

Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

2006 WINNER

ON BEAUTY BY ZADIE SMITH

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Zadie Smith is the author of the novels *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*, *N-W* and *Swing Time*, as well as a novella *The Embassy of Cambodia*, and a collection of essays *Changing My Mind*, and editor of *The Book of Other People*. Zadie was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2002, and was listed as one of Granta's 20 Best Young British Novelists in 2003 and again in 2013. *White Teeth* won multiple awards including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Guardian First Book Award. *On Beauty* won the Orange Prize for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and *N-W* was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction. Zadie Smith is currently a tenured professor of fiction at New York University and a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

PLOT SUMMARY

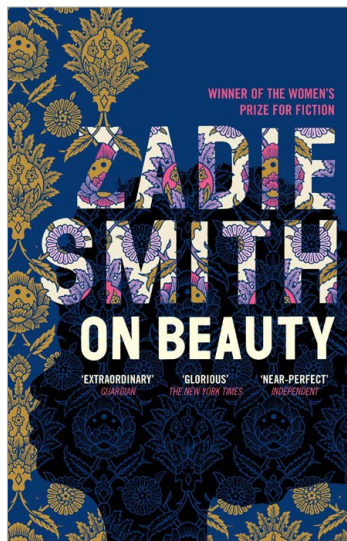
On Beauty centres on the story of two families and their different yet increasingly intertwined lives. The Belsey family consists of university professor Howard, a white Englishman; his African-American wife Kiki; and their children, Jerome, Zora and Levi. They live in the fictional university town of Wellington, outside Boston. Howard's professional nemesis is Monty Kipps, a Trinidadian living in Britain with his wife Carlene and children Victoria and Michael.

The Belsey family has always defined itself as liberal and atheist, and Howard in particular is furious when his son Jerome, lately a born-again Christian, goes to work as an intern with the ultra-conservative Christian Kipps family over his summer holidays. After a failed affair with Victoria Kipps, Jerome returns home. However, the families are again brought closer nine months later when the Kippses move to Wellington, and Monty begins work at the university.

Carlene and Kiki become friends despite the tensions between their families. The rivalry between Monty and Howard increases as Monty challenges the liberal attitudes of the university on issues such as affirmative action. His academic success also highlights Howard's inadequacies and failure to publish

a long-awaited book. Meanwhile, the Belsey family is facing problems of its own as they deal with the fallout of Howard's affair with his colleague and family friend Claire.

Zora and Levi become friends with Carl, an African-American man of a poorer background than their own middle-class standing. Zora uses him as a poster-child for her campaign to allow talented non-students to attend university classes. For Levi, Carl is a source of identity, as a member of a more 'authentic' black culture than Levi considers his own background to be.



WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Women's bodies are a prevalent theme in *On Beauty*: Kiki's large bosom and strong body are described positively, yet she herself is aware that other people fetishise and sexualise her body; sometimes, she provokes the discussion, but she is also often uncomfortable with it. Kiki and Claire Malcolm provide comparisons to each other's physicality – Claire's poem about an orgasm, for instance, is abstract and intellectual, which fits her ethereal, spare and muscular body. On page 96, Carlene Kipps draws a definite distinction between men as intellectuals and women as physical, practical beings: "Everything I do, I do with my body . . . Monty hardly knows he has a body at all."

Smith also represents interweaving experiences of race and class. The Belseys are a mixed race family whose father, Howard, a white academic, wants to pretend that race doesn't exist at all. The Belseys are an educated, upper middle-class, left-wing family, yet Howard's attitude to Carl, a working class, young black man, is far from welcoming, and Levi Belsey, the youngest son, longs for a more 'street' experience instead of life in a middle-class suburb. Carl's presence in Claire Malcolm's poetry class later becomes divisive within an increasingly conservative university environment. The Belseys contrast with the Kipps, a similarly affluent British black family whose politics and religion place them firmly in right-wing territory, yet whose company Jerome Belsey values.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Love is an underlying theme of *On Beauty*. Why do you think Kiki and Howard love each other? Does Kiki still love Howard? What does marriage and children do to love in the different families – the Kipps and the Belseys? Has Carlene had to surrender herself for the sake of her marriage, and has Kiki done the same? Can love survive marriage?

QUESTIONS

What do you think of Howard in this novel?

Is Claire right to ask Zora to speak for Carl at the university meeting?

Are rappers the present day poets of America?

How do Claire and Carl's ideas of poetry differ and how are they similar?

NEXT STEPS

Write about a piece of music of your choice that represents a personal journey of some kind, inspired by Kiki Belsey's time at the concert. Is there a piece of

music that represents a particular time or memory for you, or suggests some kind of life event?

As a bigger project, write a family history of your family, starting perhaps with parents or near relatives and working backwards. What were their views, their politics, where did they live, what did they do?

“ THIS BOOK COMBINES EXTRAORDINARY CHARACTERISATION WITH SKILFUL AND SEEMINGLY EFFORTLESS PLOTTING ”

MARTHA KEARNEY,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2006

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

N-W BY ZADIE SMITH

GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER BY BERNARDINE EVARISTO

AMERICANAH BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE