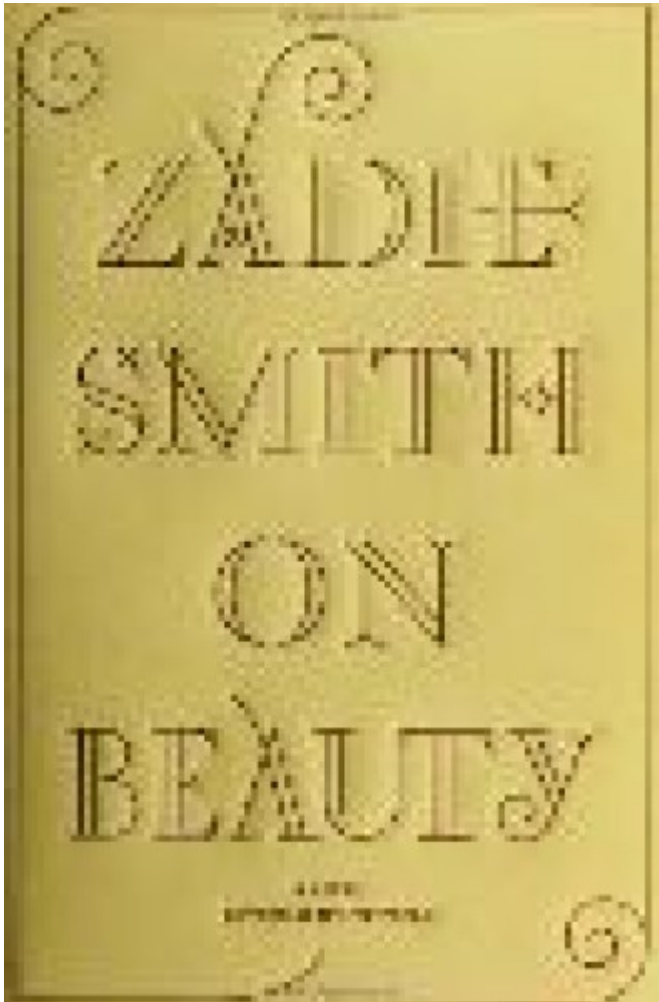


Parking lot palms

By [David Heim](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

In Review



On Beauty

Zadie Smith

Penguin

Toward the end of Zadie Smith's shrewd and entertaining novel, Kiki Simmonds gets into an argument with her husband, Howard Belsey: "All you ever do is rip into

everybody else,” she tells him. “You don’t have any *beliefs*—that’s why you’re scared of people with beliefs.”

Kiki is large, lovely, earthy and African American. Howard is white, British and intellectual, devoted above all to Theory. He teaches art history at a (fictional) liberal arts college outside Boston called Wellington, and to him, as one colleague observes, a rose is not a rose but the “accumulation of cultural and biological constructions circulating around the mutually attracting binary poles of nature/artifice.”

Ostensibly the couple’s argument is over Kiki’s attendance at an art lecture by Monty Kipps, a black, conservative Christian scholar (think Clarence Thomas in the art department) whose views are anathema to Howard. (“Kiki, this man wants to destroy *Roe v. Wade*.”) Kiki’s angry response is really provoked by Howard’s unfaithfulness—he has just had an affair with a faculty colleague—and by his treatment of their son Jerome, whose conversion to Christianity Howard instinctively sneers at.

Kiki’s complaint encompasses Howard’s intellectual life as well, and his gift for slicing up other people’s moral and aesthetic commitments. So her question is pertinent: Does Howard have any beliefs? What can a person like Howard affirm? Does a life spent deconstructing people’s notions of the good and beautiful render one incapable of responding appropriately to the good and beautiful in one’s own life—even when it appears in the obvious form of Kiki?

That serious question hovers over the novel. But Smith keeps the tone light. She is more interested in the comedy than the consequence of ideas.

