



ZADIE SMITH IN CONVERSATION WITH KURT ANDERSEN
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RON CHERNOW: The first time that I read Zadie Smith I felt immediately a very kind of pleasant tingling along the spine that you feel when you encounter an authentic new voice and new vision. Her new book, *On Beauty*, I think, is so devastatingly funny and devastatingly accurate and insightful. It would have been to the pride of any American novelist. The fact that a young British novelist was able to come here and capture the American vernacular and mores with such fidelity, I think, just testifies to the most amazing talent and versatility. So we are especially happy to have her here today. And she will be interviewed by another wonderful author, our very own home-grown Kurt Andersen, so welcome and enjoy.

KURT ANDERSEN: Thank you, Ron, and thank you, Paul. When Paul suggested the psychoanalytical fifty minutes as a rule by email, I thought it was very funny. To hear Paul, with his accent, repeat it, it reminded me why we come to hear authors and see authors rather than just read them or read about them.

Zadie Smith, at this point, and I'm sure, truly to this audience, needs no introduction, but given the presumption that all of you are rabid Zadie Smith fans, I'm going to ask her to read not from *White Teeth*, her stunning first book, not from *Autograph Man*, her second novel, but from *On Beauty*, the latest, in its very fat British edition. Zadie Smith.

ZADIE SMITH: I've never read this bit before, I don't know what it's going to be like. It's about Kiki, who's one of the main characters in the book, who's married to an academic but isn't an academic herself, so it's, I guess it's kind of about the feeling of being in a milieu which isn't quite your own, in your own house. So, here we go.

By the time Kiki returned to 83 Langham, her first guest had arrived. It is an unnatural law of such parties that the person whose position on the guest list was originally the least secure is always the first to arrive. Christian von Klepper's invitation had been added by Howard, removed by Kiki, reinstated by Howard, removed by Kiki, and then, at some later point, apparently extended once more in secret by Howard, for here was Christian, leaning into an alcove in the living room, nodding devotedly at his host. From where she stood in the kitchen, Kiki could see only a sliver of both men, but you didn't need to see much to get the picture. She watched them, unnoticed, as she took off her cardigan and hung it over a chair. Howard was full of beans. Hands in his hair, leaning forward. He was listening—but *really* listening. It's amazing, thought Kiki, how attentive he can be when he puts his mind to it. In his efforts to make peace with her, Howard had spent months showering some of this attention on Kiki herself, and she knew all about the warmth it afforded, the flattering bliss of it. Christian, under its influence, looked properly young for once. You could see him permitting himself some partial release from the brittle persona that a visiting lecturer of only twenty-eight must assume if he has ambitions of becoming an assistant professor. Well, good for him. Kiki took a lighter from the kitchen drawer, and began to kindle her tea lights wherever she found them. This should have all been done already. The quiches had not been heated. And where were the children? An appreciative rumble of Howard's laughter reached her. And now he and the boy swapped roles—now it was Howard doing the talking and Christian following every syllable like a pilgrim. The younger man looked modestly to the floor, in response, Kiki assumed, to some piece of flattery of her husband's. Howard was more than generous that way; if flattered, he repaid the favor tenfold. When

Christian's face resurfaced Kiki saw it was flushed with pleasure and a second later this shaded into something more calculated: the recognition, maybe, that the compliment was nothing less than his due. Kiki went to the fridge and took out a very good bottle of champagne. She picked up a plate of bang bang chicken canapés. She hoped these would serve as replacement for any opening bon mots she might be expected to come up with. She couldn't remember when she'd felt less like having a party than at this moment.

