

Recall This Book
Transcript
Thursday September 25, 2019
Zadie Smith with John Plotz

John Plotz:

Welcome to Recall This Book, a podcast that ask what yesterday's books have to tell us about today, and even tomorrow. This is your familiar host, John Plotz, and it's an unbelievable and slightly terrifying honor to sit today across from the award-winning and brilliant writer, Zadie Smith, in the familiar RTB cocoon at the heart of the Brandeis library, swaddled in our usual sleeper-like foam nodules. Telling you everything about Zadie Smith's fiction that I love, from *White Teeth* in 2000 followed by *Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*, *NW*, *Swing Time* and a new one on the way, would mean wasting way too much of her precious time. But I will just say quickly that her work is a remarkable and inspiring convergence of acuity and generosity. That is, she notices the quirks and even the dark places of her characters, but does so in a way that allows the reasons, the rationales, and sometimes the rationalizations behind those quirks also to emerge into view. That helps explain, I think, why your nonfiction as well is so acute, a guide and inspiration not just to readers of fiction, but also to her fellow novelists. Okay, well, so, Zadie Smith, welcome to Brandeis. It's great to have you.

Zadie Smith:

Thank you.

John Plotz:

I hope the weird purple foam nodules are not too off-putting.

Zadie Smith:

It's all good.

John Plotz:

Okay, good. It's not that coffin-like! Can I just start as a sort of general question, by asking you about your own relationship to your books once you're done writing them? Do you have favorites among them, can you stand them, can you go back and read them or do you just think about what you would've done differently? How does it feel?

Zadie Smith:
Oh, god.

John Plotz:
You're allowed to say pass, by the way....

Zadie Smith:
No, no, it's a good question. I don't know. I know so many writers, and actually, I should ask more of them how they feel because I don't think my feeling is unusual, but whenever I express it, people seem to be surprised. I mean, I don't read them. That's for sure. Ever.

John Plotz:
Ever? Wow. Yeah.

Zadie Smith:
Ever. Sometimes an essay because essays are ... I can feel proud of an essay, it's short, and also, you have the possibility of making your argument and succeeding in making your argument, whereas a novel, this is not possible. It's not an argument and success is debatable at every level. I think some of the shorter ... I sometimes read "the Embassy of Cambodia". I mean, sometimes, like maybe once every three years since it's been written, again, probably because it's short and I can tolerate the experience...but not the novels.

John Plotz:
Wait, why that one story? That's really interesting. I'm about to teach that, actually, now.

Zadie Smith:
I think it's good.

John Plotz:
Yeah.

Zadie Smith:
Which is rare for me.

John Plotz:
But that's true of your other things also.

Zadie Smith:

I think it's good and it doesn't annoy me, I suppose. With *Swing Time*, I've had to go back to it because I'm meant to be adapting it, and it really is not fun for me to do that at all. It's just not fun. I always want to move forward, but I don't have any bad feelings about the books, particularly, I just don't have *any* feelings about them.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Okay, well, so that kind of kills my second question because I was going to ask you. I don't know if you're a fan of Willa Cather-

Zadie Smith:

She's one of my American exceptions. I've tried.

John Plotz:

Yeah?

Zadie Smith:

I'm going to try again. I feel bad.

John Plotz:

Okay. All right. Because she went back and rewrote her third novel when she was, like, 60 or something, and I was going to ask you if you could ever imagine ... I mean, literally, *Song of the Lark*. She just kind of went over it from-

Zadie Smith:

I think that's amazing. I know Martin Amos a few years ago sat down and just read the whole thing over, and I remember Roth doing that as well. I think each of them, maybe I'm confusing them or misremembering, but Martin definitely told me that he felt pretty good about it all, and I think Roth publicly said he gave himself a score or something. He thought it really wasn't that bad, all things considered. That's quite a bold thing to do, to read that many novels. And I know people like Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*, as far as I know, was a kind of rewriting of something she'd written very young that she came back to and reworked.

John Plotz:

Oh. Oh, I didn't know that.

Zadie Smith:

That's a very interesting idea, too. All I can say, if I was going to do something with the novels, it would be rewriting them again. That would be it if I was going to do something with them.

John Plotz:

You wouldn't read them, but you would rewrite them?

Zadie Smith:

Yeah. No, I might rewrite them. Exactly.

John Plotz:

Right, I was just thinking there's a weird way in which Charlotte Bronte rewrites *The Professor* as *Villette*, right?

Zadie Smith:

Right. Right. I mean, the sad truth is more commonly that you're always rewriting some of the same things over and over. I read a review somewhere recently of a famous novelist who will go unmentioned. The critic gave him a really hard time, and one of the things he pointed out were these supposed repetitions throughout, you know, 14 books. Every writer I know who read that was like, "Well, you know. No shit, Sherlock."

John Plotz:

Yeah, right?

Zadie Smith:

This is what happens. It's a kind of obsessive matter, and I imagine it is tiresome for readers. It's also extremely tiresome for writers to circle these ideas over and over, but I guess with the writers I love, circling is some of the ... Nabokov is a good example. It's obsessive, really. It's the same book in some ways over and over again, but as it happens, I like that book, so it works for me.

John Plotz:

Yeah. That's really interesting. Okay, so I have this awesome cohost who can't be here, Elizabeth Ferry. She's an anthropologist, and one of the things she

said she loves about your writing is the way that London almost comes across as like a character, she says, in your novels. Can you talk about that? Does that resonate with how you think about what your novels do?