Howard and Kiki’s comic drama includes three children. Besides Jerome, the Christian, who attends Brown, they have Zora, a student at Wellington who shares her father’s intellectual energy, and Levi, 14, who flees the white world of Wellington by hanging out with Haitian immigrants and affecting a black street dialect that is barely comprehensible to his own siblings (“He don’t do no wilding out, he got no crunk, no hyphy, no East Coast vibe . . .”)

Smith has a virtuoso ear for speech; she seems capable of reproducing with authority every sort of North Atlantic idiom, from the Ivy League to working-class London to the sidewalks of Roxbury. Howard’s comments in a class on Rembrandt (he’s discussing the painting *Seated Nude*) capture the rhetoric of a generation of

humanities professors, right down to the way sweeping claims are presented as genial questions: “We’re told that this constitutes a rejection of the classical nude. OK. But. Is this nude not a confirmation of the ideality of the vulgar? As it is already inscribed in the idea of specifically gendered class debasement?”

Like Levi, and like the author herself, the denizens of Wellington are connoisseurs of dialects, which they try on for thrills or seek to use to their advantage. The resident poet proudly takes her class to a poetry slam and enthuses over street-tough eloquence. Howard enjoys mimicking TV characters and rap singers. Kipps exploits his Caribbean-British accent, stiffly using metaphors in a way peculiar to the “self-consciously conservative.” Even Kiki, the most grounded of the characters, occasionally breaks into a stylized southern drawl, playing up the role of Strong Black Woman.

More substantial encounters with “the other” (as they would say at Wellington) shape the plot. Jerome falls in love with Victoria Kipps, daughter of his father’s ideological enemy. Part of the thrill for him is encountering in the Kipps household an opposing worldview. “He liked to listen to the exotic (to a Belsey) chatter of business and money and practical politics; to hear that Equality was a myth, and Multiculturalism a fatuous dream; he thrilled at the suggestion that Art was a gift from God.” Victoria, for her part, is eager to shed the Christian family values that her father touts. And Zora, spurred by a combination of lust and condescension, is infatuated with an unemployed rap artist.

The novelist plays these encounters for their comic elements. Forays across the divides of culture, race, class and ideology generally lead to some embarrassment. Interestingly, for Smith, the Oxford-educated daughter of a Jamaican mother and British father and a native of polyglot North London, race is but one of the many markers of identity that people are called on to negotiate, and not necessarily the most decisive.

The most successful border-crossing is undertaken by two black women, both faculty wives: Kiki, a secular liberal, and Carlene Kipps, a conservative Christian. (The Kippes’ Christianity is a rather thin veneer, however—reflecting the novelist’s critique of the family’s shallowness, perhaps, or else a sign that Christians are one of the few subgroups that don’t much interest her.) Drawn together by circumstance, the women feel some elemental connection: they recognize that family matters more to each of them than do the ideas their husbands skirmish over.

Kiki and Carlene's friendship is one of several plot elements loosely modeled on E. M. Forster's 1910 novel *Howards End*. (In the acknowledgments Smith calls her novel an homage to Forster.) Their relationship parallels the unlikely friendship in Forster's book between Margaret Schlegel, the liberal idealist and defender of "the inner life," and Mrs. Wilcox, the wife of an unreflective businessman. These women have the courage of their affections, which enables them to establish connections outside their usual circle. What Forster says of Margaret might be said of Kiki: she exhibits "a profound vivacity, a continual and sincere response to all that she encountered in her path through life."

Except that Smith wouldn't phrase it in such earnest tones; her approach remains lightly satirical. The Forster parallels are mostly a humorous tease—what, the novel makes us wonder, will "Howard's end" be?

Fans of Forster will also note that none of Smith's characters, including Kiki, comes close to Margaret's moral passion for healing the divisions that modern society creates between the classes, and between culture and commerce. *On Beauty* gives us no liberal hero like Margaret, only assorted liberal (and conservative) poseurs—plus a few characters, like Kiki and Jerome, who are trying to live with decency among those who know a lot and should know better.