

Zadie Smith's *Memory Tricks*. By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

**“Swing Time” brings emotional intensity to the struggle to weave disparate threads of experience into a coherent story of the self.**



Smith's fifth novel follows two girls bound and battered by memory. Illustration by Olimpia Zagnoli

A month after Barack Obama was elected to his first term as President, Zadie Smith appeared at the New York Public Library to deliver a lecture called “Speaking in Tongues” on the vagaries of race and identity. Obama’s description, in his memoir, of the liminal position he occupied between his mother’s and his father’s worlds prompted her to imagine Dream City, a fantastical place “of many voices, where the unified singular self is an illusion.” In Dream City, a person born to parents of different nations, colors, and cultures, as Smith and Obama were, doesn’t have to worry about declaring allegiance to one or the other. It’s taken for granted that people are various creatures, and that such variety is cause for celebration, not censure. “It’s the kind of town where the wise man says ‘I’ cautiously, because *I* feels like too straight and singular a phoneme to represent the true multiplicity of his experience,” Smith said. “Instead, citizens of Dream City prefer to use the collective pronoun *we*.”

The imperfect truth, eight years later, is that “I” often seems like all we have. That’s the case in “Swing Time” (Penguin Press), Smith’s fifth novel, and the first she’s written in the first person. Smith is a restless stylist, candid about her openness to influence. “Forms, styles, structures—whatever word you prefer—should change like skirt lengths,” she wrote in 2008. The same year, in her essay “Two Paths for the Novel,” she declared herself finished with the sort of polished realism that had marked her previous book, “On Beauty” (2005), a loose tribute to E. M. Forster and itself a departure from both “White Teeth” (2000), her boisterous *début*, and its successor, the comparatively cramped “The Autograph Man” (2002). Her following novel, “NW” (2012), shifted between a lush high modernism reminiscent of “The Waves”-era Virginia Woolf and clever, postmodern nuggets of narrative. “Swing Time,” a longish book split into short, fleeting chapters, channels the propulsive, addictive, discursive mode of the novel-memoir hybrid that has lately been in fashion (Smith has admiringly referred to the work of Karl Ove Knausgaard as “crack”), but in the service of more traditional fiction, the kind that is unambiguously invented. It is Smith’s most affecting novel in a decade, one that brings a piercing focus to her favorite theme: the struggle to weave disparate threads of experience into a coherent story of a self.

Smith’s narrator, a woman in her thirties, isn’t named. We know her only by her “I,” a pronoun that she wields warily. Her voice is muted and analytical, her tone guarded. This circumspect attitude is, she tells us, a long-rehearsed tactic of self-preservation and defense. As a child, she read that her

hero Fred Astaire critiqued his performances in the third person—“He isn’t doing that right”—in order to evaluate his errors with an impartial eye. This struck her as wise. “And I took this to heart, or rather, it echoed a feeling I already had, mainly that it was important to treat oneself as a kind of stranger, to remain unattached and unprejudiced in your own case. I thought you needed to think like that to achieve anything in this world.”

She is right to be on her guard. When the novel begins, with a prologue set in October, 2008, she is in a state of disgrace. She has just been fired from her job as the personal assistant to Aimee, a pop star too famous to need a surname, and exiled to a luxury apartment to wait out a scandal that she appears to have caused. For three days, she keeps her phone on airplane mode, an act that she feels “should be counted among the great examples of personal stoicism and moral endurance of our times.” When she plugs back in, an e-mail from an anonymous sender, subject line “WHORE,” is waiting for her. It contains a concise message: “Now everyone knows who you really are.”