Zadie Smith:

I see it now. If you'd asked me when I was young if I was a particularly locally focused person, I would've been surprised, but then I see ... I notice with my brothers, my brothers are both working artists, musicians and comedian actor, and I see the local obsession in their work, too.

John Plotz:

And are they Londoners?

Zadie Smith:

They're Londoners, we all grew up together. It might also come from hip-hop. My brothers were originally rappers. Even the kids in my school, who were not all rappers, obviously, but we had an attitude about the streets, that's true, that they were ours and that you claim them, and that it's a pride to belong to them. I suppose some part of that is carried on in the fiction.

John Plotz:

Yeah. I guess, sort of taking the twist of that, I mean, your novels are set in London, but it could've been anywhere, it's just where you happened to grow up. Or is there something particular about ...

Zadie Smith:

I mean, I do think in my particular case of Northwest London and North London that we have a surprising amount of novelists. Like, on the corner of my road I can see the pub Dickens used to drink in with Ainsworth. He was a genuinely awful Victorian novelist who lived around the corner from me. So we have a long history of this preoccupation with the neighborhood. I've got Nick Hornby, of course, further up, and Julian Barnes to the left. We're all not within a mile...

John Plotz:

Do they still live in the neighborhood, both of them?

Zadie Smith:

I mean, I would never call those the same neighborhoods. Nick Hornby's

Highbury.

John Plotz:

Oh, Highbury, yeah.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, and Barnes is Dartmouth Park, but I mean, to an American, these are all next-door to each other. It's a one-mile radius.

John Plotz:

Yeah. "It's a five-minute drive"

Zadie Smith:

But I feel close to it, but I've noticed, like the book I've just finished, New York has seeped in. Listening to myself now I can hear even my accent is slipping, so things change, I guess.

John Plotz:

Uh-huh (affirmative). So you have just finished a book? That's excellent.

Zadie Smith:

Yes, it comes out next month. Yeah.

John Plotz:

Oh, my god. That's great. What's it called?

Zadie Smith:

It's called *Grand Union*, which to your point, actually, is the name of a canal in my neighborhood.

John Plotz:

Oh, okay. Not a supermarket in New York.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, no.

John Plotz:

Yeah. All right. Cool. I already mentioned I like science fiction, so one thing I read was your J. G. Ballard essay, which I loved, but it opens by saying that the

one time you met him, or maybe the first time you met him-

Zadie Smith:

Yes.

John Plotz:

... you were at cross-purposes, and so I just want to quote you.

Zadie Smith:

Oh, god. Yes.

John Plotz:

You say, "He was a man born on the inside, and I, meanwhile, born on the outside of it all, was hell-bent on breaking in." Does that still ring true to you as a way of ...?

Zadie Smith:

I think at that moment in my life, what would have seemed to him incredible, I don't know, *amiability* or desire to *fit in* would seem conservative to him, but coming from where I came from, it's a completely different situation. To him, I'm sure going to Cambridge was a kind of concession to his family and their class. To me, my family, it was a miracle, so it's a completely different place we were coming from. But that's not in any way to obscure the fact that Ballard had one of the greatest, most wide-ranging and most unusual imaginations of any English writer, and there's really no one I can think of to compare.

John Plotz:

Yeah. But just to continue the thought about being hell-bent on breaking in, looking back, so it's basically almost two decades now, right, after that moment.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

So how's that, Do you feel ... Do you ...?

Zadie Smith:

I find it quite embarrassing now.

John Plotz:
Yeah?

Zadie Smith:
The desire to be seen or recognized by English life or society. I don't mean society in the posh sense, but just literally England. I just don't have any interest in it anymore.

John Plotz:
Yeah. Okay. Okay, I was going to wait for a while to ask this, but maybe, can I ask my Brexit question now? We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but I mean, how does Brexit, yeah, how does it strike you? How do you feel it, how do you experience it?

Zadie Smith:
When novelists are asked these questions, I don't think we have privileged information or feelings. I feel like every citizen on either side, in fact, is kind of spectacularly depressed and a little fatalistic. I feel that feeling is quite strong across the supposed divide at the moment, that both sides really now know that no good will come from this, but some part of us wants it to come. Americans know that feeling, too. There's something fatalist in the body politics sometimes. It's heading for an iceberg, and it wants to because it wants change in any form, so it's coming. Change is now coming incredibly rapidly, in fact, in a few weeks.

John Plotz:
Yeah. Unless it doesn't, again.

Zadie Smith:
Unless it doesn't, again. I feel depressed about it. For me, like for a lot of writers, I think the loss is of Europe itself. You know, England is a very parochial place. It's very intellectually parochial, and our one hope a lot of the time is the ideas that come from France, from Germany, from Italy, from Poland. That's the lifeblood of whatever, to me, is interesting in British writing, and so to cut that off, cut off the possibility of us belonging to that community, is really depressing.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Did you just get back from England? Were you there?

Zadie Smith:

I did.

John Plotz:

If you don't mind my asking, the kind of world you're moving in there, do you only talk to Remainers, or do you feel like you know people who are on both sides of the divide?

Zadie Smith:

No, I'm mainly in my family group, and to be honest, outside of my very intimate family, I would imagine there's quite a few people who wanted to get out of Europe, or who didn't vote, or who didn't care.