Sometimes you get a flash of what you look like to other people. This one was unpleasant: a black woman in a headwrap, approaching with a bottle in one hand and a plate of food in the other, like a maid in an old movie. The real staff—Monique and an unnamed friend of hers who was meant to be handing out drinks—were nowhere to be seen. The living room revealed only one other person, Meredith, a fat and pretty Japanese-American girl, constant—you assumed platonic—companion of Christian. She had an extraordinary outfit on and her back to the room, engrossed in reading the spines of Howard's art books on the opposite wall. Kiki was reminded that, although Howard's fan club within the university was extremely small, it had an intensity in inverse proportion to its size. Because of the stringencies of his theories and his dislike of his colleagues, Howard was nowhere near as successful or as popular or as well paid as his peers in Wellington. He had, instead, a miniature campus cult: Christian was the preacher, Meredith was the congregation. If there were others, Kiki had never met them. **(laughter)** There was Smith J. Miller, Howard's teaching assistant, a sweet-tempered white boy from the Deep South—but Smith was paid for his services by Wellington. Kiki opened the living-room door wide with her heel, wondering again where Monique, who might have thought to wedge the thing open, was hiding. Christian didn't yet turn to acknowledge her, but he was already pretending to like Murdoch (which was their dog), playing around his ankles. He leaned forward with the clumsy loom of the natural pet-hater and child-fearer, all the time clearly hoping for an intervention before he reached the dog. His elongated, lean body struck Kiki as a comic human version of Murdoch's own.

“He bothering you?”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Belsey, hello. No, not at all, not really. If anything, I was concerned that he might choke on my laces.” **(laughter)**

“Really?” said Kiki, looking down dubiously.

“No, I mean, it’s fine . . . it’s fine.” Christian’s features abruptly morphed into his pinched attempt at a “party-face.” “And anyway, happy anniversary! It’s so amazing.”

“Well, thank *you* so much for coming—”

“My God,” said Christian with that clipped, puzzlingly European inflection he had. He had been raised in Iowa. **(laughter)** “I’m simply privileged to be invited. It must be a very special occasion for you. What a milestone.”

Kiki sensed that he hadn’t said any of this to Howard and indeed Howard’s eyebrows now raised a little, as if he had not heard Christian speak like this before. The banalities, obviously, were saved for Kiki.

“Yeah, I guess . . . and it’s just a nice thing—beginning of the semester and everything . . . Should I get the dog away from you?”

Christian had been stepping from side to side trying to lose Murdoch but instead offering him the kind of challenge he adored. **(laughter)**

“Oh, well . . . I don’t want to—”

“No trouble, Christian, don’t sweat it.”

Kiki nudged Murdoch off with her toe, and then gave him another nudge to direct him out of the room. God forbid Christian should get any dog hairs on those fine Italian shoes. No, that was unfair. Christian slicked down his hair with his palm along that severe parting on the left side of his head, a line so straight it seemed marked out with a ruler. And that, too, was unfair.

“I got me *champagne* in one hand and chicken in the other,” said Kiki, excessively jolly as penance for her thoughts. “What can I do you for?”

“Oh, God,” said Christian. He seemed to know a joke should go here but he was constitutionally unable to provide one. “Choices, choices.”

“Give them here, darling,” said Howard, taking only the champagne from his wife. “Proper hellos first might be nice—you know Meredith, don’t you?”

Meredith—if one were to remember two facts about each of one’s guests in order to introduce them to other guests—was interested in Foucault and costume-wear. At various parties Kiki had listened carefully and yet not understood what Meredith was saying while Meredith was dressed as an English punk, a *fin de siècle* dame in a drop-waisted Edwardian gown, a French movie star and, most memorably, a forties war bride, her hair set and curled like Bacall’s, complete with stockings and stays and that compelling black line curving up the back of both her

mighty calves. This evening Meredith's dress was a concoction of pink chiffon, with a wide circle skirt you had to make space for, and a little black mohair cardigan slung over her shoulders. This last was set off by a gigantic diamanté brooch. Her shoes were peep-toe red heels that put at least a three-inch distance between Meredith and her real height as she strode across the room. She stretched out a white kid glove for her hostess to shake. Meredith was twenty-seven years old.

"Of course! Wow, Meredith!" said Kiki, blinking theatrically. "Honey, I don't even know what to say. I should have some kind of award for best party outfit—I don't know what I was thinking. You look *fine*, girl!"

Kiki whistled, and Meredith, who was still holding one of Kiki's hands, took the opportunity to do a twirl, holding Kiki's hand high and ascribing a small circle beneath it.

"You like? I would so very much like to tell you I just threw it together," said Meredith loudly and quickly in her nervous, Californian scream, "but it takes me a long, *looong* time to look this good? Bridges have been built quicker. Whole hermeneutic systems have coalesced with more speed. Just from here to here," said Meredith, "that's like three hours." **(laughter)**

The bell rang. Howard groaned, as if the present company were more than enough, but went practically skipping off to answer it. Abandoned by their only real connection, the little triangle fell quiet, resorting to smiles. Kiki wondered precisely how far she was from Meredith and Christian's ideal of a leader's appropriate consort.

"We made you a thing," said Meredith abruptly, "Did he tell you? We made you this thing, maybe it's *crap*, I don't know."

"No . . . no, I hadn't yet," said Christian, blushing.

"Like a thing—a *present*. Is that corny? Thirty years and all that. Have we just been corny?"

"I'll just . . ." said Christian, crouching down awkwardly to his old-fashioned satchel.

"So we did some half-assed research and it turns out that thirty-year anniversary is *pearl*, but, as you know, the average grad income doesn't really stretch that far, so we weren't really in the pearl way of things . . ." Meredith laughed manically. "And then Chris thought of this poem and then I did my arts and craft thing, and anyway here it is, see, it's like a framed, fabricy, type poem-thing—I don't know."

Kiki felt the warm teak frame delivered into her hands and admired the crushed rose petals and the broken shells under the glass. The text was sewn in like a tapestry. It was the most unusual present she could have expected from these two. It was lovely.

“*Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made, Those are pearls that were his eyes—*” read Kiki circumspectly, aware that she should know it.

“So that’s the *pearl* thing,” said Meredith. “It’s probably stupid.”

“Oh no, it’s gorgeous,” said Kiki, skim-reading the rest to herself in a quick whisper. “Is it Plath? That’s wrong, isn’t it.”

“It’s Shakespeare, said Christian, wincing slightly. “*The Tempest. Nothing of him that doth fade, But doth that suffer a sea-change, Into something rich and strange.* Plath stripped it for parts.”

“Shit,” Kiki laughed, “When in doubt say Shakespeare. And when it’s sport, say Michael Jordan.” **(laughter)**

“That is *totally* my policy,” agreed Meredith.

“Well, this is really gorgeous, Howard will love it. I don’t think it comes under his representational art ban.”

“No, it’s textual,” said Christian, testily. “That’s the point. It’s a textual artifact.”

Kiki looked at him inquiringly. She wondered sometimes whether Christian was in love with her husband.

“Where *is* Howard?” said Kiki, revolving her head absurdly round the empty room. “He’ll just love this. He loves to hear that nothing on him doth fade.” **(laughter)**

Meredith laughed again. Howard re-entered the room with a clap of his hands.

Thanks.

(applause)

Thank you.

KURT ANDERSEN: Among the other wonderments of that short passage is not only that you read in *Americanisms* very convincingly and beautifully but more than your year in Cambridge,

Mass., did your ability to write highly American dialogue for Kiki and Meredith and Christian, for instance, come from...what?

ZADIE SMITH: I mean, it's not—there were lots of problems. Kiki's meant to be from Florida and there's lots of mistakes in terms of her accent and the way she speaks. When I start, I try not to be really fearful, because if you're really terrified about accuracy, particularly cultural accuracy, personally for me I would be paralyzed so I try not to think about authenticity in that sense. You lose things by doing that, and you lose readers, I'm sure, who are just insulted by it. But maybe from taking a bit of a risk, an imaginative risk, you get to gain a few things, too. That's how I try to think of it.

KURT ANDERSEN: You also mention, in that piece, movies, twice—old movies, old forties movies, and in my days of research on every aspect of your life for this program, I read that you are a big fan, were a big fan, obsessive fan as a child of MGM musicals, and that you wanted to be, at some point, a tap dancer.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, part of the thing about the thirties and forties movies, I'm just very, I think, and I think people who know me would say, a very un-visual person, and that's quite clear sometimes, from the novels, too, and I like things which are very wordy. And with a lot of contemporary cinema, I'm just a bit lost, I think. I can't understand scripts with only twenty-five words in them and excessive music and some of my favorite films, something like *The Philadelphia Story*—which I actually once saw in Bryant Park, it was a lovely experience—are incredibly artificial constructions and they creep, you know, like plays when you see them filmed, and I don't know why, but I've always preferred that kind of thing. Extreme artificiality on film. I don't know why.

