

The Authors of Their Lives

NW

By Zadie Smith

New York: Penguin Press, 2012,

401 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Susan Alice Fischer

As so often with Zadie Smith's fiction, my initial reaction upon embarking upon her fourth and latest novel, *NW*, was one of irritation gradually giving way to admiration. Her opening sentences—"The fat sun stalls by the phone masts. Anti-climb paint turns sulphurous on school gates and lampposts"—seem showy at first. This sensation lasts for much of the first section of the novel, "Visitation," with its weird layout for dialogue and disjointed narrative.

Yet, while the experimental quality of the writing may feel distracting or even unnecessary in places, the novel is well-worth pursuing—and those showy phrases and other oddities usually turn out not only to be remarkably descriptive of the neighborhood and social milieu in which the novel takes place but relevant to its themes as well. Cleverly plotted and written in Smith's inimitable style, with her intelligent yet playful narration, acute observations, and wonderful ear for cadence in the dialogue, *NW* is rich in ideas about class relations and the inexorable passage of time. The novel's thirty-something-aged characters have difficulty holding onto a sense that they have a future, and they worry about the extent to which they are in fact, as they so often claim, "the sole authors" of their lives—or whether they are shaped instead by the socioeconomic circumstances into which they were born. As in Smith's other work, it is the depth of the ideas, more than the individual characters, that engage the reader.

NW is titled for Northwest London, in which most of the action takes place. The novel is divided into five sections, each with a decidedly religious title: "Visitation," "Guest," "Host," "Crossing," and, again, "Visitation." Each section is then idiosyncratically subdivided into what can loosely be termed chapters. Those in the first section are headed by numbers from 1 to 23 in order, with the number 37 appearing out of order between chapters and at the end of the section. The chapters in "Guest" are titled with the abbreviations for London's postal codes, signifiers of class and racial locations. "Host" is a flashback, its numbered vignettes acting as a gloss on the present of the novel. This time, the number 37 is missing between episodes 36 and 38. The last two sections of the novel are brief. The chapters in "Crossing" are titled with the names of specific North London areas, while the last section, "Visitation," comprises only one chapter, which has no further designation. The novel as a whole is framed by an epigraph from John Ball's sermon on equality from the period of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381—"When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?" It alludes, as do the various references to apple trees and apple blossoms strewn



throughout the novel, to the destructive distance contemporary society, with its staggering inequalities, has traveled from an Edenic, egalitarian past.

While most of the characters in the novel struggle to move beyond their socioeconomic confines, the two protagonists, Leah Hanwell, of white Irish background, and Keisha/Natalie Blake, of black Caribbean descent, are among the few who have managed to move out of the Willesden, North London, working-class. Each has done so, however, at great cost to her sense of self. Most of the people Leah and Keisha/Natalie grew up with on the Caldwell public-housing estate are either stuck in place or have slipped further down, because of the overwhelming odds against them.

The number 37, which runs throughout the novel, represents in the first instance a "visitation" in Leah's life that reminds her of her class origins. Shar arrives out of the blue, ringing Leah's doorbell, screaming for help and waving a bill addressed to 37 Ridley Avenue, to show that she is a neighbor and thus worthy of Leah's trust. Spinning a story that she needs money to get to the hospital, where her mother has been taken by ambulance, Shar manages to cadge thirty pounds from Leah. During the visit, Shar recognizes Leah from the state school they both attended. Now in their thirties, Shar and Leah are no longer in the same socioeconomic class. Unlike Leah and her childhood friend Keisha (now known as Natalie), Shar has not risen from her poor background or entered the professional middle class—far from it. She is struggling with life on the dole, raising children on her own and, it transpires, trying to feed an addiction. Shar never returns the money Leah lends her, and Leah is at first irate that she was scammed. Later, she feels more empathetic, wondering "What does it mean to say the girl lied? Is it a lie to say she was desperate? She was desperate enough to come to the door."

From this opening episode, the number 37—probably also a reference to Genesis 37—becomes associated with Shar, and by extension with the

dispossessed, the people and circumstances that the now-privileged Leah and Natalie no longer see, the issues they repress—as well as with life's other silences. Leah hides her birth control and an abortion from her husband, who desires a child. Natalie feels empty despite her worldly success as a lawyer; at one point she begins to advertise her sexual services, although her trysts never seem to come off. In the last chapter in the first section—numbered 37, though it follows number 23—Leah goes to a pharmacy to pick up some photographs she had dropped off to be developed. In a mix-up, she is initially and mysteriously given photographs of Shar, suggesting that Shar is an alternative version of herself—the version that didn't get away from poverty and is still struggling to get by.

Another character who didn't get away is the focus of "Guest." At first, this section seems to have little connection with the rest of the book, other than that its main character, Felix Cooper, a 32-year-old black man, also grew up in poverty on the Caldwell estate, and that he is mentioned in passing toward the end of the first section. To Natalie and Leah, he is merely a familiar face from the neighborhood. In the long interlude dedicated to several hours in Felix's life, Smith's writing is at its most fluid and acutely observed, as well as at its least experimental. Felix, who has been through his share of difficulties, including growing up in an unstable family, is now trying to make positive changes in his life. He makes his way from Northwest to Central London to buy a used car from a well-heeled, young white man and to end a relationship with his older lover, Annie, an upper-class junkie. When Felix claims to Annie that he has slain his personal "demons" and is ready to move to "the next level," she tells him,

Life's not a video game, Felix—there aren't a certain number of points that send you to the next level. There isn't actually any next level. The bad news is everybody dies in the end. Game over.




