

Zadie Smith's New Novel Takes on Dance, Fame and Friendship

By HOLLY BASSNOV. 10, 2016

There's something beautiful about the way young girls choose their best friends. A swooning, love-at-first-sight experience, it rarely takes into account social hierarchies, societal expectations or even basic commonalities. And it can be surprisingly decisive, cementing a relationship that persists for decades without any logical basis. It is in this way that the unnamed narrator of Zadie Smith's latest novel, "Swing Time," meets her best friend, Tracey.

The only "brown" girls in the local dance class, they form an alliance even before exchanging words. And though we aren't privy to Tracey's first impressions of the narrator, the narrator is very much entranced by Tracey, taking in every detail of her face, their identical skin tones, her waist-length spiral curls finished with "thrilling yellow bows." Tracey also possesses a prodigious talent for dance, which the narrator lacks, despite a strong passion.

As children, the girls spend afternoons and Saturdays watching VHS tapes of classic song-and-dance numbers, including the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film that gives the book its title. They play with dolls and compose torrid stories of backstage dramas in which plucky blue-eyed heroines save the day. And though Tracey is the alpha in this relationship, over time it becomes clear that there is longing on her part, too: She envies her friend's doting father and quietly stable life — routine things the narrator would happily exchange for Tracey's crèche of dolls, logo-festooned clothes and artistic ability.

Though both girls live in public housing, Tracey lives in a less desirable high-rise with a permissive white single mother. The narrator occupies a nicer, low-rise building one street over with her white father and black Jamaican mother, an ambitious autodidact possessing a "terrific instinct for middle-class mores." As the girls grow up, and apart, these subtle distinctions in family structure and class magnify over time.

"Swing Time" marks Smith's inaugural use of the first-person. The narrator is not simply telling us a story; at various moments she informs us that she is remembering everything and "writing it all down." We are in effect reading her memoir. The book zigzags across a quarter century, from the narrator's first dance class at age 7 to a career-ending scandal that takes place in 2008.

Smith is no stranger to such expansive time frames; her brilliant debut novel, "White Teeth," roamed from the mid-1970s to 2000. She has also examined the intricacies of intimate pairings in previous works — be it twin brothers ("White Teeth"), spouses ("On Beauty") or best mates ("NW") — and the many ways familiarity breeds contempt.

Here, she also captures the delicate intersections of class and race. For example: When Tracey and her friend are invited to the birthday party of a fellow ballet student who lives in "a whole house," they show up in fancy dresses — only to find the other girls, all of whom are white and not from public housing, dressed casually in sweaters and jeans. Or here she is explaining why many of the neighborhood mothers don't show up for teacher conferences: As children, they "had feared school, just as we did now, feared the arbitrary rules, . . . the incessant correcting of their original patois or cockney. . . . 'Parents' Evening' was, in their minds, not so distant from 'detention.' It remained a place where they might be shamed. The difference was now they were grown and could not be forced to attend."



Zadie Smith Credit Dominique Nabokov

Smith has a knack for unearthing the deeper truths that lie beneath common experience. In “Swing Time,” she excels at capturing the world of prepubescence, with all of its unwritten rites and rules and frank sexuality: the group games of hide-and-seek in which the boys chase the girls for the reward of a quick, furtive groping, or the “Crucible”-like way other girls form a vicious allegiance against the one who suffers the misfortune of developing breasts early, thus becoming too popular with the boys.

One scene describes how Tracey turns her rage on the narrator, who, rather than return home, opts to organize a crumpled mess of Barbie doll clothes, carefully placing them on miniature hangers, “the kind of game I was never permitted to play at home due to its echoes of domestic oppression.” Remorseful after losing her temper, Tracey ultimately joins in the endeavor. “Together we got that tiny white woman’s life in order.”

The full scene is funny, sharp and telling. In the next section, the novel fast-forwards to a few months after college. The narrator becomes the personal assistant to the mononymous global pop star Aimee — a clear stand-in for Madonna, right down to her two children from different fathers, her series of younger boyfriends and her African baby adopted by dubious means.

