to churn out glorified hipsters in the highest echelons of college campuses all across the US. In his eyes, nothing is sacred except for his dick, far more emblematic of a flawed society spewing out the same shit different days than any fault of the author, and which would hardly prove for a uniquely inspiring narrative had Smith not populated his world with characters that called him out on it at every turn. This includes the much objectified woman of his desires, who despite never having a share of that third person point of view is nothing less than fully and heartbreakingly human. Now *that* takes true writerly talent.

Now, I loved *Howards End*, I did. However, the ending was too clean, too circumspect, too full of its own glorious aspirations to really ponder the implications of demographics on personal relations, and ultimately in great need of satirization. Teaching that book to students today will give you exuberant know nothings with nary a thought as to the twisting of privilege in the smallest facet of daily life, a truth fended off every second of every hour with empty courtesy, gentrified fortresses, and the avoidance of certain subjects. Politics, religion, pay check. Beware of the other side of the fence, less you find out how much and how so you use and are used. There's no success there, neither your money nor your life.

Liberalism tries. As Smith displays in full, liberalism tries, but is easily co-opted without complete understanding, or even the willingness to understand, for it is one thing to condemn racism and sexism and everything else and quite another to view one's life through the paradigm forever on. It is tiring, it is *hard*, and quite frankly who has time for all that when there's a 40+ hour work week and kids and taxes and pull up your bootstraps 'cause no one's ready or willing to coddle you no matter how much your nature and nurture screwed you over long before you were born. Never mind your beautiful passion for what society considers wrong for all the wrong reasons. Never mind the judgment based on white heteronormative masculinity, women deepening their voice in speaking classes, black men fending off the fearful stares with constant reassurance, both expending energy that could have been wonderfully devoted elsewhere if not for their body and soul.

In the end, hate people if you will. Hate them, but always grant them reason to live. Always grant them reason to *exist* in your eyes, regardless of what promotions they have the power to make possible, what length of your time they are worth based on the connections you hypothesize out of the tone of their voice and color of their skin, how much you can squeeze out of them before going back to that circle habituated to whatever power you have as a youth/mother/daughter/father/son you call family. You have the right to living your life without actively seeking out danger, but do not avoid a chance to communicate out of guilt, or shame, or entitlement. You were compromised coming into this world by both privilege and oppression; you will gain nothing by splintering off in your own little bell jar of social justice.

*If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.*

*-Zora Neale Hurston*

Humans are social creatures. There is, despite the hypocritical politickings, something beautiful worth living for in the halls of thought. Rome wasn't built in a day. In other words, go listen to some rap, or whatever other medium you have closed yourself off from without ever really knowing why or considering what drives your fellow human beings who so rapturously partake of it. Talk is cheap, silence is death, and we might as well like or dislike the tomato while explaining why; something may come of it yet.

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## **Jennifer says**

While I did not absolutely hate this book, I really disliked it from the beginning and kept reading in hopes it would redeem itself. Alas, it did not. In fact, there really isn't many redeeming qualities in the story or the characters whatsoever. The book was written with some style, but as far as the storyline and the characters go, the book should have been called *On Destruction*...which is, as it seems to me to be, where every character was bent on going in their own oblivion. I did not have any sympathy for or empathy with any of them and that I think is a huge fault in the development. Furthermore, the colloquialisms in some of the dialogues were off; the scenes as well as the characters fell a little flat.

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## **Dannii Elle says**

Zadie Smith's deep and beautiful insight into the lives of undeepest and unbeautiful people is astoundingly brilliant (yes, I am aware that I just made those words up. Let's just call it poetic license).

The book's angle is a pretty simple one: the reader follows the movements of the various members of the Belsey family, and those they come into contact with, over the course of a year or so, and begins to form an insight into how they interact with the world and the people around them. In reality, it is so much more than this.

The Belsey family - comprising of an African American mother, a Caucasian father and three mixed-race children - all struggle with an identity crisis that centres around a multitude of things including their race, gender and their place in the academic world of Wellington (a thinly veiled Harvard) that they reside in.

The complex issues that this novel confronts forced me to confront myself as more than a self-contained entity. We are *all* so much more than individual beings. Who we are is denoted by our heritage, our ancestry, our upbringing, our peers... We are an amalgamation of everything that came before us and everything we come into contact with, but it is how we process and respond to these factors that defines who we are as a person. And we are all a walking political statement for something, whether we like it or not.

