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HOTEL WORLD  
Winner of the Whitbread Award for Best Novel

# Ali Smith the accidental

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supple, jazzy. *The New York Times*



## The Accidental

*Ali Smith*

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*Ali Smith*

## **The Accidental** Ali Smith

Winner of the Whitbread Award for best novel and a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, *The Accidental* is the virtuoso new novel by the singularly gifted Ali Smith. Jonathan Safran Foer has called her writing “thrilling.” Jeanette Winterson has praised her for her “style, ideas, and punch.” Here, in a novel at once profound, playful, and exhilaratingly inventive, she transfixes us with a portrait of a family unraveled by a mysterious visitor.

Amber—thirtysomething and barefoot—shows up at the door of the Norfolk cottage that the Smarts are renting for the summer. She talks her way in. She tells nothing but lies. She stays for dinner.

Eve Smart, the author of a best-selling series of biographical reconstructions, thinks Amber is a student with whom her husband, Michael, is sleeping. Michael, an English professor, knows only that her car broke down. Daughter Astrid, age twelve, thinks she’s her mother’s friend. Son Magnus, age seventeen, thinks she’s an angel.

As Amber insinuates herself into the family, the questions of who she is and how she’s come to be there drop away. Instead, dazzled by her seeming exoticism, the Smarts begin to examine the accidents of their lives through the searing lens of Amber’s perceptions. When Eve finally banishes her from the cottage, Amber disappears from their sight, but not—they discover when they return home to London—from their profoundly altered lives.

Fearlessly intelligent and written with an irresistible blend of lyricism and whimsy, *The Accidental* is a tour de force of literary improvisation that explores the nature of truth, the role of chance, and the transformative power of storytelling.

## **The Accidental Details**

Date : Published April 10th 2007 by Anchor (first published May 26th 2005)

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Author : Ali Smith

Format : Paperback 306 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, Literary Fiction

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# From Reader Review *The Accidental* for online ebook

## MJ Nicholls says

A flat-out triumph of structure, style, shifting narrative voices, rhythm and language. A pitch-perfect technical masterpiece. Split into three components—the beginning, the middle and the end—the story moves between four perspectives: daughter, son, father, mother. Each section describes various events around a holiday trip to Norwich and the arrival of Amber, a charismatic drifter who changes her behaviour to accommodate each person.

A very tight, free indirect style\* is deployed to bring the third person narrator as close to each character as possible, from Astrid (sulky teenager daughter) and her show-off vocab, Magnus (sulky teenage son) and his mathematical attempts to work through grief, Michael (philandering father) and his embarrassing poetic endeavours, and Eva (writer mother) and her resigned melancholy, her cosy middle-England spirit. Each voice is rendered with tonal precision and demonstrates a mastery instructional to all writers.

Amber is the central catalyst of the book (little portions between each section are devoted to her voice, or what is *assumed* to be her voice), the one trigger that sends the story and characters into strange spirals, while their mundane domestic dramas continue undisturbed. She steps into the novel as an unrestrained, truly free individual and compromises the stifling repression rippling at the heart of this typical family.

The technique is very close to Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight*, another complete triumph of structure and style. If you care about truly spectacular writing and appreciate a writer successfully spinning more plates than is frankly human, *The Accidental* will knock you flat on your ass, as it did me. Genius.

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\* *The best definition of this can be found in James Wood's How Fiction Works.*

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## Shovelmonkey1 says

I cannot believe this book is on the 1001 books list. Do the people who write the list not like people who read books anymore? Why would they punish us so? 1001 list writers, once again I question you. Why?

I didn't enjoy reading it and to say I found the story a pointless and unrewarding read is probably an understatement. The book seemed to be nothing more than a series of poorly strung together literary devices... or maybe it was a vehicle for the trundling out of a series of literary devices to show how many literary devices there are.

Anyway, whatever, they made the story seem too contrived and dull. None of the characters were engaging nor did they warrant any sympathy, empathy or any other kind of pathy. A prime example being Dr Michael Smart, all round nauseating self obsessed academic with a penchant for thinking and talking about himself in the third person and for bedding his students. Note - the two activities need not be mutually exclusive for the tedious Dr Smart. That said, I can vouch that he is a good representative mash-up of many male academics that I have known and not loved.

There were small part of this book I did enjoy though. I liked pages 103 - 105. They were very clever indeed so well done for that. Also I laughed out loud when Magnus describes the film "Love Actually" as being like watching a really long building society advertisement hahahahaha! I've given the book a 1/5 mark based on the last gag alone.

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## **Carrie says**

The Accidental is a book with a lot of literary buzz in Britain. It is a finalist for the Whitbread Award and for the Booker. I had heard raves about it on Bookslut, too, so I decided to pick up a copy. I was, however, disappointed.\*

I can understand why The Accidental is getting a lot of noise. Its a very "writerly" book and very good in that sense. It's written in a stream of consciousness type style, with every chapter representing the internal thoughts of one of the four main characters - Astrid, Magnus, Eve or Michael. Eve is a writer, Astrid and Magnus are her children, and Michael her husband/their stepfather. Smith is especially good at writing the teenagers - it seems that she has absolutely captured the exploration and angst that adolescents go through. The parents are less interesting, because they seem more cliched. Michael is a professor who sleeps with all his students, Eve a writer who is unhappy with her childhood. Both are characters we have seen before (seriously, literary fiction would lead you to believe that every professor sleeps with his student, which really was not the case at either of the institutes of higher learning in which I attended). The children's voice was more fresh to me, and thus their chapters more interesting.