While the privileged characters Felix encounters in Central London have their problems, it is Felix's story that comes to an infelicitous resolution as he returns to his home in NW—a turn of events that highlights the point that both chance and social location conspire to produce life's outcomes. One is not, after all, the sole author of one's life. Despite Felix's recent period of grace (with his new girlfriend of that name), his desire to gain control of his life is not enough in a society where the odds of succeeding as a black, working-class man are curtailed by social inequities, as well as by destructive norms of masculinity.

Felix's life is contrasted with that of Natalie, apparently the biggest success among the characters in the novel. "Host" follows the life of young Keisha, her friendship with Leah, and her

socially transforming move to university—where, given her preoccupation with self-invention and attaining sole authorship of her life, she transforms herself into Natalie, whose name suggests birth. She becomes a lawyer, gets married, has children. The flashback provides an understanding of what moving into the middle class has cost Keisha/Natalie: vignettes show her repressing unsettling feelings about her connection to herself, her family, and the world around her. Allusions to a succession of historical events from her childhood onward—from the 1992 war in Bosnia, the 1993 racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in Southeast London, and the 1994 Rwandan genocide, through the 2008 worldwide economic crisis and the 2010 eruption of the Icelandic volcano that grounded planes throughout Europe—bring the novel into the near-present.

In the penultimate section, Natalie wanders through various sections of North London as she searches for meaning in her life. In this journey, she is accompanied by a childhood companion, the down-and-out Nathan Bogle, whom Leah adored when they were growing up. Natalie tells him how "loved" he was as a child, to which Nathan replies that his mother informed him early on that, "Everyone loves a bredrin when he's ten.... All cute and lively.... After that he's a problem." When Natalie protests that this is "a horrible thing to tell a child," Nathan claims, "[I]t's just the truth... But you don't want to hear that."

That Natalie's story is bookended by those of Felix and Nathan underscores Smith's theme that poverty is not "a personality trait." Things are not "meant to be" just because they happen in this best—or worst—of all possible worlds, and no one is the sole author of her life. Discounting the role of both chance and environment, Natalie insists that she and Leah have the lives they do because they "worked harder," and that "people generally get what they deserve." The novel's final, sinister "visitation" undercuts her claim.

Smith does some things very well in this novel. She has a gift for catching a range of accents and the diverse argots of London, and for painting city life vividly. She is a keen observer of human behavior, with all its tics and flaws, in a range of classes and cultures. Ultimately, I admire this novel for its insight and compassion. For all its quiriness, it is a novel that, like Smith's others, leaves one pondering its observations about contemporary life long after it ends. 

Susan Alice Fischer is editor of the online *Literary London Journal* (www.literarylondon.org), co-editor of the journal *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, and professor of English at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York. She writes about contemporary British fiction.

A Question of Safety

The Round House

By Louise Erdrich

New York: Harper, 2012,

336 pp., \$26.99, hardcover

Flight Behavior

By Barbara Kingsolver

New York: Harper, 2012,

448 pp., \$28.99, hardcover

Reviewed by A. J. Verdelle

Louise Erdrich and Barbara Kingsolver, venerable authors revered by readers and writers alike, offer two new "message-novels" this season. Kingsolver's ninth book of fiction, *Flight Behavior*, follows a startling, million-strong migration of monarch butterflies that has veered off course to Tennessee, where the insects have parked themselves during the wrong kind of winter in a mistaken stand of trees. The monarchs' annual migration is altered due to a constellation of mixed signals—warmer temp-

eratures in cooler latitudes, weeks of mild autumn weather in a time that should be cold. The monarchs have lost their normal habitat because of a flood, which normally would have driven them to winter in Mexico. Instead, they fly, *en masse* and in error, across a sky stretched over "a continental ecosystem breaking down." Although hugging—or better, blanketing—Tennessee tree trunks warms the huddling monarchs, real winter is due to arrive in the hollows, in a fashion that Mexico, and monarchs, have never experienced.

The Round House, Erdrich's fourteenth novel, won the 2012 National Book Award. The novel foregrounds the catastrophic rape of a Native woman on a reservation. The rapist meant to follow the sexual assault with murder, but the woman picks herself up and saves her own life. A wife and the mother of one son, she is catapulted by this tragic assault into a severe state of distress—near catatonia. Her husband and son, in turn, suffer emotionally as well, alternating among hyperactivity, shock, grief, and despair.

From here, *The Round House* becomes part coming-of-age story—a boy reels and roils, working through his unsteadiness to try to avenge his mother—and part CSI: what are the clues? Who is the assailant? Can the attacker be taught a lesson—about the value of Indian life, about the values of Indian men?

For the Native people in *The Round House*, living on the reservation does not equal sovereignty. According to Erdrich's afterword, prosecuting rapes that take place on reservations is hindered and even thwarted by tangled laws. Citing a report by Amnesty International, she explains that