(laughter)

KURT ANDERSEN: Well, it's interesting. We were talking about artificiality before and certain novelists who do a certain kind of stylization really successfully. Obviously what you do—what you have done thus far—is realism, and naturalism, with extraordinary success.

ZADIE SMITH: The realism, for me, it's an indulgence, particularly in this book, because if you asked me, if I had a critic's hat on, or if I was thinking seriously about it, and talking seriously, the kind of realism I write is not something I would get behind—I wouldn't run on that ticket, if you see what I mean. I wouldn't defend it and I wouldn't argue for it. That's a strange thing, I find, in my writing. I know a lot of writers *do* run on the ticket they write for and will argue for it and make a case for it, and, thus far, I wouldn't say that was true of me. I feel—it's a strange thing. You have a Duchamp urinal with people who continue to paint those tulips and the same is true of fiction, and although I love to write that way and this book was a great indulgence for me and a joy to write, it's not something—I would have a hard time defending the practice of writing nineteenth-century fiction, which is basically what I do.

KURT ANDERSEN: You approve of more conventionally unrealistic modernist twentieth-century fiction, more?

ZADIE SMITH: No, no, no. What I really admire—I was saying to Kurt before we came out, I'm writing a long essay on David Foster Wallace at the moment, and what I wanted to call it—there's a line in one of his stories which says that—that describes someone “breaking the rhythm that excludes thinking,” and that's what I really admire in fiction—people who are able to do that. The rhythm I write in is pleasurable because it's familiar. I hope, within that, I do things which are maybe less familiar or a bit more interesting or at least entertaining to me, but I suppose, yeah, that is what I admire most, people who are able to do that.

KURT ANDERSEN: And should we assume that the Zadie Smith novels that we'll be reading in ten years or twenty years will be more like David Foster Wallace or Kafka, about whom you've written?

ZADIE SMITH: That's extremely unlikely, I can tell you that, just from ability. No, it's not. Wallace is an extreme example, because you can say he looks modern and he smells modern and so people are kind of terrified—not him literally, obviously, his books. But there are a lot of ways to—I mean Coetzee is a very good example of something which may lull you into a certain

familiarity but isn't at all what I would call classical realism. So there's a lot of ways to skin the cat, and I haven't completely given up on the idea of realism, but you have to define what realism is. If it just means books which kind of sound like movies, or the way you kind of feel that you could move through the book as a person through a real environment—that's not a very effective description, that's maybe a bit lazy—but I do hope, what it is, there's a really great quote I used once in an essay, I think it's Mary McCarthy, talking about Lillian Hellman, "everything she ever said is a lie, including 'and' and 'but.'" So when you write you want to move away from, that's the worst possible conception, and then as you write you hope for something as close to the truth, as you conceive it, as possible. So it's not that I would like to write books that are accurate to someone else's idea of a true world but you want to at least be accurate to your conception and it would be strange if a certain stray kind of nineteenth-century realism *was* your conception, wouldn't it, because we live in a quite different time and world.

KURT ANDERSEN: There are architects who build perfect reproductions of nineteenth-century houses.

ZADIE SMITH: There are, and I live in a lovely updated Victorian house myself. But, one of the things is, what you *can* do is not always what you *want* to do. Writers are limited by ability and will and patience and all kinds of things.

KURT ANDERSEN: When *White Teeth* came out, and you were a child, it won four, at least four that I could count, of the big British literary prizes. It was a best-seller. At the time, or even perhaps more in retrospect, do you feel as though *that* success at twenty-four discombobulated you?

ZADIE SMITH: Well, I think I'm quite hard to discombobulate actually, I think. I mean, there are things that I can't ever know—what it would have been like to have a more natural and healthier career. Obviously it wasn't natural or healthy. But like all things, you can only deal with the cards that you're given. One thing I think about it more than anything, is that it's an enormous responsibility and generally I feel guilty about not fulfilling it. Particularly the freedom of writing what you like, which of course is what *White Teeth* gave me, it gave me the

freedom to write at my own pace, and to write the books I wanted to write, because the financial side of things was taken care of by that book. But that's a great responsibility. So I spend most of my time feeling guilty, I think, about not quite working as I should or doing the work that I could do, given the time and freedom I have.

KURT ANDERSEN: I'm also interested in how it affected your writing of your second novel. Suddenly you knew you had an audience. You knew critics and civilians were paying attention. Did that transform the nature of writing for you?