What really made me lose interest in the book, however, was the fact that nothing much happened. The plot, as promised by the book jacket, is that a mysterious stranger shows up at their summer house, and changes their lives forever. Could be promising, but in fact not much happens, and we are left unsure as to whether Amber, the stranger, ever really existed at all. The thing, is, I am not such a fan of artsy plotless writing exercise type books. I can get over that type of writing if there is an interesting story or interesting character (say, Mrs. Dalloway) to drag me along - which is why I enjoyed the children's chapters more than the adults'. This book didn't have enough other stuff for me to really enjoy it. I have been picking it up and putting it down since April - not a ringing endorsement for 306 page book with big print. I would say that if you like stream of consciousness/artsy writing you may enjoy this book. It is definitely well written in that style. If you prefer plot and characterization to writing skill, you may be left cold.

\*And worse, when I went back to Bookslut and re-read the review I realized that if I had paid as much attention the site's reviews as I do to the blog, I would never have bought it, damn it. Bad memory + impulse book-buying = bad decisions by yours truly!!

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## **David says**

*The Accidental* may claim the record for time spent in my reading queue - I bought it over five years ago, and finally got around to reading it this weekend. When I bought it, it had already generated quite a buzz - nominated (unsuccessfully) for the Booker prize, winning the Whitbread. I wasn't sure what to expect.

AS I was reading it, I thought I would end up giving it 4 stars, but in the end I really couldn't justify a fourth star. Which already tells you something about Ali Smith - she is (in this book, at any rate) the kind of writer who can be locally dazzling, but is less impressive when you step back to do an overall assessment. Most of "The Accidental" was fun to read, at times ridiculously so -- there are parts that are pure brilliance in action. Unfortunately, despite Smith's intelligence and impressive writing ability, the book's appealing qualities and scattered brilliant stretches don't fuse successfully to make a coherent whole.

The strongest aspect of *The Accidental* is the writing, specifically Smith's ability to cycle through the internal voices of the five main characters and pretty much nail each one. The sections written from inside the head of 12-year old Astrid are particularly impressive. Plotting, on the other hand, is considerably weaker. AT its core, the plot is just a variation of standard trope #17: "arrival of a mysterious stranger spurs the other protagonists to self-examination and growth". In Smith's execution, the mysterious stranger is thirty-something Amber, who shows up one summer evening and insinuates herself into the bosom of the uptight, middle class Smart family: philandering English professor Michael, his wife Eve, a (blocked) writer, 12-year old Astrid and 17-year old Magnus. Before Amber's arrival, each of the family members is fixated on his/her own problems and their self-absorption precludes any genuine communication. To say that Amber stirs things up would be an understatement - she intuits each character's weak point and uses it to ingratiate herself with, and eventually gain power over, them. Plausibility is not a high priority for Smith, so that "The Accidental" demands more than its fair share of willing suspension of disbelief. Readers who expect neat resolution are likely to find the end of *The Accidental* unsatisfying - I know I did.

But dwelling on perceived plot deficiencies misses the point. The beauty of "The Accidental" lies in the brilliance, exuberance, and genuine wit with which Ali Smith presents the unfolding events. The story is divided into a "beginning", "middle", and "end" - in each section, we hear from each of the five characters in turn. Brilliantly, Smith gives each character a characteristic style: Eve is interviewed Q&A-style, like her books; Astrid is stream-of-consciousness; while Michael holds forth as if he's lecturing to a hall of adoring freshmen (until his infatuation causes him to break, hilariously, into verse). Smith's ability to get the register exactly right for both teenagers is, quite simply, awesome, as is the mixture of compassion and humour with which she presents the inner monolog of Marcus, the most genuinely troubled member of the Smart family. Amber's interior monologs, in contrast, are less successful - Amber's character remains faintly murky throughout. Obviously, to Smith she's just the figure that kick-starts the action. As a reader I was a little disappointed by the failure to develop Amber's character in greater depth.

Taking into account the brilliance of Smith's writing, and the exuberance and enthusiasm that permeate the book, I think I've argued myself back up to a 4-star rating. There's a lot of virtuosity on display in "The Accidental". But it's tempered with compassion - I never felt it was just virtuosity for its own sake. Though it's not perfect by any means, "The Accidental" has brilliance to spare and - most importantly - it's a book with heart.

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## **Fabian says**

I feel like there was an age, or it IS that age, where writers love to explore with much keenness the family unit, for it is the perfect structure with which to scrutinize its individual parts ("The Corrections," "White Teeth," "The Red House," the list is almost infinite). & this one, a more accessible and modern "Sound and Fury" is a doozy. Like, what is happening here? is the main question through this dense but very readable firework of a novel. All four, or five, protagonists are given a very democratic framework in which to display their various personalities. We trace their singular trajectories, their personalities bleed unto each vignette

like a soul to some artifact--authentic life stories, these.

The crazy play-with-structure is indeed the premiere element which makes the novel unforgettable.