John Plotz:

Is it the kind of thing you can talk about? In America, I feel like you can't talk about Trump. If you suspect that you're on the other side of the divide with someone, I just don't want to talk about it. You know, I can't.

Zadie Smith:

I think in the kind of heated middle-class dinner parties, it could get very violent, but in my husband's family too, in their extended family, there're definitely people who voted to Leave, decisions which created job insecurity for other members of our immediate family, so I think it generally isn't discussed within families anymore. But as I say, my instinct is that there isn't a lot of fervor in the normal British politic on either side anymore. Everybody's exhausted.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Well, I recognize that over here, too. Yeah. Okay, back to writing. I was talking to my students what they liked about what they loved, and one of my students said her favorite piece by you was your essay about Joni Mitchell, which I also love, but what she said, and she's 19, is that she loved the sense it conveys of growing up and coming back to something and hearing it anew. Actually, what she said made me think of, I don't know if you know that Walker Percy novel, *The Moviegoer*?

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, yeah.

John Plotz:

You know, in which the structure is that you only know something when you go back and see it again.

Zadie Smith:

Right.

John Plotz:

You're not nearly as old as I am, but since I'm old and I teach *Middlemarch* all the time, I think about this question of coming to something anew and seeing it again. Can you talk about that as a thought for you, does that affect how you think about art, how you think about your own work?

Zadie Smith:

I'm in the middle of my life, but it seems to me what wisdom is available to older people as we get older is the acknowledgement of limits and the acceptance of them in all areas. When I look back on things I read, sometimes, for instance, and *Middlemarch* is a good example, I would've been extraordinarily judgmental of a lot of the characters in that book when I was 15, a judgment which is just not available to me anymore. As I pass through the various stages, I find myself to be equally delusional, weak, corrupt, or whatever. You read maybe with more compassion. Also, the thing which I've noticed as a critic, as a working critic, is [that] my ability to take a piece of art and destroy it and tear it up into little pieces in front of the person who made it is completely gone. I still hate things, but I hate them privately, or I hate them to my husband, or I hate them at dinner, but I don't sit down to write 5,000 words about hating something.

John Plotz:

And why is that? What's different?

Zadie Smith:

I think if I was young, listening to myself now, I would say, "You're just weak and you can't see. You can't separate the wheat from the chaff," but it partly is, again, a kind of compassion. You know how hard it is to make art, how easy it is to make bad art, and it doesn't seem to be anything gained for me anymore in the idea of saying, "Oh, and by the way, did you know that you're a terrible

writer?" It's so easy to be a terrible writer, I'm a terrible writer so often, and so the energy is removed, the desire to put things right. At the same time, I always have a great thrill in support when I see younger people doing that job because I do actually believe the wheat should be separated from the chaff on a daily basis. It's just that I can't do it anymore.

John Plotz:

Yeah. But in talking about you as then a critic, I mean, you're amazing. There just aren't that many novelists who can write the sort of appreciative and sensitive essays that you write about other art. Talking about how you do it, you do make discriminations in your essays. I mean, you don't hate all the things, I get what you're saying, but you still have to sort things out.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah. I have strong taste and, I guess, strong opinions, but I'm aware of the person who made the thing. I'm aware of how it feels to watch the thing you've made be utterly destroyed. I think it does make me less sharp as a critic, but I guess I've tried to write about things that I really admire, and the other critical job you can do is explaining why you admire, what it is about this thing which feels worthy, rather than just saying, "Oh, my god, this is everything," or whatever passes for critical praise these days. Analyzing it is a kind of duty and a task. It's interesting in itself. Good criticism to me, like when I'm reading the critics I loved growing up, Sontag or Kael or whoever, I never found a big difference between supposedly the art object and the criticism. To me, the pieces that Sontag wrote that I love most, they are art. I don't see the difference.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Kael is a example of someone who remained pretty bloody-minded till the end.

Zadie Smith:

Kael was very spiky.

John Plotz:

Yeah, she stayed spiky.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, but movies make you feel that way. If I was a movie critic-

John Plotz:
Oh, yeah, that's interesting.

Zadie Smith:
... I think I would have many violent things to say all the time.

John Plotz:
Yeah, like going to Quentin Tarantino movies makes me feel very violent.

Zadie Smith:
I'm the opposite. I adore Tarantino.

John Plotz:
You do? Really?

Zadie Smith:
I do. I'm sorry.

John Plotz:
No kidding. Wow.

Zadie Smith:
'90s kid.

John Plotz:
Have you written about him?

Zadie Smith:
No, I just went to see the last one last night, and I loved it.

John Plotz:
You did? The stuff at the end, the violence? Great.

Zadie Smith:
I never watch the violence, I should say. I love *Game of Thrones*, too.

John Plotz:
Yeah, yeah. Okay. I think if I'd put my head down, I would've-

Zadie Smith:

I just put my head down and I wait for my husband to say it's passed, and then I return.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Yeah. Unfortunately, that's my role in our marriage, so I really wish I could've done that.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah. No, I can't watch that stuff, but as a maker of icons, I love *talkies*, and if you love talkies, it's been a hard decade in the cinema at both ends, whether it's the superhero movies or the punishing art house. I want to hear words, and Tarantino's one of the last people who will speak in a movie, and he's an extraordinary writer of dialogue as far as I'm concerned.

John Plotz:

Okay, maybe you're not going to like Buster Keaton as much as I thought.

Zadie Smith:

Oh, no, I love Buster Keaton.