ZADIE SMITH: Well, you know, the thing is, I suppose I—I'm thirty, and I am from that generation who's enormously suspicious of mass audiences, that's true, so you know, because five million people like something it's almost certainly not good, is the opinion that I grew up with, so then it's very strange when five million buy your book and you're one of those people and the first thought is—there must have been something in my work that made it so easily pleasurable to so many people. So that was slightly disturbing to me, but then—but it's been really enjoyable, and the one thing I always noticed about my audiences, particularly when I started going out and reading in public, were how varied they were in age, in race, in class, so that was—I started to try and think about that as really a gift. I suppose it suits my temperament, because I'm quite—when I'm writing, I like to bring people in a bit and then throw them slightly. I'm in no way a kind of iconoclast at heart. I never have been, so it would be ridiculous to pretend to be one. But it's nice to know that you have so many different people, you could offend them in so many different ways, and maybe move them in different ways, as well. I think when I was younger—you go to other people's readings and everybody's, you know, like a twenty-six-year-old hipster, and you think, you know, where are my twenty-six-year-old hipsters? What happened to that? And then I realized that my audience was varied in a way that was really exciting for me.

KURT ANDERSEN: Presumably as a function of the fact that the characters in your books are so varied, almost, perhaps to a fault, and certainly you are generous to all kinds of people. You don't privilege the twenty-six-year-old hipster over the old person, or the white person over the black person, or any of the rest.

ZADIE SMITH: You've hit upon something which I didn't really realize about readers, because I'd been in academic environments for so long and I hadn't been reading contemporary fiction, but people do read for character in that way, and really do align themselves, so young women buy books by young women about young women, but I'd been completely out of that loop, I just wasn't reading contemporary fiction.

KURT ANDERSEN: You escaped the academy just in time.

ZADIE SMITH: That passed me by, so, you're completely right, that's what is going on. And when I first read *White Teeth*, it was quite common so I'd be at the table and an Indian woman in her early thirties would say, "I really like Alsana," and an old man would say "I really like Archie," and then a young woman would say, "I really like Zora, and I would say, "Okay," but I would quite like—I guess one of the purposes of the stories I tell is to force people to empathize a bit further away from themselves than what seems similar.

KURT ANDERSEN: Howard, who is the figure in *On Beauty* who has this claqué of two people at that party, is this white butcher's son who's now this very hoity-toity art professor in America. His son, with Kiki, is this half-black American who grew up in a college environment but who plays at being the tough ghetto kid. You play both of those cases of self-reinvention as they are—ironic and interesting and funny. In real life do you find that that kind of self-reinvention is a good thing, the fluidity that permits that in society, in culture.

ZADIE SMITH: It depends—for me it was a necessity. I was recently talking to a woman called Gabby Wood, a really good writer and journalist, and her father is an academic, and over lunch I couldn't hide my kind of *amazement* at the idea of having a father who's an academic, who then when you gave him your work would understand it entirely. So she didn't need to change, because what she was making was understandable by the people she came from. So for me I suppose my own reinvention came from going to Cambridge and having this life which maybe wasn't really predestined for me. But for people who are born slightly outside all of that, it's not a—you have no choice but to reinvent yourself, otherwise you're not really going

anywhere. So the other thing about that is there's a kind of sadness connected with it. I think particularly the scene in the book with Howard and his father. I knew quite a lot of people like that in college, a generation above me, the people who were teaching me, who were working-class English boys who are now, you know, incredible theorists, professors of all stripes, who live a completely different life. And this other thing about them—that they were from the north, or that they had very humble families, is kind of disappeared. And I always thought that was a strange sadness, that if you are from anywhere outside, you have to let go of your life, whereas if you're slightly more entitled you bring it all with you, which is, I imagine, so much more pleasurable.

KURT ANDERSEN: Has your sense been to the degree—living in America a bit and visiting America a bit—that, as we like to think, we Americans, that that's an easier transaction for us than in Britain?

ZADIE SMITH: I don't know, I can only talk from my own experience, because the key difference to me in the academic environment is that my education was free from the day it began until the day it ended, and it would have been impossible under any other circumstance, whereas my experience in American universities is that kids have a lot of money, apart from some exceptions.

