

Zadie Smith, *NW*. London: Penguin, 2012. 304pp. RRP: £18.99. ISBN: 978-0241144145

‘I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me’,¹ a statement and sentiment that both permeates and characterises Zadie Smith’s highly anticipated new novel *NW*.

In this whirlwind tragi-comic tale four lost Londoners attempt to maintain and navigate their identities as they encounter multitudinous possibilities; shifting time, place, and selfhood in the contemporary urban landscape of *NW*, London. As Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan attempt to navigate the north west corner of the city, through council estates, public parks and private dwellings, financial crises, university education and sobering sexual encounters they aim to transcend Caldwell’s poverty line; to ‘get out’ of the landscape that had previously defined them.

Smith’s electrifying portrayal of modern London offers her characters infinite opportunities; they are granted a limitless sense of possibility in their professional, personal and sexual lives. Plagued by the figure of eight, Smith’s characters traverse and transcribe ∞ on objects, places, and people; her use of symbolic numerology, echoed in her use of the number thirty-seven throughout the novel, highlights the infinite possibilities open to her characters in modern London.

She disrupts the boundaries and confines of time and space in *NW* as she presents narratives that weave through both linearity and place, granting her characters further freedom both on and off the page. Smith remarked in a recent interview with *The New Yorker*, ‘when I was writing the book I was trying to think about how we experience time. How it really feels to be in time. And the answer ended up being different depending on who or what I was dealing with.’² Smith’s varied use of narrative technique unleashes her characters from the confines of linear and chronological narrative; individualism becomes central to *NW* as her characters become boundless and fluid. They are the sole authors of the dictionaries that define them.

However, *NW*, unlike her more comic first novel *White Teeth*, tragically depicts the effect of these disrupted boundaries on individual autonomy. In *NW* as time and space unfold and opportunities and possibilities multiply so too do her characters. Zadie Smith’s modern London is a world of endless possibility and opportunity in which her characters become lost, aimlessly wandering the streets of London, shifting name, identity, and role. Sexual encounters multiply and individuals become anonymous.

In her much debated 2010 essay ‘Generation Why?’ Smith launched an all-out attack on social media and its nullifying effect on individual identity and autonomy. As she writes:

¹ Smith, Zadie. *NW*. (London: Penguin, 2012). p.3.

² Smith, Zadie. Interview with Cressida Leyshon, "This Week in Fiction: Zadie Smith", *The New Yorker Blogs*, July 23, 2012. Accessed August 18, 2012. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/07/this-week-in-fiction-zadie-smith.html>

When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like Facebook, he or she is reduced. Everything shrinks. Individual character. Friendships. Language. Sensibility. In a way it's a transcendent experience: we lose our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires, our fears. It reminds me that those of us who turn in disgust from what we consider an overinflated liberal-bourgeois sense of self should be careful what we wish for: our denuded networked selves don't look more free, they just look more owned.

With Facebook, Zuckerberg seems to be trying to create something like a Noosphere, an Internet with one mind, a uniform environment in which it genuinely doesn't matter who you are, as long as you make "choices" (which means, finally, purchases). If the aim is to be liked by more and more people, whatever is unusual about a person gets flattened out. One nation under a format.³

NW reiterates this sentiment, but the attack here is widened to the modern urban sprawl of northwest London. With infinite open doors and 'fuckin liberty'⁴ at the end of every pencil, Smith's characters become overwhelmed by possibility and ultimately lost. Keisha becomes Natalie, Leah is muted, Nathan blends into the streets, and Felix faces oblivion. Individual choice is reduced to the click of Chat Roulette; *NW* becomes nowhere. Smith's reference to Kierkegaard in chapter three, re-establishes *NW*'s main focus; that is, the importance of life as a single individual making individual and not collective choices, as it is only when characters begin to make collective decisions in *NW* that they begin to unravel.

Smith's new mix of fragmentary narrative forms in *NW* works perfectly to present a dazzlingly real portrayal of modern London. By disrupting the boundaries of time, space, and identity for her characters, both on and off the page, she depicts the limitless possibilities that modern urban landscapes such as London offer. However, what is most notable in *NW* is that these disruptions, that had before been glorified in postmodern society, are now given a tragic element. Zadie Smith turns our attention to the inequality and negative effect of limitless possibility and boundless opportunity in a post-postmodern society.

³ Smith, Zadie. "Generation Why?", *The New York Review of Books*, November 25, 2010. Accessed August 25, 2012.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/25/generation-why>.

⁴ Smith, Zadie. *NW*. (London: Penguin, 2012). p.3.