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## **Michael says**

This was a fun and surprising read with lots of scintillating wonders in its delivery and content. It falls into the box of “experimental writing”, but it flows along so fast and spritely compared to many a turgid, self-important postmodern of doorstep dimensions. Ali’s opening epigraph from John Berger was a perfect set-up: “Between the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narratives being offered to give a sense to tat life, the empty space, the gap, is enormous.”

The story is of a dysfunctional London family in summer residence in a rural town in Norfolk, with sections alternately told from the minds of an adult couple, Michael and Eve, and their kids, twelve-year old Astrid and seventeen-year old Magnus. Astrid is largely ignored by her parents and lives in a vibrant fantasy life and projects involving documenting the world with her videocam. Magnus is in a horrible limbo of probation pending investigation of his role in internet bullying of a girl that led to her suicide. Eve is enjoying success as a writer of a series based on ordinary real people who died in World War 2, whom she renders in a fictional rewrite of the life they might had lived. Michael is a professor of Victorian literature, failed poet, and perpetual philanderer targeting his students.

Into their lives comes a stranger, Amber, a 30-something woman appears at their home unannounced:  
*Sorry I'm late. I'm Amber. Car broke down.*

Eve assumes she is one of Michael’s student conquests, and Michael assumes she is one of his wife’s feminist acolytes. Astrid thrives on the attention she pays her, and Magnus finds solace in her ready grasp of the hell of remorse he is in. Michael is inspired by her ignoring him and smitten into lust and love by her apparent innocence and goodness. Eve is gratified by her taming effects on her kids and challenged to prove her integrity in the face of being told privately by Amber that she is an expert fake. Is Amber a midwife for healthy development of each character or a malevolent, lying manipulator? These questions get more insistent when she destroys Astrid’s camera and encourages Magnus’ adolescent lusts. The changes in Michael and Eve evolve down strange pathways, a great satire for me who appreciates a humbling of academics prone to getting divorced from the realities of ordinary life.

Interspersed with the episodes on the family are segments told by someone who calls herself Alhambra, named after the movie theater where she was conceived. Her riffs on cinema history and the impact on our culture are marvelous. It seems likely this is Amber, based on what she says she gained from her parents: “From my mother: grace under pressure; the uses of mystery; how to get what I want. From my father: how to disappear, how not to exist.”

One three-page mash-up of movie plots at the middle of the book is worth treasuring. Perhaps self-indulgent or perhaps a key to digesting the absurdist twists in the lives of supposedly ordinary people in the narrative. Try a sample and see if it doesn’t whet you for the whole piece:

*But my father was Alphonse, my mother was Isadora. I was unnaturally psychic in my teens, I made a boy fall off his bike and I burned down a whole school. My mother was crazy; she was in love with God. There I was on the alter about to marry someone else when my boyfriend hammered on the church glass at the back and*

*we eloped together on a bus. My mother was furious. She'd slept with him too. The devil got me pregnant and a satanic sect made me go through with it. Then I fell in with some outlaws and did me some talking to the sun. I said I didn't like the way he got things done. I had sex in the back of the old closing cinema. I used butter in Paris. I had a farm in Africa. I took off my clothes in the window of an apartment building and distracted the two police inspectors from watching for the madman on the roof who was trying to shoot the priest. I fell for an Italian. It was his moves on the dancefloor that did it. I knew what love meant. It meant never having to say you're sorry. It meant the man who drove the taxi would kill the presidential candidate, or the pimp. It was soft as an easy chair. It happened so fast. I had my legs bitten off by the shark. I stabbed the kidnapper, but so did everyone else, it wasn't just me, on the Orient Express.*

I loved how Astrid's playful, fertile mind was rendered, an internal version of her mother's characterization as "Kicky and impatient, blind as a kitten stupefied by all the knowing and not-knowing". Innocent she may be, but she is the one to put things into perspective toward the end of the book by imaging in detail the apocalypse of an asteroid strike (asteroid she tells us is one letter added to her name). My biggest empathy for the characters goes to him due to Ali's method of portraying his state of guilt over his classmate's suicide and the cold arithmetic behind school's eventual decision to cover it up:

*Everyone is broken. ...The people talking on all the millions of tvs in the world are all broken, though they seem whole enough. The tyrants are as broken as the people they broke. The people being shot or bombed or burned are broken. The people doing the shooting or the bombing or the burning are equally broken.*

...

*We are glad to inform you. The matter officially closed.*

*The end result=they've got away with it.*

*The end result=no one really wants to know.*

...

*He can forget it. A simple act of subtraction. Him minus it. He can have his memory erased by a special laser pen-torch, like in Men in Black.*

I chock this one up as a bedazzling and wonderful read and recommend it to those who like quirky tales with an underground impact that can catch you unaware. As it is 10 years old, I will eagerly pursue other books from her imaginative mind.

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## **Nada EL Shabrawi says**

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## **Alicia B. says**

This is a must-read if you are a writer/poet (or poet who loves fiction). It's definitely a writer's book. I can see why many people would dislike it, but it's pure genius. JUST BRILLANT! If you understand lit-heads, poetry meter, characterization, plot lines, emotions, word choice, undercurrent and themes... Well, let's just say you're sure to enjoy and appreciate this novel and its style.