KURT ANDERSEN: You were at Harvard.

ZADIE SMITH: I was at *Harvard*, obviously, but Cambridge, you know, should be thought of as the academic equivalent of that place, and there it seemed to me that there was more opportunity, otherwise I never would have been there.

KURT ANDERSEN: Other than changing your name from Sadie to Zadie a little more than half your life ago, are there other instances of explicit self-reinvention that you'll admit?

ZADIE SMITH: The reason for that, so often, I keep on reading it and it's completely untrue. I was in love with a boy whose name began with Z and I thought at fourteen somehow I could

help the situation (**laughter**) by joining him at the other end of the alphabet. But now I'm very very glad about it because it works kind of as a name for the books which is slightly separate from the name I have for myself in my head, which is my real name with an "S."

KURT ANDERSEN: Really? So "Zadie Smith" is a character, a brand . . .

ZADIE SMITH: It's become that. It's become something which is on a book. I don't think of myself that way all the time.

KURT ANDERSEN: You said, or you were quoted as saying in an interview, "I'm a little paranoid that whatever I do is in danger of being destroyed by the person I'm becoming." What does that mean?

ZADIE SMITH: Jesus, that must have been a bad book tour day. I'm really depressed. (**laughter**) Um, I, um, I suppose—I have a quite Protestant mentality of maybe, my husband is a Protestant, I have no religion, I feel like a Protestant in that I am very suspicious of things that take you away from your work, and I would imagine that was a book-tour comment. It's the honest truth. It seems so long away now, but when I first started writing, I didn't know that there was all this thing around books, because I just thought people wrote books, and that was the end of the story, and they came out. And I didn't know there was all the other stuff. And the other stuff is, you know, I don't mean to sound strict, but I think it is personally corrupting, honestly.

KURT ANDERSEN: So we're witnessing some corruption right here.

ZADIE SMITH: You're witnessing some corruption as we speak.

KURT ANDERSEN: Do you worry, given that you're prone to Protestant worry, do you worry that having spent all of your working life, your adult life, in a darkened room, I understand, alone, making up stories, that by not being out in the world in other ways, that you will come to the end of your well of material and experience?

ZADIE SMITH: I never—as an adolescent, I never believed in experience. When my friends went to India, I just thought all that stuff was totally irrelevant—travel or relationships or even friendships. You know, I didn’t—I thought all you needed was to read other people’s books and then this would make you a writer. And that is the kind of writer I think I was definitely. *White Teeth* is very much a product of reading a lot of fiction and kind of putting it through some fiction blender and out comes *White Teeth*. But the older I get . . . I absolutely believe in experience now and that it is transforming and it’s the central test of your life. It’s very easy to sit and read and make all these little moral decisions about what happens in *Pride and Prejudice*, or what happens in *Vanity Fair*, but this is nothing like moving through the world, being married, having friends, dealing with humans, so I take it much more seriously now.

KURT ANDERSEN: Another thing you’ve been quoted as saying, and it doesn’t sound so much so much like a bad book tour quote, you say, “I always find an absurdity in people’s most strongly held cultural views,” and, what I take to be the corollary, “I’m almost entirely ambivalent most of the time.”

ZADIE SMITH: I think—my husband always has a go at me for my ambivalence—he’s not ambivalent—but there’s a great phrase that Forster used to describe a character, I think it’s Harriet Herriton, maybe, that she was “full of consistency and moral enthusiasm,” and he doesn’t mean it as a compliment and I always—I do think of English fiction as having a deep horror of people who are both consistent and morally enthusiastic—those are the worst type of people you can ever come across. But then again—and this is again from reading Foster Wallace recently—it’s a very easy default position to be the cynic, or what used to be called the postmodern cynic, and have a fear of people who have this kind of moral enthusiasm. But the bottom line is you have to find something—he puts it as you have to find something to worship and you have to live by it. These are very strict Aristotelian ideas, but I think it’s true. But I do have a horror of party politics, my husband’s here so I’m very conscious of him being here, and listening to me. But he would say it’s just because I can’t bear to read those sections of the paper, and I’m sure he’s right, but I can’t bear the idea that once you pick your side, you follow it all the way through against all common sense, against everything that is before your own eyes as evidence. The

global warming issue is a good one at the moment. It's extraordinary to hear people arguing political angles on this incredible inevitability facing them down. So that kind of terrifies me.

