

Zadie Smith's 'Swing Time' Explores Friends' Diverging Paths

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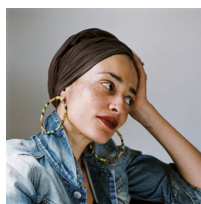
Doubles — pairs of friends, rivals and families; contrasting ideologies and views of the world — animate Zadie Smith's novels, as surely as doubles and doppelgängers haunt many Hitchcock movies. Her astonishing debut novel, "[White Teeth](#)" (2000), recounted the story of two World War II vets — polar opposites and best friends — and their extended families, opening out into a teeming, Bruegel-esque portrait of a multicultural London. "[On Beauty](#)" (2005), another magical big-city novel (set mainly in Boston), also depicted two very different families with intertwined lives. And the disappointing "[NW](#)" (2012) used the diverging stories of two childhood friends to look at the potent and ever shifting dynamics of money and class.

Ms. Smith's latest novel, "Swing Time," works a variation on this setup. This time, it's two spirited London girls and their very different trajectories. There are echoes of Wendy Wasserstein's captivating 1981 play, "[Isn't It Romantic](#)" — in their titles, lifted from 1930s classics in film and song, and in their portraits of two friends' coming of age and their conflicted relationships with their mothers.

At the same time, this novel addresses many themes that have animated Ms. Smith's work since the start: the competing claims that family, cultural heritage and politics exert on identity; how personal imperatives are shaped (or not) by public events; the mix of emulation, resentment and rebellion that inform children's attitudes toward their parents.

Told in the first person, the narrative cuts back and forth in time, alternating between persuasive chapters about the unnamed narrator's memories of her childhood and adolescence (when she and her friend Tracey both aspired to become dancers), and dull, strangely generic chapters about her grown-up experiences, working as an assistant to a famous singer and would-be humanitarian named Aimee, who can "procure a baby" for adoption "as easily as she might order a limited-edition handbag from Japan."

The novel's flashback chapters, set in London, possess the tactile energy and emotional detail of "White Teeth." Ms. Smith conjures the electric pulse of the 1980s and 1990s, when goth and punk were taking over the streets, and the nostalgia of the Cool Britannia years, when people rode Vespas to work and decorated their cubicles with pictures of Michael Caine in "Alfie" — the boys looking like "rebooted Mods" with "Kinks haircuts from 30 years earlier," the girls like "Julie Christie bottle-blondes in short skirts with smudgy black eyes." She also captures the now-quaint rituals of that era before smartphones and the internet transformed daily life — when email was still a rarity, and research was conducted not through Google, but in libraries, reading old newspapers and microfiche.



Zadie Smith addresses themes of family and identity. Credit Dominique Nabokov