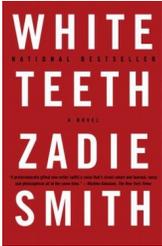


Books by the Stack



White Teeth by Zadie Smith

Set in post-war London, this novel of the racial, political, and social upheaval of the last half-century follows two families—the Joneses and the Iqbals, both outsiders from within the former British empire—as they make their way in modern England.

Why you'll like it: Complex characters. Quirky. Funny. Lyrical writing.

About the Author: Zadie Smith was born in North London in 1975 to an English father and a Jamaican mother. She read English at Cambridge, graduating in 1997. She burst onto the literary scene having written her first work while she was still an undergraduate. As of 2012, she has published four novels, all of which have received substantial critical praise. She joined New York University's Creative Writing Program as a tenured professor in 2010. Smith has won the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2006, and her novel, *White Teeth*, was included in *Time* magazine's *TIME 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005* list.

Questions for Discussion

1. *White Teeth* generated enormous interest within the publishing world, in part because it was an unusually assured first novel, produced by a writer who was very young at the time. What aspects of *White Teeth* – in terms of either style or content – strike you as most unusual in a debut novel? How is it different from other first novels you have read?
2. A few days before Archie tries to kill himself because his first wife has left him, Samad tries to console him: "You have picked up the wrong life in the cloakroom and you must return it... there are second chances; oh yes, there are second chances in life" [p. 11]. Does Archie's marriage to Clara constitute a second chance that improves greatly upon the life he had before he met her? Why does the chapter title call the marriage "peculiar" [p. 3]?
3. Why does Archie like to flip a coin in moments of indecision? What does it say about him as a person? How does the opening epigraph, from E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* [p. 1], relate to Archie and his approach to life? Does chance play a more powerful role than will or desire in determining events for other characters in the novel too?
4. Archie "was a man whose significance in the Greater Scheme of Things could be figured along familiar ratios: Pebble: Beach. Raindrop: Ocean. Needle: Haystack" [p. 10]. Does the fact that Archie is so humble, so lacking in ambition or egotism, make him a more comical character than the serious and frustrated Samad? Is Samad's character ultimately funny as well?
5. Samad imagines a sign that he would like to wear at his restaurant job, a sign that proclaims "I am not a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier..." [p. 49]. Why, in all the years that pass during the novel, does Samad not pursue another job? Is it surprising that Samad doesn't seek to change his life in

more active ways? Does Islam play a part in this issue?

6. The narrator notes that "it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, peanuts, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, disappearance" [p. 272]. Magid and Millat both shirk their Asian roots, though in different ways. Magid begins to call himself Mark Smith while he is still a schoolboy, while Millat models himself on Robert De Niro's character Travis Bickle in the film *Taxi Driver*. Irie, on the other hand, is drawn to what she imagines is the "Englishness" of the Chalfens. Is the gradual loss – or active rejection – of one's family heritage an unavoidable consequence of life in a culturally mixed environment?

7. Samad and his wife, Alsana, had a traditional arranged marriage in Bangladesh. Is love irrelevant in a relationship such as theirs? Does the novel indicate that love is a simpler issue for those of the younger generation, who are sexually and emotionally more free to pursue their desires?

8. What is the effect of juxtaposing Alsana with Neena, her "Niece-of-Shame," who is an outspoken feminist and lesbian? Why is Neena one of the novel's most pragmatic – and therefore contented – characters? Why does Alsana ask Neena to act as an intermediary with the Chalfens for Clara and herself?

9. What opportunities for self-expression and community does the sparsely attended but lively pub run by Abdul Mickey offer? Does Smith use the pub as a sort of stage for the everyday comedy and the various ironies of ethnic identity and assimilation in North London? What is funny about the timeline on page 204?

10. Fed up with her own family, Irie goes to stay with her grandmother Hortense, and begins to piece together the details of her ancestry. Does what she learns about her family's history make a difference in her sense of identity or in her ideas about the direction her life should take?

11. What effect does the introduction of the educated, middle-class Chalfen family have on the novel? Why is it significant that Marcus Chalfen comes from a Jewish background? Why are the Chalfens so patronizing toward the Iqbals and the Joneses? Considering Joyce's relationship to Irie and Millat, what is wrong with the liberal sentiments that the Chalfens represent?

12. Why does Smith include an episode in which Millat travels to Bradford with other members of KEVIN to burn copies of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*? Does the fact that none of the boys have actually read the book make their ideological zeal more comical, or more frightening?

13. Why does Smith set up the circumstances of Irie's pregnancy so that it will be impossible for her to know which of the twins is the child's father? How does what we learn about Irie and her daughter on the novel's final page relate to the genealogical chart that appears on page 281?

14. With *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith shows herself to be a brilliant mimic of the sounds of urban speech. In which parts of the novel does she display this skill to the greatest effect? How does her prose style work to convey the busy, noisy sound-scape of a multicultural metropolis?

(Questions issued by Reading Group Guides.)



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