I love how it's broken up into 3 sections (the beginning, the middle and the end). I love how the chapters

start, as if they are 1/2 of a missing thought. I love everything about this book, although I'll be the first to admit sometimes Ali Smith tries a bit too hard to be what I'd call "elusively intellectual" in her writing style. But I can admire the effort and her imagination, definitely.

One of the most creative and innovative stories I've ever read with fascinating and genuine characters!

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## **Violet wells says**

I really enjoyed Ali Smith's *How to be Both*; this one for me was more hit and miss.

A dysfunctional or normal family – pretty much the same thing nowadays – rents a holiday home in Norfolk. One day a mysterious stranger, a woman called Amber, arrives and ends up moving in with them. All four members of the family metaphorically are very much waiting for an amber light to turn to green and Amber's redemptive role is to reveal how this light might be changed. The first problem for me was Amber herself. She's something of a cliché as an inspirational free spirit. More of a new age traveller than a sorceress or annunciation angel. Her remedies for the supposedly stifling middle class malaise gripping the family (this malaise isn't altogether convincing) are somewhat hackneyed. She introduces the son Magnus to sex and teaches Astrid to be hostile to public opinion and property. In fact there's a kind of hollow hippy philosophy at the back of this novel. Amber doesn't really have any convincing alternative reality to offer, though Smith tries to convince us, unsuccessfully for me, that her belligerent ministrations are empowering, redemptive, life changing.

The other big problem is the unevenness of the characters. Each of the family members gets an equal share of the narrative. The females, especially the young Astrid are compelling and penetratively imagined; the two males, on the other hand, are flat and unconvincing. Husband and stepfather Michael is little more than a cliché – it doesn't matter that he himself comes to accept himself as a cliché: a professor who serially sleeps with his students. At one point he even decides he's going to pick the prettiest checkout girl in a supermarket and sleep with her: an hour later he implausibly achieves his ambition in the back of his car while she's on lunchbreak. At one point I remember thinking that Ali Smith is a bit like the British Nicole Krauss except there's more artistry in Krauss' playfulness. Smith, by comparison, can come across as both whimsical and pretentious. Also thematically Krauss is more rigorously masterful; she rarely loses control of her core material; Smith, on the other hand, tends to overreach herself, go off on tangents as if she wants to include in her book everything she thinks about modern life. Prime example of this is when Amber is given a voice and we get five pages of hugely pretentious prose about cinema as if therein lies the explanation for everything. But for this novel to work you have to believe Amber leads the way to discovery in her disciples or victims and for me this only really worked with the pitch perfect Astrid. There were times when I wished the entire novel was about Astrid with perhaps Amber as a presence only she could see and hear.

What saves the day is Smith's writing which is always quirkily eloquent and pulsing with vitality. Her characterisation of a 12 year old girl is also one of the best I've ever come across. However if you fancy reading her I'd recommend *How to Be Both* over this.

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## **James says**



Here is a literary accident: the almost universal exclusion of female writers from a coherent popular-culture postmodernist ideal. Here is Listverse's Top 10 Works of Postmodern Literature: marvel at the readily bandied about names of Pynchon, DeLillo, and Foster Wallace, however the lack of any female writers on the list is perhaps a bigger tell. In the same way that the Woolf-renaissance happened years after her work was published, perhaps it is only in retrospect that critics can pick out the undervalued, the buried and the silenced. It comes to no surprise that Ali Smith is famous but, paradoxically, at the same time *not*; her reputation in Scotland is unquestionably secured within the small country's surprisingly rewarding list of postmodernist writers, carving a heritage with contemporaries like Gray and Kelman, however I never get the feeling that she has quite become a global phenomenon herself yet? Perhaps I am wrong, and somebody could enlighten me as to her reputation outside of my country - however, and more importantly, Smith deserves to be read and known because her writing is the very embodiment of the postmodern aesthetic. Move over, America (!)

*The Accidental* is shockingly good, and an absolute pleasure to get lost in: its postmodernity is undoubtedly contemporary yet never feels too contrived. Smith, like Kelman, is a master of understanding dialect, exquisitely examining the various tics and modes of speaking which come together to form identities of real people. Thus, *The Accidental* is a novel which focuses on the four intertwined narratives of a middle-class family renting a house in Norfolk for the Summer, split into sections embodying the free-indirect-discourse of each family member. Each member of the Smart family has their own linguistic production, reminiscent of Joyce's chaptered style in *Ulysses*: Michael - the English Literature university professor - waxes lyrically like the texts he teaches; Eve - the pseudo-writer - constantly interviews herself in the style of her 'novels'; Magnus - the teenager - sees the world as a sexual blend of scientific equations, and Astrid - the youngest - is desperate to prove the existence of things through their documentation on her camera. Through the multi-narrative, events that befall the family are each represented a number of different times from slightly refracted angles, with an absolute light precision of prose and understanding of human perception, complex but never muddled. The book is a remarkably oral book, a meditation not on things *per se*, but rather the way events and objects are perceived and represented, thus perhaps it is not surprising that *The Accidental's* focus on image [and cinema] hints at a twenty-first century concern carried along by the modernist anxieties of writers like John Dos Passos. Smith's prose is both at once constructive and destructive, wherein her semantic layers constantly threaten to become violent at the very turn and touch of the page. There is always the danger of the book losing shape with each section *just* about melting into each other, a metaphor for the frayed, domestic seams which barely hold together the Smart family.

*'She had entered him like he was water. Like he was a dictionary and she was a word he hadn't known was in him. Or she had entered him more simply, like he was a door and she opened him, leaving him standing ajar as she walked straight in.*

Underneath the violence of the diction lies a strangeness which Smith exploits into the 'accidental' premise of the novel: the suicide of Magnus' classmate; Astrid's slightly skewed way of thinking; the death of domestic sanctity [of broken plates, burning moths, and uninvited guests] all paint a stifling setting to follow for the majority of the novel. The quintessential Britishness of the holiday home is turned on its head and intruded upon - which is perhaps why when the novel finally leaves the Norfolk home, for the final third, *The Accidental* seems to lose its experimental momentum. The claustrophobic setting and narration opens out onto a world which cannot be so readily contained, where Magnus' idea of words as meaningless which has propelled the novel so far so good [or as Astrid's observance of a furniture warehouse name, *Sofa So Good*], seems unbelievable outside of the novel's primary setting. Something must be said too of the novel's curious narrative structure, divided into 'the beginning', 'the middle' and 'the end' but never indicative of such divided boundaries: instead the book constantly travels back and forth, examining the myriad of possibilities and connections such as the causal relationship between *this and that, what thens and if sos*. Words are meaningless, Smith argues, however through deconstructing their significance she arranges them on the page

in order to give or take meaning, where the spaces between words [or the lack of a specific punctuation] reinforces the unconscious ramifications of everyday feelings. Words are no accidents, the novel reveals.

At its heart, *The Accidental* asks: *what is communication?* How does a photograph *be*? *When* does an image start? Where is the callous email which Magnus sends with fatal consequences? What is a cliché, and why does Michael, himself a typical philandering cliché, upon seeing a moth literally drawn to and then burned by a flame, experience such an epiphany with seeing the real image behind the facade of mundane speech? Smith tackles without holding back, and indeed sometimes rather too heavy-handedly, the various permeations of the age-old debate between reality and artifice, taking shape throughout the novel as memories, holograms of the past, present and future selves and, of course, via photos and film: all the hermeneutic interpretations of an instant. The visibility of life in the novel is never accidental, but like Astrid's seemingly random photos, always a motivated force. Thus Amber's almost trope-like appearance, which underpins the novel's plot like Hilda's role from *The Master Builder* is perhaps at first mystifyingly opaque whilst her lazy integration within the family suspends disbelief. The magnetism which this mysterious stranger holds over everybody is mildly irritating, and defies explanation until the very conclusion when her presence - though never outright explained - is highly suggestive as never having been coincidental in the first place. It is no surprise then that Amber, as the only character who does not have a story in *this* story, is supposed to embody the very entirety of twentieth century cinema, a character which seems to come straight from an Angela Carter tale; her conception at the Palais Du Luxe cinema surreally defines her as a homage to the silver screen reinforcing her cinematic traits as alluring, superficial and transitory, at once therapeutic but with great potential to be disconcerting and - like films - even terrifying. And yet it is in Amber, the spiritual *imago*, and her delayed presence [as if there is a photographic delay between her intrusion and its consequences] which forces the family to deal with their past once they return from the supposed bliss of Norfolk. The only noise is the ominous bleeping of the messages left on their home-phone. Through Amber, their delayed lives are changed: through Amber, new languages must be wrought in order to continue on the various expressions of life in the present.

Although *The Accidental's* most fruitful theme is this ongoing but never quite fully satisfying discussion between the imagined and the real, the novel is indeed multifarious, drawing towards it musings about art, history, childhood and domesticity but always with an unfiltered, sharp focus on the lens of contemporary existence. In an age of electronic false images, what does it mean to exist alongside such visions, and where can truth be found? Often humorous and witty *The Accidental* is equally at times bleakly foreboding underneath Smith's sharp style; such is the spirit of the unabashed optimism which leaks onto the present-day dream. Smith takes apart that dream one word, one space between words, at a time and reorders it into something not so dissimilar to the real life: the novel is a profound and beguiling take on postmodern unease, one that never fails to hit its mark with flair.

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## **F says**

This started off really good.  
But it just died on me. I found it got really boring.  
Did not finish

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## **Julie Christine says**

The stranger who arrives in mysterious circumstances and turns a household on its ear may be familiar literary trope, but Ali Smith does it with such panache and vivacity, the familiar becomes fresh and revelatory.

*The Accidental* shows the rusted and broken bits inside the moral compass of the Smarts, a bourgeois British family of four on summer holiday in a drab northern England town. Eve Smart is mid-list novelist and mother of 17-year-old Magnus and 12-year-old Astrid. Michael Smart, husband and step-father, is a philandering professor of English. It becomes all too easy to detest the Smart *mère et père*, for they are eye-rollingly entitled and pretentious, but this novel is about the kids. And it is in their voices that Smith's prose shines like a beacon.

Teen-aged Magnus has retreated deep within himself, grappling with his complicity in the tragic death of a classmate and the particular bewilderment of a privileged young man who has everything but the attention of his parents. Flitting about like a moth is young Astrid, a budding videographer and keen observer of the arbitrary and contrary unfolding around her. Astrid is the novel's strongest voice, the character I could have spent all of my time with, for her innocence is genuine, her clear heart a clean space in which to linger, after being sullied in the moral decrepitude of her ineffectual parents.

