

Zadie Smith: Fact, Fiction And Fraud [C1]

Con la sua ultima opera, la scrittrice britannica realizza ciò che aveva promesso di non fare: scrivere un romanzo storico. L'ambientazione è la Londra vittoriana e i temi affrontati sono decisamente contemporanei.

Back in 2000, Zadie Smith made her name as a writer aged just twenty-four with her bestselling first novel *White Teeth*. The story, written in part while Smith was still a student at Cambridge University, is set in the 1970-90s in Willesden, a working-class neighbourhood of north-west London. This is the community where Smith grew up and she reflects, from first-hand experience, some of the richness and the challenges of multicultural life in the area. Zadie Smith herself embodies some of this multiculturalism: her mother is Jamaican and her father English. Since the success of *White Teeth*, Smith has written five more novels, as well as short stories, a children's book, a stage play, essays and journalism. She's taught creative writing in Europe and in the US and won many major literary prizes.

THE FRAUD

Smith's latest novel *The Fraud* was published in 2023. Set in the 1860s and 70s, it's her first historical novel but stays within the geographical location of north-west London, which has inspired so much of her work. Working from a skeleton of historical fact and archive materials, Smith tells the story of a real [high-profile](#) legal case called the Tichborne [Trial](#) that took place in Victorian England. A wealthy aristocrat called Roger Tichborne is [shipwrecked on his way to](#) Jamaica and [presumed dead](#). But later, an English [butcher](#) called Arthur Orton, who's living in Australia, [claims](#) that he is Roger Tichborne. Despite the story being completely improbable, thousands of people, especially working-class Londoners, support Orton (the [claimant](#)) when the trial takes place. The [claimant](#)'s key witness is a Jamaican man called Andrew Bogle, who was formerly [enslaved](#) in Jamaica and knew the slave-owning Tichborne family. Bogle swears that, despite appearances, the [claimant](#) is [indeed](#) Roger Tichborne.

THE WIDOW

Smith depicts the lives of various people who become involved with the trial, including Bogle, the key witness; William Ainsworth, a successful writer; and, most importantly, Eliza Touchet, Ainsworth's cousin. All the main characters are based on real historical figures, but Smith imagines a life for them that goes well beyond the historical record. The character of Eliza Touchet, about whom almost nothing is known historically, is at the heart of the book. From the outside, Eliza appears unremarkable: a widow who manages the house and family for her cousin, William Ainsworth (also widowed.) But, as readers, we get to see Eliza's inner world of passion, sexual experimentation, ethical dilemma and literary aspirations.

WORLDS APART

In a meeting with the international press in Barcelona, Zadie Smith talked about how and why she wrote *The Fraud* in the way she did. **Zadie Smith (English accent)**: I wanted to know what the relationship was between my mother's country and my father's country. And I've discovered a lot. So it was a thrill from an educational point of view. But the most fun were the characters themselves, particularly Eliza Touchet and Andrew Bogle. Imagining things like what it would be like for Andrew to leave a plantation in Jamaica and turn up at a great house in England. It was like playtime. Like you really have to exercise your imagination and really think about what that would be like. And get out of the way yourself, because the book is not about me. The book is about them. So it was really like being a child again, just trying to imagine. And the same with Eliza. I had to imagine what would my life be like if I had none of my basic civil rights and very little freedom of movement.

VICTORIAN LEGACY

Smith feels the legacy of Victorian Britain in her everyday life and explains why she wanted to tell a story about this period. **Zadie Smith**: I live in Victorian London anyway. Everything above the level of the shops is

Victorian. These are Victorian buildings, my children go to Victorian school, the park is Victorian... So I was very [aware](#) of being the [inheritor](#) of Victorian Reform, of this vision which only appears in the Victorian period; that something should be done for the provision of the people. That is a completely new idea in Europe in the 1830s. That people should't be left to rot or die in the street, or not be educated or not receive hospital treatment. That there should be something called the commons that exists for the people. That is a Victorian idea. So what I wanted to think about was how these incredibly radical reformist ideas existed simultaneously with this hellscape that was going on in the Caribbean and amongst the working poor of England. So I wanted to tell a different history of the Victorian period. When I think of the Conservative government that just left my country, how little they did for the people, and then I compare it to the reformist movements of the 1830s, it's shocking. So we have two great periods of radical reform in England: the 1830s and the 1950s, 60s and 70s, when I was born, at the end of that. And I think people in England are [aware](#) of the forming of the National Health Service, the creation of the state schools, and of public housing. But I wanted to remind them of the roots of those ideas, and *The Fraud* is about the roots of those ideas.

VIVID CHARACTERS

The novel is full of vivid characters, [witty](#) dialogue and has plenty of humour. But Smith also addresses tough issues, depicting the day-to-day life of [enslaved](#) people on the plantations of Jamaica in brutal and historically-accurate detail. On the surface, the 'fraud' of the title refers to the [butcher](#) Arthur Orton claiming fraudulently to be the aristocrat Roger Tichborne. But, through the story, Smith asks questions about other types of fraud. Isn't it a fraud when working-class people don't get a [fair](#) trial? Isn't it a fraud when a man is successful thanks to a woman's sacrifice? Isn't it a fraud when people in England build their wealth and status on the labour of [enslaved](#) people in Jamaica? The island was claimed as a British colony in 1655 but its key role in British history is poorly understood by many, according to Smith. **Zadie Smith:** This book is about England. I was trying to make my country understand my country. To me a book about Jamaica is a book about

England, because these two countries are absolutely involved with each other for four hundred years. And the fact that that isn't properly comprehended by most English people is a great shame to me, because I don't think you can understand the country you're in unless you understand its history in full, not as an addition, not as a reclaiming or any of that stuff, [but] as the actual history of your country. This is not a minor part of British history. It's central. So this is an English novel about England and in the center of English life is Jamaican history, Jamaican people and Jamaican suffering.

Glossary

- **depicts** = descrivere
- **unremarkable** = ordinario
- **thrill** = entusiasmo
- **inheritor** = erede
- **fair** = giusto
- **high-profile** = noto
- **claimant** = querelante, richiedente
- **enslaved** = schiavizzare
- **indeed** = infatti, di fatto
- **claims** = affermare, dichiarare
- **on his way to** = dirigersi verso
- **presumed dead** = dato per morto
- **butcher** = macellaio
- **aware** = consapevole
- **witty** = ingenuoso
- **shipwrecked** = naufragare
- **turn up** = comparire
- **Trial** = processo