John Plotz:

Oh, you do. Okay, good. Yeah. He didn't do too well with the talkies.

Zadie Smith:

No, no. I can take a silent movie, I just can't take a movie with words in which there are only four and they're not good.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, no. Yeah. The talkie is a good way of thinking, and they understood in the '30s. They didn't say, "We had silent movies, and now we have audible movies." They said, "We have talkies." I mean, it makes a difference.

Zadie Smith:

I like a script, yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Yeah. Okay, well, so while we're talking about the Joni Mitchell essay, I just have to ask you, you have a line in it about having, even having, I think, an exploratory season of science fiction. You mention reading Huxley. Did anything further beyond Huxley, did science fiction ever grab you?

Zadie Smith:

I love speculative fiction. I don't happen to love Huxley, but I think I've read almost all of Le Guin and Butler, and I've read a lot of Delany. It just depends. I'll take any recommendation. I don't have any objection to literary genres.

John Plotz:

What does *speculative* mean for you, then?

Zadie Smith:

It may not be the precise definition, but I connect science fiction with the idea of a technological center to the story and often space, of course, and I don't need either of those things to feel like I'm in an other place.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I'm with you on Le Guin, completely.

Zadie Smith:

She's extraordinary.

John Plotz:

She is really extraordinary.

Zadie Smith:

Was, gosh.

John Plotz:

Yeah, I know. I interviewed her once, actually. It was amazing.

Zadie Smith:

Oh, lucky you.

John Plotz:

She's so nice. What about Doris Lessing, did she ever grab you?

Zadie Smith:

Oh, gosh, Doris Lessing is one of our North London giants. I can't explain. I'm a feminist, I grew up in the movement. I just don't like *The Golden Notebook*. I just don't like it. I can't force myself to like it. I admire her enormously, but that book is not for me.

John Plotz:

And what about the sort of smaller, weirder ones, like *The Fifth Child*?

Zadie Smith:

The Fifth Child I just got. That is a great book.

John Plotz:

It *is* a great book. Yeah.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, and it's such a funny concept. Can we give it away? I mean, I don't know if it's spoiling it.

John Plotz:

Oh. Yeah, I think we can just give it away, yeah.

Zadie Smith:

It's just, it's the idea that you have ... There's this like, idealized, perfect family. Four children. Everything is wonderful.

John Plotz:

It's [in] Cambridge, in fact, isn't it?

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, it's Cambridge, and nothing could go wrong, but then they have a fifth child, and that child is evil, basically, which is just the most fantastic concept.

John Plotz:

Oh, my god. It was so great.

Zadie Smith:

And kind of explosion of bourgeois life. Like, "I'll just do one more thing," but it's the one thing you shouldn't do.

John Plotz:
Exactly. It's amazing.

Zadie Smith:
That's a great book.

John Plotz:
Yeah, and you know, when I teach it, I don't know if this rings true to your associations with it, but it's like, I taught a British fiction class where I couldn't get a rise out of my students at all. Then I taught *The Fifth Child*, and they had the most visceral reactions to it.

Zadie Smith:
Yes, it's very extreme. And it's against nature somehow to demonize a child to that extent-

John Plotz:
Yeah, exactly. That's what really-

Zadie Smith:
... but it's very enjoyable.

John Plotz:
Yeah. I think the ones who hated their little brothers really got into it, yeah.

Zadie Smith:
Right. Yes, because I guess that happens a lot, right? The sibling arrives and ruins your life. Yeah. It's a common experience.

John Plotz:
Exactly. Can I ask you about, I'm sure you talk about this piece a lot, but "Two Paths for the Novel"?

Zadie Smith:
Yes.

John Plotz:
I'm going to oversimplify, but it's about the two possibilities of lyrical realism

and an avant garde experimental. I think it came out in 2008, so 11 years on. It's not a lot, but can you say something about how you think about that division now?

Zadie Smith:

I think the landscape has transformed. I was really writing out a frustration that-

John Plotz:

Yeah, I like that guy, Joseph O'Neill...

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, and especially in England. It's different in America, but especially in England, the space for experimental writing has always been incredibly small. A lot of the most interesting work has come out of the art world, in fact, and certainly in music. We have an incredible underground hip-hop scene, but in writing, I've always thought it to be quite oppressive: the kind of novel that is celebrated, partly it was the structure of the prizes, but it was a great emphasis on historical novels, if you go anywhere near Henry VIII, everybody's delighted, and a lot of kind of English heritage stuff. In fact, for me-

John Plotz:

No, wait, but you're not badmouthing *Wolf Hall*, are you?

Zadie Smith:

No, no. Hilary Mantel is one of my favorite writers, but I guess what annoyed me about that situation is that she wrote maybe nine or 10 extraordinarily-

John Plotz:

I know. You're right. *Beyond Black*. Yeah. Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Totally.

Zadie Smith:

... wonderful and bizarre books, which no one in England read. Then she wrote about Henry VIII, brilliantly, and that's when-

John Plotz:

Oh, right, and you could say that about Pat Barker. Same deal.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah. That's what you have to do, and when you're a younger writer watching that, that's very dispiriting because not everybody has a book about Henry VIII in them. So that kind of culture I found that oppressive, but actually, the past 11 years in American publishing, there has certainly been a great change. Not only in the variety of things that're being published, but geographically the kind of things that are being published, and then at least in New York, presses like Archipelago and Other Books, we get a constant stream of writing from the African diaspora, from Africa itself, from Eastern Europe, so that's all very enlivening. And I think the essay to me feels like a museum piece.