And what of that mysterious stranger? The enigmatic Amber arrives Chez Smart and moves in, yet no one in the family is quite up to admitting they have no idea who she is or how she found them. Her past feels irrelevant to the story, yet the stream-of-consciousness snippets indicate she was born in a movie theatre called Alhambra some three decades prior. She seems conjured out of legend, an imp, a sprite, beautiful and irreverent and frankly, rather mean-spirited and of questionable moral judgment. She drills under the skin of each family member, dragging them out of their emotional malaise and entrancing each before blowing the nuclear family to bits, figuratively speaking. Far be it from me, however, to give anything away.

Ali Smith plays with form here, as one would expect, but I would hazard a guess that this is one of her more traditional narrative structures. Points of view shift here and there, with meltdown riffs that shake the reader up before moving her along.

I loved this book. Truly whetted my literary appetite for more Ali Smith.

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## **Phee says**

\*July 2018 Bumping this rating up to four stars because I am still thinking about it a month later. Sometimes it's best to sit on your feelings for a bit. \*

This is really hard book to rate. I really enjoyed the writing style and the way the story was told. Ali Smith's writing style was a little hard to get into at first. She writes in a stream of consciousness style and doesn't use and punctuation to denote speech. But once I was used to it, it was easy to read. I never got confused as to who was speaking.

I loved how real and not perfect the characters were. They fucked up and just needed to communicate with each other. It's nice to read about characters who get things wrong and who go through shit.

But I did get a little confused at some points. The whole book is about story telling and it gets quite metaphorical at times. But as a whole it is quite an interesting read with many layers to it.

I want to check out more by this author to see how her stories and storytelling differs. So I'll pick up some more of her work soon.

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## Mala says

**"Eve's head was full of sentences which she'd been practising overnight. Who is to say what authenticity is? Who is to say who owns imagination? Who is to say that my versions, my stories of these individuals' afterlives, are less true than anyone else's? She was going to answer every question with a question. This would let her answers seem open, let her seem willing to be discursive, at the same time as be rhetorically cunningly closed."**

What is it with Ali Smith?! I want to hold her shoulders and give her a good shake, twice. How she fooled me! How she wrote this very clever book!

Ostensibly *The Accidental* is a multiple pov examination of a British family stuck in a rural summerhouse in Norfolk. The arrival of a stranger (view spoiler) changes the family dynamics in that everyone tries to project their needs onto this person & boy (view spoiler)

It's a revealing detail that the daughter Astrid's first impressions of Amber are the truthful ones, later you see different family members seeing her as "angelic," "beautiful," & so on.

This family of four are all within solipsistic bubbles of their own; no one having a clue to the other's suffering/problems. Perhaps they needed this stranger for a reality check, a shock to their system. And a shock they do get after which *The Lady Vanishes!*

This is the slim plot which Smith delivers with panache & rich stylistic variety but her brilliance here lies in how she is spinning quite a different yarn all the while, right under the reader's nose!  
(view spoiler)

The narrative's heavy & repeated emphasis on the hermetic world of cinema— it's an artificial construct, a world within a world & the plot mirrors that, its constant preoccupation with images/photographs & their reality (the infamous human pyramid pic from the Iraq invasion of 2003 finds a place here), the ephemerality of the moment behind them, its interwoven motifs of light & darkness through which the characters fumble towards a clear-seeing perspective, all stress *It is about actually seeing, being there*. Are the readers alert enough to take the hint to pay attention to the artifice?

*The Accidental* explores an interplay of fiction & reality— the Amber chapters/interstices are a clever play on the kind of Genuine series of books Eve Smart has built her reputation on: Shall I drop a hint? Think of Uncle Balt in *The Tunnel*. (view spoiler)

This is my second Ali Smith & there are parallels with my first read, *How to be both*. Both have many things in common: adolescent girl having troubles at school, precocious teen, busy mother, absentee father, a stranger whose arrival sets things moving, a stocktaking of old memories, events & their lingering influences, lesbian themes, engagement with new technologies, plenty of references to songs & movies, & a focus on eyes & cameras.

Ali Smith understands the adolescent mind extremely well & her adolescent characters are far more prescient & grounded than her mature ones: *Astrid can't believe, for example, that her mother has just gone off round the world etc. like she has. It is like the opposite of actually being there. It is substandard parenting. It will have consequences. It is substandard responsibility.*

Thing is, I got most of her books & would like to completionize them but I don't want more of the same. Ali Smith is a gay writer & no problem with that but it gets on my nerves the way her straight female characters

respond to overtures from another female— as if a world of (better) unexplored possibilities opens up before them! As if being gay was a lifestyle choice & not an embedded fact of one's biological makeup. Other than that, she is cool.

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## Blair says

*The Accidental* takes a well-worn premise – in which the appearance of an enigmatic newcomer upsets the balance of a largely dissatisfied upper-middle-class family – and filters it through that inimitable freeform Ali Smith style.

The characters are knowing cliches. Eve is a kind-of-successful author with writer's block. Michael is a professor who's sleeping with, apparently, *all* his female students. Moody teenage son Magnus is involved in an online bullying scandal that's resulted in a classmate's suicide. 12-year-old Astrid is an example of the precocious, inquisitive girl-child character who seems to appear in all Smith's novels (at least, all four I've read so far).

