

Questions and Proposals about Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*

Because the following document is pretty long, I'm going to telegraph what the questions are about, so you can go to the ones that interest you.

1. Question 1 is about the so-called "culture wars," especially as they are played out within the psyches of individual characters in Smith's novel.
2. Question 2 concerns what the novel has to teach us about beauty. It also includes a "sub-question" about the relationship, if any, between beauty and belief.
3. Question 3 is about the portrayal of women in the novel. It also asks about the portrayal of the novel's male characters, esp. Howard and Monty.
4. Question 4 is epistemological in nature and concerns both Smith's and E. M. Forster's interest in a kind of purity untroubled by human thinking.
5. Question 5 is explicitly about what Smith may have learned from Forster, so those of you who are joining the Book Group with *On Beauty*, or those of you who haven't read Forster, or read him in a long time, may want to skip it.
6. The first half of Question 6 is about marriage, and the second half is about muddle, in particular about Smith's (and Forster's) interest in "muddle" as a spiritual and ethical teacher.

Questions and Proposals about Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*

1. ***"Don't act like a nigger with me, Levi."***

The above remark, really a threat, comes from Bailey, Levi's boss at the "mega-store" where Levi sells music CDs, in particular the hip-hop he loves and worships. Levi has just tried to save himself and his fellow employees from having to work on Christmas, and it's a no-go. Not only has Bailey denied Levi's request, he has vilified his character, really his whole life's enterprise, by claiming that Levi "acts" like a "nigger"—a word "never before said to Levi in anger"—in order to gain the respect of his co-workers. "Those kids don't know shit, but I know," Bailey continues. "They nice suburban kids. They think anyone in a pair of baggy jeans is a gangsta. But you can't fool me. I know where you pretend to be *from*." (p. 191, *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith, Penguin, 2005)

The question of cultural clout—of how much "cool" you have, of how "authentically" you can "be yourself," either because of or despite your skin color, your class, your income, where you live, what kind of music you listen to, who you read, what you wear, how you talk, and where you rank within a myriad of hierarchies, some openly acknowledged, such as the workplace or the university, and some not, such as the media structures that decide whether or not you're "sexy"—is of essential importance to *On Beauty*. For many of the novel's characters, attaining that clout is a painful and damning business, but it is also the novel's happy "ado"—and Smith's treatment of the way people behave while fighting for cultural capital is often delightfully satiric. Where the novel becomes more sober and affecting is in its treatment of the "culture wars" as they rage within the psyches of single human beings. In the scene paraphrased above, for example, Levi is rudely awakened out of a fantasy about himself, a fantasy, we might say, that gives him courage, that makes him feel attractive, proud, legible to others—*Hey look, Mom, I'm a bona-fide cultural commodity!*—to a reality that is contradictory, shameful and even crippling. "Be yourself," we tell our children, we tell ourselves: live in honesty and you will know God.

But for some—so says this novel--that’s a much tougher gig than it is for others.

One way we might review the novel before gathering to discuss it would be to imagine the individual characters, in particular the darker skinned ones, as waging wars against themselves. Do you think of Kiki as being at war with herself? Yes? No? Why? How about Zora? Carl? Vee? How about Monty Kipps? *Kiki* thinks Monty is at war with himself—that’s what she decides about him after their argument about affirmative action--and maybe deciding that is one way she can turn down the noise in her *own* head. Carlene? Or has Carlene simply sold out? Or, to be fair to Carlene, maybe she’s not so much sold out as (more nobly) “gotten free”? Is it possible ever to get free of such anguish, if you’re not white? What do you think Smith would say in answer to that last question?

2) What does the novel have to teach us about “beauty”?

Let us look for a moment at the novel’s title, “On Beauty,” whose traditional “On (Fill-in-the-Blank)” format makes the book sound as much a kind of treatise as a fictional narrative. In reading the book, so the title tells us, you will satisfy more than your appetite for delicious stories; you will also *learn something*, and learn something new, about this ever-compelling--yet ever-elusive--quality we call “beauty.”

