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Art as shelter

A Haitian painting, not a house, is the key to Zadie Smith's modern reworking of E.M. Forster's 'Howards End.'

By Lizzie Skurnick
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On Beauty, By Zadie Smith. Penguin Press. 464 pages.

When an established author updates a classic, it's generally considered bad form to spend the great majority of your reading sniffing out salient "Aha!" moments. But *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith's third novel, a vigorous homage to Forster's *Howards End*, not only invites, but demands, such sniffing. The author -- whose debut, *White Teeth*, catapulted her into the kind of galactic literary orbit of which lesser authors, crashing and burning through unearned advances, can only dream -- has transposed her countryman's novel of love and class in turn-of-the-century England into a treatise on race and class in current day America.

On Beauty takes place on the campus of Wellington, near Boston, a Wellesley-ish hothouse of impenetrable jargon, singing groups, and demonstrations in support of the dispossessed du jour. (Though she denies it, it's impossible to imagine that Smith's time at Harvard, where she was a visiting fellow, did not inform her nasty eviscerations.)

The families in question are the Besleys and the Kipps. The Besleys, like *Howards End*'s Schlegels, are unabashedly liberal, art-loving, and mixed race (well, the Schlegels were half-German). The counterpoint Kipps are conservative and Caribbean, with a self-serving grip on morals and money that is quite as firm as Wilcox's before them.

But there, the parallels end. Heads-of-households Howard Besley and Monty Kipps are both Rembrandt scholars -- and longtime political enemies. Howard -- who is white and English, and married to the black and American Kiki -- is in the pro-affirmative action corner. He dislikes representational art, maintains an arms' length ironic distance from Kiki, and, born working-class, was once more in need of affirmative action than his three children, Jerome, Zoran and Levi ever will be. Monty Kipps is pompous, people-friendly, and devoted to religion. What do they share? Jobs at Wellington, and a tendency toward

unfortunate indiscretions.

When On Beauty's Howard heads home to London to fetch son Jerome from his failed affair, somewhat humorously, he's become Forster's Aunt Juley, and Jerome the swooning Helen from Howards End.

Like Kiki, who imagines the world of the Mozart Requiem as peopled by mermaids and apes, there's Helen yet again, seeing Beethoven's Fifth as peopled by goblins and elephants. The dreamy political impulses of Forster's Schlegel sisters, an equal mix of the patronizing and the passionate, are distributed between Kiki and Howard's daughter, Zora, and son, Levi, while Monty Kipp's daughter, Victoria, calls up both the seductive allure of Forster's Paul Wilcox and the young Mrs. Bast.

Smith's re-imaginings have real meaning. Her Leonard Bast is Carl, who, as a Roxbury resident and spoken word poet, is about the same uncomfortable rung below the Besleys as Forster's clerk -- respectable, intelligent, well-meaning, but with rough edges that are, well, kind of embarrassing. And Zora, who will prove Carl's undoing as surely as Helen was Leonard's, steals his Discman, not his umbrella, at a concert. With its cloaking earphones and omnipresence, the Discman is a potent symbol, our generation's version of Leonard's umbrella, which keeps him both hidden and undifferentiated among the mass of Londoners huddling under gray skies.

Less successful is Smith's re-envisioning of the symbolic Howards End: not a house, but a much beloved painting by Haitian artist Hector Hippolyte of voodoo goddess Erzulie, owned by Monty's ailing wife Carlene. As Kiki and Carlene become friends, Carlene tells her that Erzulie represents "love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon ... jealousy, vengeance, discord, and, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune." From here, it's not a very great leap to see that Smith is making Forster's "Only connect" -- the inscrutable epigraph of Howards End -- into a treatise about beauty and its primacy, in art and in life.

But here, she fails. In its brutal intercession of worlds, Howards End is, as Trilling famously put it, about "who will inherit England."

Smith attempts to dispatch the idea of the house in a note from Carlenen, in which she leaves the painting to Kiki: "We find such shelter in each other." But, although Zadie Smith is one of the best prose writers working today (and one of truest and funniest, when she tackles race and class), her talent lies in the minute, not in the broad strokes. Smith, too, is concerned with what Forster termed "collisions of the trivial sort through which the doors of heaven may be shaken open" -- the chance connections so charged with meeting as to determine the fate of our lives. (White Teeth, after all, begins with a man being saved from committing suicide by the fact that he's parked in a butcher's loading dock.) But Smith's strength is a storm of crystalline detail, not some symbolic superstructure. Brilliant as her depictions of the Besleys and Kipps may be, the frame that holds Erzulie may as well hang empty.

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