Thus we are introduced to Tracey, the narrator’s best friend from childhood. The two have long been estranged, but the e-mail launches the narrator back in time to recount the moment they met, in 1982, at the weekly Saturday dance class held at a church in Kilburn, the slice of North West London where they grew up in neighboring council estates. The girls are drawn to each other at first sight. “Our shade of brown was exactly the same—as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both,” Smith’s narrator remembers. Each is an only child and the product of a biracial union, though Tracey gloats that, according to the norms of the neighborhood, the narrator’s family has things “the wrong way round”: a black mother (a severe-minded feminist with a half-inch Afro who shuns makeup and, to her daughter’s shame, dresses in a plain, aspirationally bohemian uniform of espadrilles and linen trousers) and a white father (a manager at the Postal Service who takes care of the household chores so that his wife can study for her sociology-and-politics degree). Tracey’s mother is obese, pink, pimpled, tacky, unemployed; her Jamaican father is in and out of prison. Tracey, by circumstance and temperament an expert magical thinker, claims that he’s away on tour as a backup dancer for Michael Jackson.

Between the friends themselves, the narrator can see no contest. She herself is gawky, her frizzy hair pulled back in a serviceable puff above a narrow, long-nosed face. Tracey is a “darker Shirley Temple,” perfect down to the yellow satin bows in her spiral-curl braids and outfitted in the sort of enviable style that violates the narrator’s mother’s pro-austerity policies: “Logos, tin bangles and hoops, diamanté everything, expensive trainers of the kind my mother refused to recognize as a reality in the world—‘those aren’t shoes.’ ”

But the main point is that Tracey can dance. She has presence, that mysterious, magnetic quality of the natural performer. If passion and dedication were all that counted in the way of such things, the narrator would be just as accomplished as her friend. Dance is her religion. Raised on the Gershwin and Porter tunes her father loves, she pores over pulpy show-biz biographies of Fred Astaire “like a Victorian lady reading her psalms” and studies with a scholar’s intensity the classic M-G-M musicals she finds on VHS. But some truths belong to the body alone. Her feet are flat. And so she watches Tracey do what she can’t:

I really felt that if I could dance like Tracey I would never want for anything else in this world. Other girls had rhythm in their limbs, some had it in their hips or their little backsides but she had rhythm in individual ligaments, probably in individual cells. Every movement was as sharp and precise as any child could hope to make it, her body could align itself with any time signature, no matter how intricate. Maybe you could say

she was overly precise sometimes, not especially creative, or lacking in soul. But no one sane could quarrel with her technique. I was—I am—in awe of Tracey's technique. She knew the right time to do everything.

That slip into the present tense is telling. The narrator was in thrall to Tracey from the moment she laid eyes on her; years later, she's in thrall to her still. She doesn't care that Tracey lacks "soul." It's enough that she has total command over her body, the exquisite look of artistry without its animating spirit.

Tracey knows how to exploit this kind of devotion. She has a gift for cruelty, the authority that comes with spotting others' weaknesses. "Look at her," she tells the narrator, as they watch a video of Astaire, in "Top Hat," twirling Ginger Rogers to "Cheek to Cheek." "She looks fucking scared." In one discomfiting chapter, the girls are invited to the birthday party of a white, middle-class schoolmate, Lily Bingham. They are the only black kids there, and as soon as Tracey realizes that Lily's mother won't smack her for misbehaving she seizes power, stealing candy and kicking seats on a trip to the movies. Later, she raids Mrs. Bingham's underwear drawer for lingerie to wear in a lewd dance routine in which she enlists her friend. The narrator is sure that her own mother will punish them when she picks them up; instead, she defends Tracey's behavior to Mrs. Bingham as an impressionable child's imitation of her parents' bad influence.

This turns out to be an excuse to save face. Her real worry is Tracey's bad influence on her daughter. The narrator has heard her say that Tracey, who has already started hanging out with rough boys, is destined to become a single mom. When she looks at her mother, she is shocked to see angry tears in her eyes.

"I know you're not a quitter, Pete—in fact, that's the main reason I have no choice but to fire you."