So, now that you’ve finished the novel...what have you learned? What do you feel the book has to say about “beauty,” A) that you hadn’t really known or been aware of before, and B) that only this book, pursuing *this* cast of characters, across *this* cultural landscape, could have shown you? Below are two sub-questions about particular elements of the novel to help refine your thinking.

a) *Howard’s silence about the Rembrandt painting.*

On the second to last page of the novel (p. 442), Howard endeavors to give a lecture about Rembrandt—a lecture, the text implies, he never ultimately gives. Instead, he is stunned into silence by a painting by Rembrandt called *Hendrickje Bathing*, a projected image of which hangs on a screen behind him.

What do you think is happening to Howard here? Go ahead and re-read these last pages of the novel. How is this moment in Howard's life *itself* a treatise “on beauty”?

b) *The relationship of beauty to belief.*

As you know, of all the characters in the novel, Howard is the least given to belief—and here I use the term in a general sense rather than a properly religious one. Nearly all the other characters have something they believe in, or believe in believing in, anyway, quite passionately, whether it's God; or liberal politics (Kiki, Zora); or conservative politics (Monty); or improving the lives of the dispossessed (Levi); or music (Levi, Carl); or poetry (Claire); or teaching (Claire); or self-sacrifice (Carlene); or family (Carlene, Kiki); or love (many of the characters in this novel believe in love, but Kiki, we might say, believes in it to an unusual degree.) Howard, by contrast, appears to have built a career out non-belief, or anti-belief, on the “belief” that any belief left un-deconstructed inevitably leads to ideological thinking.

So Howard is leading this ideologically spotless life—an admirable way to live, in one sense, for ideological thinking can become quite dangerous. Yet his efforts have resulted in a sad, even absurd, paradox: daily immersed in the study of some of the most “beautiful” images in the world—the paintings of Rembrandt Van Rijn--Howard is unable to believe in their beauty, the way, for instance, Claire is able to believe in the beauty of the poetry she studies, or Levi is able to believe in the beauty of the music he is eternally piping into his head from his iPod. I'm not sure this is right—and please help me out if you find my thinking patchy here—but it does seem that Smith wants to say that if you are in the

habit of resisting belief, you may have a hard time recognizing what is beautiful in your life (which in turn might make your life harder to believe in.)

This last proposal of mine grossly over-simplifies a complex problem whose causes are cultural, economic and racial. (And that is the reason we must credit Howard for his work.) Yet I have oversimplified for reasons of space (I don't want these questions to get too long.) So let's take up this issue when we meet. To restate: What, in her treatise "on beauty," does Zadie Smith have to say about the relationship of beauty to belief?

3. Another look at "beauty": The novel's portrayal of women.

One of the aspects of this novel I admire the most is its sensitivity about the painful paradox the "thinking woman" must live if she is also to strive for "beauty" according to the punishing and impossible standards set by the current culture. I ask you to consider Smith's wisdom on this subject as it informs her portrayals of her female characters. How is this wisdom present in her portrayal of Kiki? Of Zora? Victoria? I would call her portrayals realistic and loving. But maybe you disagree. Or maybe you have wisdom you'd like to add to Smith's.

Following from this question, we might also talk about the novel's portrayal of men, especially of the adult men, Howard and Monty. Both fail utterly at being faithful husbands. Do you think it's necessary—for the book—that they fail, or can you imagine the story having gone a different way?

4. The disc of varicoloured light as typical of Smith's and Forster's interest in "pure" spaces, both physical and mental

I wonder if others of you were drawn to the first truly extraordinary image in the novel, the “disc of varicolored light” cast by the “sole original window” of the Belsey home. Let me quote the passage in which the disc appears so you know what I’m talking about.