John Plotz:

Yeah. So you don't have another vision? There's not a different version of "Two Paths" now? It's more like multiple. You feel like-

Zadie Smith:

No, I think the whole thing which is exciting, it's not finished, this work, but exciting is that so much variety has entered the bloodstream of publishing. If you'd asked me when I was 12 to name five black writers, not American writers, but diaspora writers, female, I would've found that really hard. Not because they didn't exist, but because they weren't coming to my school, my library, my bookshop. Now, that really has transformed and so the environment just feels different. If I was 12 again now, I would be in a state of some excitement about the atmosphere.

John Plotz:

Well, I like the idea that you think 12-year-olds are reading novels. I hope you're right.

Zadie Smith:

That's true. That's true.

John Plotz:

I really, really hope you're right.

Zadie Smith:

I missed a key point there.

John Plotz:

Unlike you, I was rereading *White Teeth* recently, and I was really struck ... I wanted to ask you about one word. You do have so many amazing riffs in that book, but you have a riff on the word “involved”. But were you talking about-

Zadie Smith:
Do I?

John Plotz:
Yeah, well, you're talking about people being dating and so they're involved, but it kind of caught me ... Well, okay, so maybe this doesn't-

Zadie Smith:
What part of the book is it? You have to give me some clues.

John Plotz:
Okay. Oh, shoot.

Zadie Smith:
What's the context?

John Plotz:
I mean ... Oh, god. This is so terrible. I can't remember which characters are-

Zadie Smith:
Well, nor can I, so don't worry. Don't be embarrassed.

John Plotz:
Okay, but I guess what I'm trying to get at is that you play out the idea that to be involved is not just the thing that two people do. Maybe it's in the high school and they're trying to figure out “the last man” kind of stuff early on, but you're interested in the way that when people get involved with someone else, they think they're on a path, but then involvement with someone actually changes things.

Zadie Smith:
Right, that's true.

John Plotz:
Yeah, and I was just thinking, I don't know, maybe if it rings true. Like, in the

Joni Mitchell essay, you talk about *attunement* as your way of describing what it means to get back in touch with her or to get her, but so I was wondering if that word "involved" resonates for you as a way of what you think your novels are doing because you're kind of watching people move through the world, like *NW* has four people, but then they crisscross and touch one another.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, paths, you're right. I guess in life and when I'm writing, I'm assuming that there are no strict rules for involvement no matter how you're encouraged to believe it. You don't know whose sensibility you will join with. Of course, there are clues. Of course, if you grew up in the same environment and the same culture with the same politics, there is a likelihood, but it's not a guarantee. And likewise, when you find yourself in a completely new context, I don't feel that we should assume that there is no possibility of connection or some kind of joining of sensibilities, But it's never easy, it's not pretty, and it's surprising.

Zadie Smith:

I always think about it as like an analogy with the presidency. I imagine, maybe I'm wrong, that every smart person, putting aside the present, every smart President, when he walks into his office, thinks, "Finally. Now, I'm going to do this thing," and then what immediately happens is contingency everywhere. You have your plan and the plan is destroyed by the series ... Oh, there's an interesting piece by Samantha Power actually, in the *New Yorker* right now, about this, that your idea, which is basically narcissistic because it sees only your POV, has to suddenly realize these multiple other forces.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Like gravity wells of different things, yeah.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, and everybody's life is like that. You're sold, in America particularly, the idea that you can just bulldoze your way into your personal vision and that you're supposed to, which I find a little frightening, and that compromise is weak and pathetic, so then a lot of the systems that are based on compromise, like marriage, relation, having children, seem in the culture pathetic because they're not fundamentalist in principle. They are about an endless series of compromises.

John Plotz:

So that's the binary, then? *Pathetic* on one side and *fundamentalist* on the other?

Zadie Smith:

Or dogmatic, maybe, but learning to negotiate yourself with others I don't think has to be seen as weakness, you know? I admire the person who bulldozes through, I can't help it, it's in the culture to admire that person, but god, the wreckage they create in other people's lives.

John Plotz:

Is it interesting to think about artists and which artists are which? I mean, whether there's like an artform that reward you for being pathetic or for feeling involvement?

Zadie Smith:

I mean, rock and roll, or music in general, has always ... We stand aside and watch the pure ego go along its path undistracted. But sometimes, I think you think you see something you don't really see, like Patti Smith is a good example. There's a kind of, at least in New York, a iconographic obsession with Patti's younger days, which was all exactly about the heart wanting what it wants and being determined, but Patti's actual life is much more complicated.

John Plotz:

That's what I got when I read her memoir.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah. The break, the children, the husband, a complex mix of tedious domesticity and rock and roll combined. It's complicated.

John Plotz:

Not only is she one of these, I can't remember where she's exactly from, but I know she's like, 40 miles from New York, and everyone she's friends with, including [Robert] Mapplethorpe, I think, are all kids who want to be New Yorkers, they're not actually already New Yorkers, so it's in fact that complexity is already there.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah. It's not easy, and I think when you're young, you see a version of the

pure life. Something the psychiatrist writer Adam Phillips said that I find really interesting is why often we punish ourselves, I often do, for not being what your 17-year-old self thought you would be. And then he says, "Why are you subjected to the opinions of a 17-year-old? Why would you submit yourself to this judgment? What makes you think that that judgment was the correct one?"