Interloper Amber, meanwhile, is one of my least favourite fictional tropes: the ~incredibly charismatic~ and non-specifically beautiful stranger who has a bewitching, destabilising, life-altering, (etc.) effect on everyone she meets, regardless of gender, sexuality, age, (etc.) Perhaps the trope works better in film, when you can *see* the person who's meant to have this incredible, unlikely impact; on the page, Amber's appeal was a mystery to me. She's horrendous to pretty much everyone. But then, pretty much everyone is horrendous to begin with.

This story doesn't really (well, I think) do anything subversive with its subject matter, and maybe that's one way in which it actually is subversive, because you don't exactly expect Smith to let the plot run its course in the usual way. There's playful wit, language-bending and experimentation with form, and at least one Chekhov's gun that doesn't go off, but I was disappointed that the story was neither as disruptive as I wanted it to be nor as conclusive as I, then, hoped it would be.

I enjoyed this more than *There but for the* and *Autumn*; less than *How to be both*. I'm fond of Smith's writing, but I can't seem to fall in love with any of her books quite as I would like to.

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## Erin says

I don't relish giving a book one star, but *The Accidental* was the rare book that I found so unreadable that I couldn't even finish it. The writing style was very affected and intentionally obtuse, making the book unpleasant and difficult to read. The characters were whiny and self-involved beyond all reason. There were huge logic gaps (such as why Amber was allowed to hang about the house, uninvited and unknown to all of them-- hello?!) and pithy observations. Ugh. I struggled and struggled with this one, because I really like to see even the bad books through to the end. In this case, I decided life is simply too short. Oh well.

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## Barry Pierce says

I think I can safely say that Ali Smith is one of my favourite authors. This is another great one from the Scottish supreme. Once again Smith adopts her trademark "fuck the rules" style of prose, disjointed and stilted and basically all over the place. Her prose is probably why I love her so much. It's so thoroughly unique and enjoyable. Even though the plot of this once isn't her best it's still highly readable. Ali Smith is a god among us.

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## K.D. Absolutely says

This novel was shortlisted in the 2005 Booker. This and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* lost to John Banville's *The Sea*. I can't believe it!

Compared to *The Sea*, this book's storytelling is very innovative. Brilliantly fresh. My first Ali Smith and I thought I was reading the 21st century equivalent of my favorite James Joyce. The first half is alienating because it basically uses stream-of-consciousness with the main characters having their own POVs per chapter and Smith used terms and events that are basically known probably to people in England except when she used contemporary world-known lines from movies, e.g., "Love Actually" or songs, e.g., Streisand's "Love, soft as an easy chair". Then I saw myself singing while trying to figure out what was the book was trying to tell me. But I love it for its newness. I mean, Smith went everywhere with her narration especially in the first part, *The Beginning*. Then the plot started to take shape in the second part, *The Middle* before she finally tied all the loose ends and made herself clear in the last part called *The End*. On the criticism that the girl **Amber's** role seemed not to make sense, I think her role was just to let the family members realize their true selves.

The Smart family, composed of **Michael**, the father, **Eve** the mother, **Magnus**, the son and the daughter **Astrid**, is a typical Western dysfunctional family. In the beginning of the book, the young girl Astrid brings with her, anywhere she goes, a camera and she has this habit of capturing sunrises and sundowns. My take on this is that Astrid tries to filter what she sees through her camera because it is through the lens where she can figure out things better. It's kind of metaphor and I loved it.

One day, she finds a beautiful letter that her father wrote to her mother when they were still courting each other. This seems to have made her realize that their family was once a happy one. When the father was not yet having extra-marital affairs with his students, the son hasn't been the cause of his classmate suicide and the mother hasn't lost touch of the reality in her life. The reason why I said this is that towards the end when Astrid kisses her mother, "Eve was moved beyond believe by the kiss." It reminded me that we sometimes all get to busy with our everyday tasks and we forget kissing and hugging our loved ones. This is kind of a cliché but true.

My favorite character is of course Astrid. She is now one of the fictional characters that I will remember for a long time or maybe remember forever. Smith was able to beautifully capture the eccentricities and intensity of a 12-y/o lost character.

I will be reading more novels by Ali Smith for sure. Same goes for Kazuo Ishiguro: I'm currently reading my 7th novel written by him. But not for John Banville. After I read his *The Sea*, I decided not to pick another one by him. This is one of those cases when I don't agree with the Booker jurors.

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## Suzanne says

This was phenomenal. Skillfully structured, beautifully written, with a story that kept me flipping pages past my bedtime. The story is told from four different POVs with a stream of consciousness bent and occasional experimental flare, as in the segment narrated in poetry by the serially philandering husband/step-father/English professor, Michael. Twelve-year-old Astrid's imaginative flights of fancy, pre-teen jargon and maybe hints of ADD were an amusing ride (don't be alarmed, it's not all like this). Wife/mother and blocked writer Eve grapples with the memory and problems of her own family of origin while she struggles with professional challenges in a project that consists of the "Genuine article" series ("autobiotruefictinterviews"), although the articles are actually quite speculative. Magnus's teenage angst has legitimate foundations; he's been involved in a prank gone very wrong and is suffering the torments of hellish guilt until an intervention by the character who is the engine of the story. Amber, the charismatic, unpredictable, and mysterious visitor, insinuates herself into the household while they are on holiday and changes all their perceptions and lives. Amber's (possible) story is told in occasional short interstitial pages that create a mythology that we are offered to take or leave as a history of the interloper. Eve seems to be the only one who "gets" Amber and is the one who finally ejects her, but not without repercussions.