KURT ANDERSEN: Although that's a good case in point of where one could easily—one, it seems to me, ought *not* to be ambivalent, right?

ZADIE SMITH: No, absolutely, but I suppose I'm ambivalent about political positions. I can't—I find it hard enough to say, you know, “here is a man,” or “here am I as a person,” without deciding exactly what my color is no matter what argument you put in front of me.

KURT ANDERSEN: Does that ambivalence do you think lead toward your exquisite moments of comedy in your books or vice versa, or are you just a comically inclined person and that feeds your ambivalence?

ZADIE SMITH: I think—you know, I don't think of myself as a funny person, but, I think, I do—one quality I have maybe is that I'm quite ambivalent towards the idea of *offense*. I don't get offended very often. If you do get very very offended then, when you write, your sympathy is more with this character, whoever it is, and you're trying to abuse everybody else to highlight the grandeur of the central character, who is usually you. But I don't find myself wanting to make a case for the me-ness of me very much, mainly because I'm not quite sure what the me-ness of me would be like, but I think it's a complete delusion, because I think I have no qualities or personality or trait, like I'm sort of a master of negative capability, but I know lots of people who think I'm an ass, or that I'm a this or a that, but I obviously have a strong personality, but the worst kind, where I think I don't have one. I think I'm just sitting around observing, but actually I'm a real pain.

(laughter)

KURT ANDERSEN: But from *White Teeth* on, your books lack—and I think one of the reasons they are so prized by critics and readers—the obvious authorial character.

ZADIE SMITH: It goes all the way through my life. You know, I can't write diaries, I can't bear to write in the first person at all—

KURT ANDERSEN: Even fictionally?

ZADIE SMITH: I did it once, I did it in a story for the *New Yorker*, but even that is kind of at a distance, it's that Gatsby position of being a friend, or the person looking on at the main story.

KURT ANDERSEN: But Nick Carraway you can do.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, but I can't—I just don't know where to begin with, I think. I can't do that.

KURT ANDERSEN: Okay, I'll put this next question in the third person for you. If I ask you to fill in the blank in this sentence, Zadie Smith is a [blank] writer. What are the first and maybe the second sort of factual adjectives that you would stick in that blank?

ZADIE SMITH: I think I'm very willful, and I'm probably like that as a person too, very determined, that's the main quality I have, I think, is persistence, more than anything else when I'm writing.

KURT ANDERSEN: And does that lead you mostly to things you're happy with as a writer?

ZADIE SMITH: Well, yeah, I am, I am happy-ish. A lot of it is in retrospect.

KURT ANDERSEN: That's the ambivalent suffix, right? "-ish."

(laughter)

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, it depends on—like when I was getting ready to do this, I get very nervous about doing things like this, I get very convinced that I'm not—as if it were a viva that

I'm not going to be smart enough, so I go back and read over previous smart things that I've written in the past, and then it always seems like—who was the person who—who was smart enough to write that piece? I read this piece about Kafka that I wrote. I don't ever remember having those ideas or being that smart, but it must have happened at some point, so there's always a feeling of falling off, of something that you were able to do or you understood for a while and then promptly forgot everything that was in it, or all that was serious. College is like that. You know, you're never as smart as you were when you were nineteen in a seminar, it just disappears.

KURT ANDERSEN: Well and you're never quite as convinced that you *are* smart as you are at nineteen.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, maybe it's, I think it's probably quite true of women in general, maybe it's a bad generalization, that they tend to think they don't know what they probably do know. Whereas some boys tend to err in the other direction, let's put it that way. But I do have that. It takes a while to convince myself that I did know and it wasn't foolish or that I didn't plagiarize. I always think that, well, that wasn't me, or somebody else must have done it, or—that's a very constant feeling.

KURT ANDERSEN: Speaking of Kafka and your indeed very smart piece about him, you talk about him doing this—why he wasn't a novelist, that he was trying to do this impossible, inherently impossible thing that maybe all artists are doing. But I read also that you are writing with your husband a musical about Franz Kafka.

(laughter)

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, well, this is one of a constant kind of . . .

