

A 21st-Century Dickens? [B2]

Come Dickens e George Eliot, l'opera di Zadie Smith combina magistralmente impegno sociale e umorismo.

With her stories set in London and woven around lots of vividly-drawn characters and social issues, Zadie Smith has been called by some a modern-day Charles Dickens. She does admit that she has been greatly influenced by the novels of Dickens as well as those of another Victorian writer, George Eliot. Charles Dickens is a key figure in the Western literary canon and even appears as a character in *The Fraud*. Smith argues that Dickens' work is still very relatable for readers today. **Zadie Smith (English accent):** This year I published *The Fraud*, and I think Barbara Kingsolver published *Demon Copperhead*, which is *David Copperfield* rewritten. So something in Dickens is speaking to people still. In *Demon Copperhead*, it's about this incredible gap of inequality, the size of it. Barbara Kingsolver noticed that the gap between the rich and the poor in America right now, to try and find an analogy for that, you have to go back to the Dickensian period. And so it seemed natural to me that she would choose *David Copperfield* as a model, because it's based on Dickens' own childhood, and it's about a boy finding himself in a world of extraordinary economic inequality. So that's how it works. The canon is there if you need it, if it's useful to you, if it can be transformed, and if it's meaningful to you. But when it stops being meaningful, it dies of its own accord. Nobody needs to demand that it die. It just dies. But for me, Dickens is very much alive.

DISCONNECTED

Like Dickens, Smith speaks out on social issues; she has become known for her considered and nuanced contributions to current debates on topics from race and feminism to the war in Gaza. Smith makes a point of restricting her engagement with social media, though, and doesn't have a presence on online platforms such as X. Being too reactive to the opinions of others is something she sees as a danger of the hyper-connected world. And

spending too much time in an online world of [soundbites](#) and simplified narratives is something she wants to get away from. **Zadie Smith:** I guess my whole thing is reminding myself primarily that I am a human being with capacities. And that's what I'm trying to remind my readers of, too: that we're human beings and we have the capacity to read. Not just things in a [straight line](#), not just monologues, not just speeches, not just [screeds](#). We can read. Likes that's one of the things we can do. We're not machines, we can read. So, yes, maybe there's some [annoying](#) time changes [in the book] and yes, maybe it doesn't move in a [straight line](#). Neither does life and I have respect for human beings. I'm not trying to write for robots or [AI](#) machines or any algorithm, I'm trying to write for human beings, and human beings can read if they're given the opportunity to do so.

TRAGICOMEDY

Although *The Fraud* describes the horrors of [slavery](#), it's also very funny in places. Smith talks about mixing the tragic and comic in her work. **Zadie Smith:** It would be much more difficult for me to write a book without any humour in it. I'm always amazed at books with no sense of [levity](#) in it [them] at all. That seems to me hard work. It maybe [runs in my family](#). My brother is a stand-up comedian, so there's a lot of it in my house. I grew up around it. But also life is, to me, tragic and funny. And the writers I love know that and write from that place. I can't think of any writer I've considered truly great who doesn't have that double consciousness about life, apart from perhaps Dostoevsky. He has no sense of humour at all, but he's still great. But to me, that is writing, the knowledge that those two things exist simultaneously.

Glossary

- **vividly-drawn** = vividamente delineati
- **slavery** = schiavitù
- **soundbites** = estratti, citazioni
- **straight line** = linea retta
- **screeds** = sermoni
- **gap** = divario, differenza
- **nuanced** = ricco di sfumature
- **engagement** = coinvolgimento
- **of its own accord** = di propria iniziativa
- **speaks out** = parlare apertamente
- **levity** = leggerezza
- **woven around** = intrecciare, sviluppare attorno
- **relatable** = comprensibile
- **noticed** = notare
- **runs in my family** = è una caratteristica della mia famiglia
- **topics** = argomenti
- **annoying** = fastidioso
- **AI** = intelligenza artificiale