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Few emotions are more unnerving to a child than pity for a parent. The narrator thinks of her mother as impervious, not quite mortal, but Tracey exposes her fear of losing control over the life she has fought to make for herself. An idealist with a pedantic streak and "a political mind," she is forever initiating community-improvement programs. If her husband quibbles about the vacuuming, she lectures him on "the importance of having a revolutionary consciousness, or the relative insignificance of sexual love when placed beside the struggles of the people, or the legacy of slavery in the hearts and minds of the young, and so on." She wants to rise in the world, and, amazingly, she does, eventually getting elected to Parliament. Childhood is an experience of bursting through the chrysalis of family to fly off into the world beyond, but the narrator's own growth is outstripped by that of her mother, who is all too willing to leave domestic life for a public one when the time is right.

Yet, as devoted as the mother is to the principle of the people, she remains aloof from them in reality. Although she loves to talk of Africa as homeland, she avoids the topic of Jamaica, the site of a brutal childhood she doesn't care to discuss. Changing one's voice is a motif in Smith's fiction, a new accent and diction the best costume in which to disguise an identity better left behind, and the narrator's mother has all but scrubbed away her native patois. Unless the past is actively contained, she feels, it may surge up to flood the present and drown the future. This is the threat that she sees in Tracey and wants her daughter to recognize. Tracey is on track to train as a professional dancer, but dancing is a vain ambition. School is the only sure way up and out, and when she runs into Tracey's mother she brags of her own daughter's academic accomplishments. "She was in a

competition of caring, and yet her fellow contestants, like Tracey's mother, were so ill-equipped when placed beside her that it was a fatally lopsided battle," Smith's narrator thinks. "I often wondered: is it some kind of a trade-off? Do others have to lose so we can win?"

The question runs like a bright thread through "Swing Time," as it does through Smith's larger body of work. She has often used the device of doubling, planting two characters together to observe the different ways they grow, and the soil she chooses tends to be her own. "White Teeth" featured Millat and Magid Iqbal, twins in Willesden, Smith's childhood neighborhood, whose father separates them at the age of ten, keeping one in London, where he becomes a hapless Muslim fundamentalist, and sending the other to be brought up in Bangladesh, where he devotes himself to a life of science. The protagonists of "NW," Leah and Keisha, are Willesden childhood friends; Leah, who is white, stays in the neighborhood, leading a comfortable, if static, life, while Keisha, who is black, changes her name to the more bourgeois Natalie, becomes a barrister, marries rich, and feels like a fraud. These are not trade-offs, exactly. Neither Leah nor Natalie considers herself a winner. Magid doesn't have to turn out good for Millat to turn out bad. (For that matter, a novelist from Willesden, admired since the age of twenty-four, has not had her success at the expense of another girl from down the street.) No great principle of cosmic causality is at work; it just feels that way.

Tracey's true foil in the novel isn't the narrator, who never attempts to scale the heights of fame that Tracey seeks, but Aimee, the narrator's boss. Like Tracey, Aimee is a talented girl from nowhere—Bendigo, Australia, in this case—but where Tracey's career sputters out after a few chorus gigs on the West End Aimee is a beloved queen of pop known more for her persona than for any particular musical style, shifting her sound with the times to stay on top of the charts.

Why does one make it and not the other? Aimee would chalk it up to fortune, which, mixed with a drop of positive thinking, she sees as the universe's prime mover. "She has no tragic side," Smith's narrator observes. "She accepts everything that has happened to her as her destiny, no more surprised or alienated to be who she is than I imagine Cleopatra was to be Cleopatra." She refuses to recognize the impediments of economics, geography, race, and history, just as she shrugs off the degree to which her life depends on the work of other people. The narrator sums up the tasks that fall to the celebrity's personal assistant with a mordant list: "I scheduled abortions, hired dog walkers, ordered flowers, wrote Mother's Day cards, applied creams, administered injections, squeezed spots, wiped very occasional break-up tears."

The narrator goes to work for Aimee when she is in her early twenties, a recent college graduate unsure what kind of person she should try to be. She has no particular ambition; she has tried on various poses in disparate crowds. (Smith is wonderful on black conspiracy theorists who look to the supernatural to explain the unbearable phenomena of racism and inequality, and on the plight of the lone black girl in a group of goths, powdering her face ghostly pale.) Floating in Aimee's bubble of bland international luxury—the private flights and cars, the town houses in London and Manhattan—doesn't provide her with an adult identity so much as it allows her to defer her search for one.