As the characters begin their individual journeys of self-discovery, I departed on one of my own. This book helped me to think about my own place in my own society: every thing I touch and everything that has touched me, no matter how seemingly insignificant, has all made up the person who sits here and writes this today.

If anyone is still reading this self-absorbed waffling then I urge you to pick up and read this book. It touched me soul, and I hope it does yours.

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## **Kinga says**

Before we talk about Zadie Smith, let's talk about me first. Here is something you should know – I was a serious book-worm up until I turned 16 (more or less) at which point I lost all interest in anything that wasn't parties, boys, alcohol, drugs or sex. There, I said it. For the next five years my brain didn't see much action (I



somehow managed to finish high school and got accepted into the University of Warsaw but generally I found education a big distraction to my social life). I was about 21 when finally the fog surrounding my brain cleared a little and I decided to go to my local library. I had no idea what to read or how to choose. I was just browsing idly when I saw a book called 'White Teeth' with an interesting cover. I checked it out, went home and started reading. Soon I was mesmerized. I had no idea there were books like that, that there were stories like that and that people were telling them. I can't quite recall now what it was about 'White Teeth' that spoke to me so but it was as if a curse was lifted and I could read and use my brain again.

For this OCD reason or another, a decade had to pass before I read another Zadie Smith's book. I am more cynical now and not so easily impressed as I was back then. I felt I could see what Smith was doing there; I was onto all her tricks. Nonetheless, I enjoyed this book tremendously. All this mixing of race, politics, academia, art, love and death – what's not to love? Even if some of the observations were not particularly revelatory to me I have to give it to Zadie – she knows how to write people. That's what the characters in 'On Beauty' were – people, rather than characters. They were so well put together I feel I would recognize them if I chanced upon them at a party (you know, I still go to parties). Zadie Smith is at the same cruel and merciful towards her subjects. She won't hesitate to point out all the silliness of their lives but allows us to feel compassion for them and look upon their futile attempts to practice what they preach with forgiveness.

Also the climax was quite astonishing. I begin to believe that the ability to write a good climax, to make the reader understand you knew exactly what you were doing from page one is exactly what separates great writers from everybody else.

But we shouldn't forget humour either:

*'[...] A brother don't need a gate – he jumps the fence. That's street.'*

*'Again, please?' said Howard.*

*'Street, street,' bellowed Zora. It's like, "being street", knowing the street – in Levi's sad little world if you're a Negro you have some kind of mysterious holy communion with sidewalks and corners.'*

And descriptions. Here is my personal favourite (for obvious reasons):

*The African women in their colourful kenti cloths, the whippet blonde with three phones tucked into the waistband of her trucksuit, the unmistakable Poles and Russians introducing the bone structure of Soviet Realism to an island of chinless, browless potato-faces, the Irish men resting on the gates of housing estates like farmers at a pig fair in Kerry...*

Bone structure! You can thank us for that later.

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## **Emma says**

I would probably give this book three and a half stars, which is not an option here. I thought it was well-written and had many interesting, memorable scenes, but the book did not really feel like a cohesive whole. The story follows an interracial family in an academic setting. The father is a white art history professor at a private liberal arts college in a fictional suburb of Boston; his wife is a black southern woman and they have three kids.

The title "On Beauty" comes from a poem, which is quoted at one point during the book. The book did

comment on different types and perceptions of beauty as well as different kinds of intelligence and intellectual styles. These themes are conveyed through the novel's many characters. For example, there is the wife, Kiki Belsey, a large black woman with beautiful skin who radiates with a goddess-like presence, who notes that people expect this like her as a black woman of her size. She is not in the academic world, but is perhaps the most emotionally intelligent character. Her husband Howard is an average-looking white middle-aged man, who struggles with finishing and publishing his academic scholarship and whose style tends to dispute common understandings about the art world. (His main thesis is that Rembrandt wasn't really anything special, he was just painting to fulfill the requests of the clients who commissioned him.) Another professor, Claire Malcom, is a petite, thin white woman who wears no make-up and might seem not to care about her appearance, though it is revealed that she has been ordering salads almost her entire life, practices yoga in order to stay young and flexible, and pays careful attention to her bikini line. Claire is a poet and is somewhat looked down upon within her department for not being a "real" academic. Howard and Kiki's daughter Zora tries too hard in both respects. She spends considerable time getting ready in the morning and pledges at the beginning of the semester to swim everyday and lose weight. She also works incredibly hard in her classes (she is a sophomore at the fictional college, Wellington), but does not seem to have any real opinions of her own. What she lacks in natural beauty or talent, she makes up for with hard work and persistence.