“The sole original window is the skylight at the very top of the house, a harlequin pane that casts of a disc of varicoloured light upon different spots on the upper landing as the sun passes over America, turning a white shirt pink as one passes through it, for example, or a yellow tie blue. Once the spot reaches the floor in mid morning it is a family superstition never to step through it. Ten years earlier you would have found children here, wrestling, trying to force each other into its orbit. Even now, as young adults, they continue to step round it on their way down the stairs.” (p. 16)

As many of you know, good novelists will often install, in the early pages of their novels, a single extraordinary image that embodies visually what the novel is about to do thematically, morally, spiritually, and so on. For me, this “disc of varicoloured light” functions as just such an image for being the only truly “pure” space in *On Beauty*, and by “pure” I mean untroubled by meanings that come from culture, religion, the media—that come, in other words, from people. For those of you who have been with the Book Group since we started reading Forster together last September, it does seem that Forster, too, is interested in delineating these “pure” spaces, even protecting them from the noise of the rest of his books--spaces which, because absent of human meaning, bear an almost supernatural or divine kind of meaning that cannot be “said” in words. (In Forster’s case I’m thinking of the Marabar caves in *A Passage to India* and of The Wych Elm tree in *Howards End*.) This question, therefore, is designed especially for those of you who may have been thinking about Smith’s novel as a Forsterian one—though it is certainly accessible to those of you who have only read the Smith.

And the question is: Why do you think such purity is so compelling to these writers? What is it about the subject matter they make novels out of that would lead them to want their readers to see spaces and hear sounds that are free of human meaning?

5. What do you think Smith has learned from Forster?

(This question really *is* designed for those of you who've been reading with the group since we started Forster, so if you're joining us with *On Beauty*, you may want to skip it.)

What are the similarities you've noticed between Forster's artistic vision and Smith's? This question is interested not so much in the many story elements from *Howards End* Smith has copied in writing *On Beauty*, rather in the ethical and emotional lessons she learned from her avowed master. One of the things Smith is surely saying is that, although he drew his lessons from a study of England in the early 20th century, they still matter to us now, even as Americans, as we enter the 21st. *Forster rules*, says Smith. *He's not just some mannered Edwardian with a penchant for interior monologue and topiary. In fact, SO illuminating, so instructive, so useful to the current situation are Forster's novels that I'm going to copy his most famous one, and really, really obviously, because that is the only way I can get you to take him down and read him again.*

So the question, stated a little differently than before, is: How is Forster's wisdom useful in helping us navigate our new, global, multi-cultural landscape?

Another way to ask this question (and this is a slightly different question): What is it about the *quality of attention* E. M. Forster must have practiced in writing his novels that we can look to for instruction in leading our lives, even though they're happening a full century after his own?

(continued next page)

6. The “Muddle” as Ethical and Spiritual Opportunity in Forster and Smith.

Near the middle of *On Beauty*, Kiki and Carlene engage in a fascinating and rather moving discussion about, essentially, what it is they live for. They are drinking tea and eating a pie Kiki has brought over (they're at the Kippses), and they're talking about marriage, and Kiki, invited to discuss her feelings about Howard's infidelity, declares that she is now taking the time to figure out “what” she's living for. Hearing this, Carlene replies that for her, the question has never been so much “what” she lives for, as for “whom.” This remark vexes Kiki; it sounds “wasteful” and “stupid” to her, and, worse, liable to send a thinking woman “backwards.” And so Kiki raises her voice, and then, being Kiki, regrets it; and then Carlene, “shushing her,” leans forward and says the following:

“Yes, yes. But you staked your *life*. You gave somebody your *life*. You've been disappointed.” (p. 177)

As you may remember, it's only twenty or so pages later that Kiki will be using these very words—*I staked my life on you*--to show Howard just how massively his affair with Claire Malcolm has hurt her. A position she initially finds “backwards” ultimately becomes not just her experience, but her claim on her experience. We might even say that Carlene's words bring Kiki down to her bones, centering her and giving her strength. (I can easily imagine someone disagreeing with that last remark—and I look forward to hearing the contents of that disagreement.) In any event, I wonder if the changing course of Kiki's response to Howard confused you--but confused you in a productive way, much as it seems Carlene's remarks confused Kiki productively. To expand the question, I wonder if the novel generally left you in a “muddle,” and with this word I wish to remember the many “muddles” suffered by the characters in the Forster novels we've read together, in particular *A Passage to India* and *Howards End*. For Forster, to be in a “muddle” means literally to be unable to think as one had thought before, and about one's most important concerns—simply not to know what the first thought ought to be. It seems that Zadie Smith is also interested in bewildering her characters in this way, believing the muddle a supreme kind of teacher, or crucible.