John Plotz:

Yeah, isn't there some Anne Hathaway movie in which, is it called *13 Going on 30* or something like that, where she dreams that she's a fashion editor in *Vogue* as a 13-year-old, then she wakes up and she is a 30-year-old? We're like, "Oh, god. That'd be so horrible if you *got* your 13-year-old dream."

Zadie Smith:

Right. If it was a way to be in each stage of life, in that kind of Shakespearean sense of each stage, with acceptance, that would be extraordinary. But who can do that?

John Plotz:

I was going to ask you about this Hannah Arendt line, which I think relates to what you just said. At the beginning your answer, you were talking about the unpredictability of who you are no matter ... You think that people who are of your caste, of your neighborhood, of your group, whatever, or may like you, are going to be "your people." Arendt talks about the need to make a distinction between *what* somebody is and *who* somebody is. Does that resonate for you?

Zadie Smith:

That's literally what I've just been writing about in the past few days. It interests me a lot. Part of the discourse at the moment assumes too much and at the same time too little. It assumes that when you say "my people," you can know for certain who those people are by looking at them and by hearing what they have to say. I think what fiction as a kind of philosophy always assumed is that what people make manifest is not all that people are. There's a great part of human selves which are hidden, unknown to the self, obscure, and that's the part that fiction is interested in. The possibility also of having multiple peoples, multiple allegiances, multiple connections, some of which seem very unlikely. When we read, I think that becomes clear.

Zadie Smith:

What I was writing about: an example is, I just read *Olive, Again*, which is Elizabeth Strout's second Kitteridge book. What's so strange is that I had literally nothing in common with this old, white woman from Maine, but I felt with her and for her, and something about something inside her and something inside me are in common. In some sense, she is my people. It's not visible and I don't think we could go to the ballot-box with. It's not even real. It's fictional, but it's an example of how your sensibility can surprise you. You know?

John Plotz:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So can I ask you about that, what you just said, that hidden part of selves or that surprise of the affinity in an age of the endless publicity, of social mediation?

Zadie Smith:

Yes.

John Plotz:

I mean, you've written about Facebook. There's a kind of crotchety old-person way of saying, I mean, I'm happy to say it as a crotchety old person, just there's a way in which social media seemed to go to war with that space and privacy. But I noticed you wrote on the back of, oh, god, Sally Rooney's book. You really like Sally Rooney. So I imagine there's a way also of thinking of we live in a social media age, but it doesn't mean our private space has gone away.

Zadie Smith:

I think Rooney's a great example because this argument is not split between old and young or technological Luddites and technological experts. If anyone thinks by using their thumb on an iPhone moving through Instagram and Facebook that they are technologically literate, they are insane. That is not what you are doing. The difference is between people who are naïve about what this technology is and people who aren't. Sally Rooney is a Marxist and not naïve about the technology. And in the end, it isn't even about the technology because technology is not sinful. There's nothing wrong with the technology.

Zadie Smith:

What's wrong with the technology is the surveillance capitalist behind the technology, the shadow techs which you are feeding all this material into. If it were a closed loop, if Instagram were a kind of cooperative internet space, I couldn't care less. That's not really what this is about. The idea that you are unwittingly or unknowingly, or maybe not caring, you are fueling an incredible capitalism red in tooth and claw that aims to know everything about you at all times in order to sell things back to you, that is what is going on there. The idea that it's about your identity or your opinions....The data doesn't care. It doesn't care about any of that. It doesn't care what kind of person you are. It just cares how you do it, how often you do it, in what way you do it. That's the data that's important to it, so I don't-

John Plotz:

Let the record show that Zadie Smith is making iPhone-like gestures with her thumb.

Zadie Smith:

I'm making iPhone symbols. The argument as it was six years ago, where we were trying to pretend that it was about internet versus old novelists or people like Jonathan Franzen or me, everybody has to grow up and work out what we are actually doing online. That's what interests me. The arguments about social media, that's such a small corner of one of the most oppressive acts of capitalist capture of your lives that's ever happened in the history of humanity.

John Plotz:

I agree with you about Sally Rooney, but are there other places you see it getting worked out in an interesting way? So are there people who are thinking it?

Zadie Smith:

I think all over the place, young people are beginning to ask the question, "What am I doing every day? What am I feeding? What machine am I feeding, and why?" You have to have faith in the generation who use this technology that they will come to some of these conclusions themselves in their own way. You cannot preach to them.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Small quote by you, "I admire Beckett and I respect Joyce. I love Woolf."

Zadie Smith:
That's fair.

John Plotz:
Yeah? I kind of wondered where E. M. Forster fit in there too. I mean, I know you've explicitly acknowledged your debt with Forster, but I feel Forster a lot in your ...

Zadie Smith:
I used to be very embarrassed of liking Forster. Then I was noticing this extraordinary play that's coming to New York, "The Inheritance," by a gay Puerto Rican New Yorker-

John Plotz:
It's like a rewriting of *Maurice*, right?