Similar analysis can be made for almost every character, some we barely meet at all. For instance, in the course of three pages we are introduced to a college freshman who was the academic star in her high school who is terrified to open her mouth in Howard's class for fear of saying something stupid. As quickly as she is introduced, she is gone, never to be mentioned again. This breadth of characters provides these various human idiosyncrasies, but in some ways damages the story as a whole, never letting us get to know one character or storyline in depth.

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## Helle says

Sassy, smart and street-wise is what this novel is; what Zadie Smith is. With a literary nod to a favourite novel of mine, *Howards End* - which is anything but sassy and street-wise - this is a novel that only Zadie Smith could pull off. As in *White Teeth* and *NW*, it is teeming with snappy conversations, larger-than-life characters, literary references and unlikely plot developments (partly grâce à Forster); in short *On Beauty* is full of life and soul.

The prose crackles and sparkles, and once again we witness Zadie Smith's trademark ear for different dialects and sociolects, rap and literature. And while many of her sentences are eloquent and the topics serious, they are also full of mirth. It is perhaps what I appreciate the most: her wit. Because it is invariably coupled with heart and smarts.

Here Howard, middle-aged intellectual Brit transplanted to the United States courtesy of his voluptuous, African-American, non-intellectual (and utterly wonderful) wife, Kiki, is having a conversation with a curator at the college where he teaches (who speaks the first line):

*'Ag'inst Rembrandt', the second man said. He had a high-pitched Southern voice that struck Howard as a comic assault for which he had been completely unprepared. 'That was the title your assistant mailed us – I'm just tryna figger what you meant by 'ag'inst' – obviously my organization are part-sponsors of this whole event, so –'*

*'Your organization –'*

*'The RAS – Rembrandt Appreciate – and I'm sure I'm not an innellekchewl, at least, as a fella like you might think of one...'*

*'Yes, I'm sure you're not,' murmured Howard. He found that his accent caused a delayed reaction in certain Americans. It was sometimes the next day before they realized how rude he had been to them.*

Forster dealt in social classes: the cultured intellectual Schlegells, the moneyed business people - the Wilcoxes, the working class man - Leonard Bast, who were all trying to bridge the gap between their classes; between literature and life – to 'only connect'. In *On Beauty* Zadie Smith takes us to a college town in New England, and so her groups are Americans, Brits, whites, African-Americans, intellectuals and non-intellectuals, students and rappers, teenagers and their parents – all trying to find their place in the world, to connect or, as in Howard's case, work through a mid-life crisis. And as in *White Teeth*, she has created characters that jump off the page and really *exist*. But *On Beauty* shines much brighter than WT and NW, in my opinion.

The novel was further from *Howards End* than I had expected but turned out to be a fantastic book in its own right, allusion to favourite novel or not. When I read her acknowledgements at the end, I nearly broke down (in gratitude? wonder? renewed and double appreciation of Forster and Zadie Smith?) This is what she writes:

*It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other. This time I wanted to repay the debt with **hommage**.*

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## **Mary says**

This is why Kiki had dreaded having girls: she knew she wouldn't be able to protect them from self-disgust. To that end she had tried banning television in the early years, and never had a lipstick or a woman's magazine crossed the threshold of the Belsey home to Kiki's knowledge, but these and other precautionary measures had made no difference. It was in the *air*, or so it seemed to Kiki, this hatred of women and their bodies - it seeped in with every draught in the house; people brought it home on their shoes, they breathed it in off their newspapers. There was no way to control it. (p.198)

There was nowhere to park. They had to leave the car several blocks from the party itself. Zora had specifically worn the shoes she was wearing because she had not anticipated any walking. To make progress she had to grip her brother around his waist, take little pigeon-steps and lean far back on her heels. For a long time Jerome restrained himself from commentary, but at the fourth pit stop he could keep silent no longer. "I don't get you. Aren't you meant to be a feminist? Why would you cripple yourself like this?" "I *like* these shoes, OK? They actually make me feel powerful." (p.408)

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## **karen says**

i read this too long ago to write a proper review of it, but this is a little heads-up if anyone wants to check out a "summer reruns" list i made over here:

i do so love making lists.