The narrator keeps the job for an unheard-of nine years, during which time she has no life of her own, no friends or romantic relationships, and no outside ambitions. Aimee becomes “a person for whom I scheduled abortions, hired dog walkers, ordered flowers, wrote Mother’s Day cards, applied creams, administered injections, squeezed spots, wiped very occasional breakup tears and so on.” The narrator, in other words, gets that “tiny white woman’s life in order.” (Aimee is described as 5-foot-2 with an “elfin face.”) By taking over the narrator’s existence — and ultimately the novel itself — Aimee turns her into a kind of new-century domestic, not unlike the “minstrels, maids and butlers” who populate her beloved musicals.

This takeover is unfortunate. To be sure, there are insights to be mined from the disconnected reality of the rich and famous, particularly when Aimee and her squad embark on building a girl’s school in a small, unspecified West African country. But those perceptions pale in comparison to the visceral feeling Smith has for the workaday characters of Northwest London, like Tracey’s smooth criminal of a father or the narrator’s pot-smoking Uncle Lambert, whose abundant garden “was Jamaica to me.”

The novel’s explorations of everyday village life in London and Africa contain specificity and verve. It’s a world that feels real. In stark contrast, the many chapters focused on Aimee yank us out of that world and into a place that feels more like reality television — entertaining but hardly memorable.

In movie musicals, as the narrator notes, the plot is never the point: “The opera-like comings and goings, the reversals of fortune, the outrageous meet cutes and coincidences. . . . To me they were only roads leading to the dance. The story was the price you paid for the rhythm.”

The same could be said of “Swing Time.” The herky-jerky story line functions mostly as a vehicle for Smith’s cadenced digressions and lyrical love letters: to the American songbook, to geniuses of black dance like Jeni LeGon or the Nicholas Brothers or Michael Jackson, to the overcast landscape of London itself. When the narrator heads off to college, readers are treated to a flashback to hip-hop’s golden era, a time when conscious, cool kids rocked natural hair, “big jeans and bomber jackets,” smoked weed in their dorms and “applied high theory to shampoo ads, philosophy to N.W.A. videos.”

The narrator’s first trip to Africa as the advance person for Aimee provides one of the novel’s most vivid scenes. She witnesses the kankurang, a dancing Pied Piper who carries boys off to their initiations into manhood. This “wildly swaying orange shape . . . covered in many swishing, overlapping leaves” seems to the narrator “like a tree in the blaze of a New York fall that uproots itself and now dances down the street.” All of the people in this scene stop what they are doing — the minicab driver, the uniformed schoolgirls, the grandfather, even the narrator — to join in the ritual procession. “Here is the joy I’ve been looking for all my life,” the narrator proclaims. But watching this celebration of masculinity causes her to wonder: “Who comes for the girls?”

It’s a potent question, and its unspoken answer plays out in the way Tracey and the narrator become secondary characters in a book that initially seems to be about them. No one comes for the girls, at least not for the black and brown ones.

When the narrator falls out of favor with the pop star in a Page Six-worthy scandal, she loses not only her expense-account lifestyle but also what little sense of self she had. “A truth was being revealed to me,” she says: “that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow.”

Though not the right age or era to qualify as a millennial, Smith’s narrator falls into the current zeitgeist of lost and self-absorbed young protagonists cropping up in literature, film and television. Returning to London in the middle of a tabloid scandal of her own making, she doesn’t even realize that her mother, suffering from late-stage cancer, has been transferred to hospice. A neighbor she barely knows informs her of the news.

Unsympathetic characters can be compelling, of course, goading the reader forward by sheer force of personality and the desire to see what deliciously unconscionable things might happen next. (Smith herself offered a case in point in her novel “On Beauty,” with the rival scholars Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps.) But in “Swing Time,” even the pop diva Aimee grows weary of the way her assistant spends her life constantly apologizing. Readers might feel the same way. The book relies not on plot or character development but on a series of skillfully rendered passages to propel the story as it swings back and forth through time, though not necessarily with perfect rhythm.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/books/review/zadie-smith-swing-time.html>