Other characters in *On Beauty* find themselves in “muddles”--and here I think of Jerome's first flush of enthusiasm for the Kippes while living with them in London. Raised in a liberal, feminist, multi-racial and multi-cultural household, his father a deconstructionist given to disparaging those who organize their lives around belief, especially belief in God, Jerome, sinking back into the “receiving sofa” of the Kippes, finds himself seriously entertaining political and intellectual positions considered anathema by the Belseys.

It was a kind of blissful un-selfing; a summer of un-Besley; he had allowed the Kippes' world and their ways to take him over entirely. He

had liked to listen to the exotic (to a Belsey) chatter of business and money and practical politics; to hear that Equality was a myth, and Multiculturalism a fatuous dream; he thrilled at the suggestion that Art was a gift from God, blessing only a handful of masters, and most Literature merely a veil for poorly reasoned left-wing ideologies. He had put up a weak show of fighting these ideas, but only so that he might enjoy all the more the sensation of the family's ridicule—to hear once again how typically liberal, academic and wishy-washy were this own thoughts. When Monty suggested that minority groups too often demand equal rights they haven't earned, Jerome had allowed this strange new idea to penetrate him without complaint and sunk further back into the receiving sofa. When Michael argued that being black was not an identity but an accidental matter of pigment, Jerome had not given the traditionally hysterical Belsey answer—"Try telling that to the Klansman coming at you with a burning cross"—but rather vowed to think less of his identity in the future. (p. 44)

The question here—and it's really a question for personal reflection—is whether or not this novel left you in a muddle such as the one Jerome finds himself in the above paragraph. Or left you in a muddle such as the one Kiki finds herself in as she sits in Carlene's living room and hears marriage defined, perhaps for the first time, as "staking one's life" on one's spouse. Howard, too, will be muddled, more muddlingly than anyone around him...has the novel muddled you in similar ways? (Of course, we can shut off such confusion the instant we close the book, whereas Smith's characters are pretty much done in for for life.) It does seem that if Smith's novel has confused you, if only for a day, if only for an hour, it has succeeded; and that if it hasn't confused you, if you go on turning the pages knowing exactly how you feel about every single controversial dilemma presented by the story, every single controversial figure, then it hasn't done its work. Or, *you* haven't done yours. Do you agree? Disagree? What are your thoughts?

I look forward to seeing you Monday evening—and hopefully Sunday afternoon as well.

Emilie

I'm not sure this is right—and I invite you to help me out if you find something patchy in my thinking here—but it does seem that the novel has something useful to say about that Kiki is far more able to praise life and its beauty than Howard is, or, maybe that's going too far—maybe all one can justifiably say is that Kiki is more able Howard to receive life's beauty. There's a luminous scene on page 194 that seems to speak to this ability of Kiki's very eloquently: Kiki, at home in a rare moment by herself, is found by her daughter sitting “half in the kitchen and half in the garden” “just looking” at the coming of winter.

“Kiki had been quite content for the best part of an hour, just like this, watching the pitchy wind bully the last leaves to the ground—now here was her daughter, incredulous.”

Howard, by contrast,

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Kiki telling Howard what she's come to understand about him:

“I'm talking about you—you're terrified of anyone who believes anything—look how you treat Jerome—you can't even look at him, because you know he's a Christian now—we both know it—we never talk about it. Why? You just make jokes about it, but it's not funny—it's not funny to him—and it just seems like you used to have some idea of what

you....I don't know...what you believed and what you loved and now
you're just this—“