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### **Josh says**

Why have I been put off by trying Zadie Smith in the past? Could it be the name of her books? With the names 'On Beauty', 'The Autograph Man', 'White Teeth' or even 'NW', could that have really been the reason why I hadn't read, much less really picked up anything by her? How superficial is that? I have a 'don't judge a book by it's cover' mentality merely because when one judges by the way it looks is ridiculous because I've found some completely ugly covers that have been great books and the opposite, but 'On Beauty'? With its simple cutesy curly cue type on front, the name that yells aesthetics (aesthetically speaking), it was one that was first picked up and not even flipped through, one that was put back onto the bookshelf without a second glance for quite some time. I picked this up out of curiosity, I picked it up because I wanted to *go outside the box*. This is one that I failed to even look at the excerpt or blurb to what it was about. I climbed onto it and rode on. This story is about the beauty of life and how beauty is completely relative in nature. This bi-racial, bi-cultural symbiosis between man and woman and **their** story of the world around them is well thought out, ingenious and realistic. Not only is it a story, plain and simple, set out forthwith without abstract meaning, it holds the key to what great story telling is all about: getting to the core of an issue and not hiding it behind a curtain. *THIS IS IT, HERE I AM, TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT*.

The insecurities with our loved ones, our tendency to be doormats, raw emotion and lessons learned are all on display and this is what makes this a 5-star and not a 4-star.

Anyone can write a book with a story such as this, but understanding what you're writing and knowing **HOW** to portray what you're writing in a way that it truly makes someone snicker like 'yeah, I know how that is'...that's what does it for me.

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### **Ace says**

About a third of the way through I wasn't sure I wanted to know any more about the Belsey or the Kipps families so I ended up reading heaps of other books while this sat waiting for me to return. The ending was strong and had a dash of drama. Not quite as good as White Teeth but better than Swing Time. A gifted author, I need to read her other books.

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### **Nikki (Saturday Nite Reader) says**

**3.5 stars**

*On Beauty* by Zadie Smith is 442 pages. A very, very slow 442 pages in which you need to be fully engaged and present while reading. This is not a book you can breeze through, as the book would mention of certain characters: it is *intellectual*. There is no doubt that Smith is a talented writer, I just struggled a bit in establishing a reading pace with this one.

*On Beauty* follows the Belsey family: an interracial couple, Howard and Kiki, married thirty years living in an upper middle class town with their three children, Jerome, Zora and Levi.

- Howard is an art history professor at a local liberal arts college who is hard to like; he always has an opinion (its most always negative) and he's always right (*or so he thinks*)
- Kiki used to be a beautiful spitfire but has gained a significant amount of weight; still a spitfire but that magnetic confidence doesn't exude from her like it used to (*I blame Howard*)
- Jerome is a young man trying to find himself in religion and grapples with adulthood and his relationship with his family; he is the rational one of the bunch
- Zora is Howard 2.0 with the spunk of Kiki; she yearns to be accepted but her approach in getting what she yearns for is more alienating than endearing
- Levi is sixteen and going through an identity crisis; he is passionate and loyal and trying to find something worth fighting for (*his family doesn't understand him – as any teenager would say*)

**What was once a well-oiled machine of a marriage becomes broken overnight.** Howard and Kiki dealing with who they once were and who they are now, and the kids trying to come into their own while their parents unravel makes for an interesting household. *Cue in a slew of other characters that will bring out the best and worst of the Belsey clan.*

The story addresses culture norms, social class, political differences, stereotypes, personal vendettas and the like. It was portrayed in such a way that you did not feel the story was trying to lead you to believe one point of view over another; it was more about perspective. **It's an authentic portrayal of the inner workings of a family and the façade they provide the outside world versus what its really like when the front door is closed.**

It had a very funny start and I was hopeful of the tone it set, but then I got lost in the weeds when the writing became too granular on the subject of art and literature. There would be pages upon pages of description and I rather prefer dialogue: bring back Kiki and her likeable charm. Kiki, Jerome and Levi were the only characters I liked; much of the others were highly irritating.

**It's a thought-provoking read and made for some good conversation at book club.** It's not a summer vibe read, but may be a good read cozied up in a blanket with fuzzy socks near a fireplace with a cup of hot-chocolate (*now who is being too descriptive?!*).

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## Helene Jeppesen says

Contrary to a lot of people's opinions, I loved this book! The first couple of chapters were unpredictable and refreshing, and the rest of the book was an amazing story about family life, marriage problems, racism, growing up, and beauty.

I loved every single character, and while especially one of them behaved irrationally, it was entertaining and informative to read about his decisions and the ensuing repercussions.

"On Beauty" was one of those books that grabbed me from beginning till end, and while I've only read one other novel by Zadie Smith, this one has been my favourite so far. It was easy to read and yet a very universal book that I think everyone can benefit from reading - even though it does seem that some people don't really like this novel at all.

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