Zadie Smith:
... I think his name is Matthew Lopez, I may have got that wrong, who one day picked up *Howards End* and did this extraordinary thing. We were just talking about it that there's no obvious connection between a Puerto Rican gay New Yorker in the early '90s and Forster, not really, Forster's sexuality was completely hidden for the entirety of his career, but there was a connection of sensibilities. That's the same book that I used to write *On Beauty*, and it kind of retrospectively gave me heart that I wasn't crazy, that sometimes you can reach across all these obvious gaps as me and Forster had literally nothing in common, but something in his sensibility spoke to me. There is something very radical in *Howards End* about human relations, about our ability to connect with each other, which is always bastardized in that phrase, "only connect," which makes it sound much more boring than it is, but anyway, this Mr. Lopez has managed to make a seven-and-a-half-hour play.

John Plotz:
Oh, my god, it's seven and a half hours? Wow.

Zadie Smith:
Yeah. Yeah, yeah. It comes in parts. I think you have to sit there all day, and everybody in it is a gay man in New York. It's about the history of gay life in New York in the '80s and '90s, and Noughties, and I can't wait to see it. It's

extraordinary that somebody else has had the same relationship or some variety of relationship with that book.

John Plotz:

I feel like for him from very early on, like from *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, he's so incredibly good at how people ... Well, it's what you were talking about with inner lives, right? I mean, it's that sense that you don't actually have that good a sense of what's inside you. You need to be around other people in order to find it, but what you're showing people on the surface doesn't-

Zadie Smith:

Is almost always a lie.

John Plotz:

Yeah, exactly.

Zadie Smith:

At every level, and that's the bit which I find when people preach to younger people about Instagram and the rest of it. Of course it's all lies, but so is everything else. It's a different way of manifesting that lie, but people lie a lot all the time about themselves, but the person they lie to most often, which is what Forster understood, is themselves. And it is possible to become very old and have lived very, very little truth. That was Forster's terror, and that's what his books are about.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I do think that's one of the reasons I love the question of *who* in Hannah Arendt. I feel like it comes up again and again, and she never thinks that there's something inside. Like, if you got to the very middle, it would just be empty. The only who is what comes out in the presence of other people, but it's not predictable. That coming out isn't predictable.

Zadie Smith:

I think she's right. I mean, all you can do is to experiment on yourself and your understanding of other people. I don't think people have a core. At the same time, I do think that they're sacred, so that's the same thing as saying they have souls because once they're lost to you they cannot be replaced in any form, so I do believe in this sacredness of each individual person, but at the same time, I believe them to be so changeable inside that even if there is a

core, there's not really much point in theorizing about it because you'll never find it, or never be sure of it.

John Plotz:

Yeah, you'll never get there anyway. Yeah. Yeah. Can I ask you about other kinds of artwork? I mean, you've already talked about this a little bit, but you know there's a quote, actually, I think from the Joni Mitchell essay also. You talk about the fact that you can choose whose child you want to be, and for you, it's the novel. But you obviously have this deep relationship to other artworks, other forms of art, so how do you think about that?

Zadie Smith:

I've been thinking a lot, obviously, because I'm middle-aged and having a midlife crisis, about music.

John Plotz:

You're too young to have a midlife crisis.

Zadie Smith:

No, it's coming. I come from music. I think what I've realized is that in the dynamic of my family, because there were some really great musicians, really world-class singers and musician, my uncle's an incredible bass player, and my brothers, music was their thing.

John Plotz:

Didn't that exclude you from it, or no?

Zadie Smith:

I think everybody decided for me that music will not be a good thing. I would sing, and my family would always like, "Ugh, stop," or, "You're overdoing it," or they'd accuse me of Mariah Carey, overdoing all every note and all the rest of it. It's taken me a while as an adult to realize that first of all, I guess I had in my mind unless you can sing like Stevie Wonder, you have no right being a singer. That's really what I believed as a child, that there is only excellence, there's only Aretha Franklin, there's only Stevie Wonder, there's only Mary J. Blige, and everybody else should not enter the arena. I felt very strict about that. With writing, I didn't feel that. I felt like there was room for amateurs, for people who are not Tolstoy.

Zadie Smith:

I came into writing with that sense that I'm not going to be whoever, but I'll contribute, whereas with music, I felt that there's no such thing as a contribution. There is only genius. And so, as an adult now with my children, playing music for fun, singing with them, playing with them, I'm remembering, "Oh, yeah. This is just a beautiful thing to do." I don't know why I decided to kind of cast it from my life as something that should never darken my door again. I love music. I still love it, so when I'm writing about it, it's really like a coming home to something that I had maybe secret dreams I would do and I turned from early. I suppose lots of people have something like that you just kind of turn your back on.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Well, that was actually going to be my next question, which is if you had not become a writer, what would've happened.

Zadie Smith:

I mean, sometimes, I sing. I've sung on stage a few times. In fact, I'm singing in New York at the Carlyle next week. I sing, but every time I do it, it's a kind of test case and the same lesson comes back, which is I cannot perform, so I could never have been a singer. I just can't do it. I find it too exposing and incredibly embarrassing, and I have no charisma when I sing. I just stand there and do it, and then I go home again, so it was never an option for me, but I enjoy it more. One of my brothers has released albums and does a lot of music, and I just love watching him do that. I would be his stagehand. That would be a good job.

John Plotz:

The name of the podcast is *Recall This Book*, so we kind of like towards the end of the interview to ask this question, which is basically about recallable books. In other words, if there's a book you can think of that you love, that you feel like has been neglected, something that got kicked under the trash can of history, kicked onto the ash-heap of history, and shouldn't have been.