Film, photography and media create a motif. From Astrid's juvenile film projects to various discussions about movies, TV programming, and porn sites, and the story of Amber's conception in a cinema, the preservation of a fleeting moment in photographs or film illuminates themes such as the difference between "reality," whatever that is, and pictures and stories, and does it even matter? What is known, and how, and by whom?

There were some lovely bits of writing. From Eve's contemplation of her daughter's growing up:

*Poised before her own adulthood like a young deer before the head of a rose. (Deer love to eat roses.) Standing there on her too-thin legs, innocent, unsturdy, totally unaware that the future had its gunsight trained directly on her. Dark round the eyes. Kicky and impatient, blind as a kitten stupefied by all the knowing and the not-knowing. . . Everything about her asked for attention, the way she walked across a room or a shop or across the forecourt of a petrol station, leaning into the air in front of her as if about to lose her balance, mutely demanding that someone -- Eve, who else? -- put out the flat of her hand and let Astrid push her forehead or her shoulder into it.*

And Michael considering the power of phrases that become clichés simply because they are so powerful, as he is gobsmacked by his attraction to Amber:

*Moth plus flame. Right here, right now, Michael had seen and felt and heard the precise drama of the moment when that moth wing singed and went brittle in the candle. He had felt the whole substantial impact of individual moth hitting individual table. He had felt these things, yes, more acutely, more truly, more surprisedly, than he had maybe felt anything since he was, oh, he didn't know, a fresh-faced (cliché!) twelve-year-old, and not a twelve-year-old like that one over there either, he thought to himself, casting a glance over the top of the bland combed hair of the head of Eve's curmudgeonly girl, not a twelve-year-old now, when nothing was new and everything was so already known and been and done and postmodern-t-shirt-regurgitated, no, he meant a back-then tank-topped twelve-year-old at the side of deep water, laying deep in the long grass and the noise of summer, the sweet core-line of a piece of the grass in his mouth, when for the first time he saw two insects, two flies of some kind, long-legged waterflies,*

*metonym you might say for the whole of summer, and the one was on the other's back in a sheer frenzy of what Michael knew for sure, for the first time, the most innocent time, was entry.* Michael goes on to analyze various words in his ruminations: "Entry! It was a wonderful word." Sheer: "as a word it was calmed and smoothed yet still so bloody boyishly enthusiastic." This book is a word-lover's dream.

The family's encounter with Amber, plus some issues that had been simmering before they met her, spark a complete reordering of their thinking and their lives. The last chapter belongs to Eve and is pretty much perfect.

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## **Wanda says**

I hesitate to write this review because so many people actually liked this book. I frankly found it deliberately obtuse, unaccessible, and pretentious. It was sort of like reading the post-modern philosophers who are so obscure and self-conscious that you wonder if THEY actually know what they are writing about. This was one of our book club choices and we really wanted to like it. The synopsis seemed intriguing, the reviews were glowing for the most part, and it looked like a relatively fast read. I guess it will give us lots to talk about at book club – or perhaps someone will be able to convince us that we missed something. Now, if I did not have degrees in literature and was not actually something of an informed reader, I would have reacted like my husband, whose response at the second chapter was "Forget this, I don't have time to be bored stiff." But I do have a background in literature and poetry and enjoy words a lot. Nevertheless, this did nothing at all for me.

The plot involved a pretty conventional situation – a young woman insinuates herself into a family that already has fissures and the family is left altered. Ok – could be interesting. But Ali Smith takes this rather derivative plot and turns the story into an exercise in literary cleverness. One lumbers from chapter to chapter in repetitive stream of consciousness, with a dearth of punctuation that quickly becomes tiresome. At first, I sort of enjoyed Astrid's latency aged oppositional take on the world, but then pretty quickly got tired of her petulance.

This is a book for folks who have an appetite for literary experimentation. If you liked *Ulysses*, you will like this. If you like guessing where dialogue begins and thought ends, you will love this. As for me, I think that punctuation was invented for a reason. Call me pedestrian. I also like some literary experimentation, for example I loved *Shadow Tag* by Louise Erdrich. But Erdrich's book drew me in inexorably and I watched in horror as a relationship imploded. It was a compelling and satisfying work and well worth putting the time into. This one was simply boring and annoying and it alienated me.

I understand that Smith is a fine writer, and she certainly does have mastery over language, but the novel simply did not hang together and chapter after chapter jarred up against each other willy nilly. The characters are thin and not well developed. The book is a frustrating, self-conscious and self-indulgent show that I would have abandoned after the second chapter as well had it not been part of our book club list. I guess I should have known that it was going to be less than compelling reading when I read the *London Times* critic who called the novel "astringently intelligent." What the heck does that mean?? If you have to ask, perhaps



you should avoid this exercise in frustration, for that is what it was.

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