That changes when Aimee decides to boost her image by building a girl's school in a West African village. As the narrator begins to take part in life there, sharing meals and sleeping in communal huts, she finds herself eager for the first time to imagine belonging to a common people with a

common past. Still, close as she gets to this new community, community itself continues to elude her:

Even the simplest ideas I'd brought with me did not seem to work here when I tried to apply them. I was not, for example, standing at this moment in a field with my extended tribe, with my fellow black women. Here there was no such category. There were only Sere women, the Wolof, and the Mandinka, the Serahuli, the Fula and the Jola, the last of whom, I was told once, grudgingly, I resembled, if only in basic facial architecture: same long nose, same cheekbones.

On one of Aimee's trips to the village, a celebration is called in her honor, and a female drum circle forms. One by one, people enter the circle to dance, and finally, pulled forward by both arms, the narrator is forced to take her turn. She listens to the beat, watches the steps, and realizes that she can follow them. We haven't seen her dance since her church class days, when Tracey was the star; now she gives herself over to the pleasure of movement, as Tracey once did, silencing the mind and putting her body in control. Five ecstatic minutes later, she collapses beside a villager friend, who translates the praise she has earned: "They are saying: 'Even though you are a white girl, you dance like you are a black!'"

Tracey's threatening e-mail—"Now everyone knows who you really are"—has become a promise that may never quite be fulfilled. Even at her most physically free, she is as immaterial as a simile, "like" the only thing she has ever thought herself to be.

At the start of the novel, the narrator attends a public lecture where she watches a scene from "Swing Time," the 1936 Astaire movie that gives Smith's novel its title. Astaire tap-dances on a stage, with three figures silhouetted on the curtain behind him, struggling to keep up. It is an exuberant dance, which the narrator remembers from childhood. Later that night, she takes a closer look at the clip on YouTube and is horrified to discover that Astaire is in blackface, complete with white gloves and lolling Bojangles grin.

Smith hangs the moment over her novel like a portent, a warning about memory and the distorting tricks it can play with the sense of self one takes—or makes—from the past. As the book progresses, she interleaves chapters set in the present with ones that deal with memories of college, of home, of Tracey. It is a graceful technique, this metronomic swinging back and forth in time, calling to mind the *sankofa* bird, one of the African symbols that the narrator's mother holds dear. "It looks backwards, at the past, and it learns from what's gone before," she tells her daughter. The narrator has taken note. The novel's structure feels true to the effect of memory, the way we use the past as ballast for the present. And it feels true, too, to the mutable structure of identity, that complex, composite "we," liable to shift and break and reshape itself as we recall certain pieces of our earlier lives and suppress others.

The preciousness of memory doesn't make it less unreliable; the unreliability of memory doesn't make it less precious. As the novel progresses, Tracey turns into a figure of demonic, almost cartoonish spite; it is as if she has responded to the failure of her adulthood by striving to erase the picture of the promising child she once was. But the narrator hasn't forgotten. At one point, she describes sitting in front of the TV with Tracey, watching a tape of Jeni LeGon, a black dancer from the thirties and forties, long ago relegated to a historical footnote. Smith has restored her; the narrator notices the striking likeness of her friend to the woman onscreen. She watches Tracey study LeGon's moves, trying to see what can be taken from this earlier version of herself: "She sat inches

from the television screen, ready to point out this or that moment of action or expression, an emotion passing over Jeni's face, a variation in one step or another, and interpreting everything she saw with that sharpness of insight I felt I lacked, that I considered, at this point, Tracey's possession alone. A gift for seeing that seemed to have its only outlet and expression here, in my living room, in front of my television, and which no teacher ever saw, and no exam ever managed to successfully register or even note, and of which, perhaps, these memories are the only true witness and record." ♦

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/14/zadie-smiths-memory-tricks>