Zadie Smith:

Oh, gosh. I think I have quite boring taste. I think most things I know, people know. Well, there's a book I teach every year, which I know is out of print because I've had to start to photocopy it and give out photocopied versions of it, which is called *The Bathroom*, which I think is actually mentioned in that

essay, "Two Paths for the Novel," but it's by Toussaint, who's Belgian, who's a kind of '80s, I don't know, kind of horrible experimental kind of fright in France they thought at first, but it's a really fantastic book. It seems quite tame now, but when I first read it, I was quite shocked by it. Coming from a kind of British realist tradition, it really surprised me. It's a great book.

John Plotz:

That sounds great, yeah. Oh, yeah, I had one final question. It kind of comes out of *Swing Time*, kind of out of *White Teeth*, but can you talk about the ways that you double characters up in your novels or play them off against one another? I mean, there are twins in *White Teeth*, but yeah....

Zadie Smith:

Yes, which is awful. It must be subconscious. I promise I won't do it again. I don't mean to. I don't mean to. I've thinking about it recently that fundamentally, it's some kind of Hegelian structure in my mind, which is so depressing, but that I think a lot of British literature has that structure. It believes in thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The novels are constructed that way, and you get it off Austen.

John Plotz:

Woolf has it.

Zadie Smith:

Woolf has it. It runs straight. It's like a intellectual tradition that runs through English writing, and I don't believe in it consciously. I'm not Hegelian. I don't know why I write fiction that way. I would much rather be like the child of Kierkegaard.

John Plotz:

But Kierkegaard's all about dialectic, though!

Zadie Smith:

I know, but he doesn't believe that it resolves itself positively. He thinks it resolves itself in hypocrisy and denial, which is much more what I believe.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, but speaking of which, I was actually going to say Jane Austen is an example of someone who consciously puts in on the table, but it's such artifice. In other words, the sister plots....

Zadie Smith:

Such artifice. Yes. I mean, Austen is part of the problem. I love Austen, but she's got so much invested in order and in people and life being ordered, and so much of life is invisible to her. I mean, so much. Like sex, addiction, wildness. Her and [Jean] Genet, I mean, would they have a thing to say to each other? She lives in a different universe, but the world is not organized like an Austen novel. Be very nice if it was, but it isn't.

John Plotz:

Yeah. But that was kind of my question about, I don't know how to ask this question well, but the twinning principle could be ... Right, so you're saying it's a thing. As a writer, you do it. You're not even necessarily aware of you're doing it, but you do do it. But isn't it something that happens in life as well? In other words, we all have our twin in a life.

Zadie Smith:

That's it. There's a hundred PhDs written on the subject, I'm sure, but for immigrants, obviously, and the children of immigrants, there is a shadow life. There is the possibility of what if my mother had never left Jamaica? What if I lived in Jamaica? For all black people, to be honest, there's an ancient shadow-life of, "What if I'd never left Africa?", which for me is a persistent thought. Whenever I'm in West Africa, I think about it. What would it be like not to have been ripped from this place, put into these strange contexts, and have to somehow synthesize these contexts over hundreds of years? What'd it have been like to have been left alone? All of those ...

John Plotz:

So that's kind of an under text for *Swing Time* then.

Zadie Smith:

Yeah, *Swing Time* is really about the dream of what if it all had never happened. I found in the art world I have a friend, Toyin Odutola, who paints these incredible portraits of beautiful, wealthy West African people in extraordinary imagined scenarios. It's not the only part of her work, but part of the concept is, "what if none of that wealth had dispersed?" What if it had all been retained, what if our kingdoms stayed, but if Igbo and Yoruba were not just things that we claim proudly at a distance in New York, and of course belong to actual African people at the moment, but were also wealthy,

unbroken kingdoms which had never had this terrible disruption at the center of them? Seeing that painted was really a kind of ...

John Plotz:

I'm sorry, could you say her name again?

Zadie Smith:

I'm going to mispronounce it and she's going to kill me. I can spell it.

John Plotz:

We'll get it right on the website.

Zadie Smith:

T-O-Y-I-N O-D-U-T-O-L-A. She is a genius, I think. She's painted many other things besides that, but I did feel, looking at those paintings, a sense of fantastical homecoming. What if we had never left? Yes.

John Plotz:

Zadie, thank you so much. This was great. Are there any other questions that you think I should've asked you?

Zadie Smith:

No.

John Plotz:

Any other things you'd want to say?

Zadie Smith:

I'm all good. Thank you.

John Plotz:

Okay. Recall This Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry, and today, as always, our music comes from Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. If you liked listening to Zadie, you may be interested in checking out our recent interviews with sci-fi novelist Cixin Liu and Samuel Delany, and my conversation with the comic novelist Steve McCauley, as well as a bonus episode that Elizabeth and I recorded which discusses this interview and also Zadie's whole visit to Brandeis where she addressed undergraduates and debated identity politics with some very sweet 19-year-olds.

John Plotz:

Upcoming issues include a conversation with the filmmaker Mike Leigh, and versions of several recent interviews such as our conversation with Madeline Miller have appeared as articles in our partner publication, Public Books, so check them out there. Finally, as a teeny, tiny, teeny non-profit that takes no commercial money and generates no revenue, we have to ask. If you enjoyed today's show, it would be incredibly helpful to us if you forward it to your friends and your relatives and took a minute to write a review or just to rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. On behalf of the whole Recall This Book team, which includes Matthew Schratz and Claire Ogden as well as Elizabeth Ferry, thanks for listening.