KURT ANDERSEN: See, they laugh, as I expected, like *Springtime for Hitler* . . .

(laughter)

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, I hope it won't be that funny. I was thinking more the kind of Kurt Weill-y type thing. But we've done no work on it, mainly because I've done very little work on it. But I do hope—it would be great for me to mix two extreme pleasures in my life of fiction and musicals.

KURT ANDERSEN: You talk about. . . . Well, when I tallied, tried to tally the various people—writers you've mentioned in various interviews at various times and in your writing that have been your heroes, literarily, or influences. You've mentioned C. S. Lewis, E. M. Forster, Nabokov, Dickens, Raymond Carver, Updike. Updike is alive, but the rest are dead white males, and I wonder if you draw conclusions from that?

ZADIE SMITH: I don't have that thing—I was thinking about this recently. I was reading this essay I'm writing about those three qualities of persuasion Aristotle talks about—logos and I was thinking about ethos particularly and the idea of being the *right* person to speak, having the right to speak, and I notice apparently with a lot of young American white males that they feel very guilty about those kind of interests, those writers being their interest, and they feel that they need to defend it, and I never felt a need to defend books that I liked. It didn't even occur to me. But now people do think “dead white males,” that kind of thing, and it seems strange to have a lot of interest in those writers. I don't think that I'm—you know, I just, whatever is the best writing as far as I can tell and feel, that's what I'm interested in. And it stretches to lots of other writers, too, but I had a very traditional education, so those writers came up more often than others. But now I—particularly when it comes to women's writing, I seek it out a lot more, I read it a lot more actively, because it does become a matter of survival, you do need to know that there are women who wrote really well, and one way or another, even though I suppose role models are a silly idea, it can't help but make you feel better. When I first read Virginia Woolf I felt pleasure that she was a genius, but also great *relief* that she was a genius, because she was a woman.

KURT ANDERSEN: Speaking of the realm of identity politics as a template to put over literature, when I Googled “Zadie Smith” and “postcolonial” I got twenty-three thousand returns

and I'm wondering, I wonder what you think of that phrase and the concept as applied to you and as a general academic rubric.

ZADIE SMITH: I think it's a factual description for a great deal of writing. I mean, you're really pushing it with me, I'm born and bred in England and I'm about as post-post-post-colonial as it's possible to be, I should think, but you know, I don't mean to sound cynical about it, but part of it is just convenience, and I kind of apologize to the rest of the postcolonial authors because they have a right to be there and it just happens that *White Teeth* was published in the last year of the century, and it's very neat, so you read a Rushdie and then you read a Kareshi, and then I'm just tucked in as the last minute goes on the clock. So that's—

KURT ANDERSEN: “Oh, she has a Jamaican mother. She makes it.”

ZADIE SMITH: That's the reason, and that's nice, but I feel slightly disingenuous to be there and I do notice quite often when I'm touring and I'm meeting students and they read *White Teeth* and they write and then you have to write about *The Autograph Man* and it doesn't really fit into the whole postcolonial thing, and then it all gets lost. But no writer should complain about books that are bought by students, you know, that's the thing that makes books survive, so any way that I'm in colleges is extraordinary for me.

KURT ANDERSEN: In *On Beauty* the art historian, quasi-hero of the book, Howard, is very much—one could even say a caricature of the kind of deconstructivist poststructuralist academic theoretician. Did you begin this book with—with what kind of attitude toward his kind of work did you begin this book?

ZADIE SMITH: You know, part of it is absolutely a caricature, and part of it is a self-caricature because I *was* that person, you know, that was my whole *deal* when I was in college. And again it's this thing about juggling this logos, ethos, pathos, are you going to be—is your work going to be of knowledge, is it going to be from your personhood—do you take me because I'm authentic, because I'm postcolonial—or is it going to be this—emotional? And when I was in college I had given myself completely to logos and the rest of it could go hang. So Howard is that man, really,

and it was at the—you know, I realized later in a fairly predictable way that it was at the expense of other parts of my life than my work, what was to become my work. So it's affectionate, but also I really didn't want it to be anti-intellectual. It really gets me down when people go on their big hunt against postmodern theorists because some of that stuff is some of the greatest writing you'll ever read. There are essays by Derrida which I would count next to any novel that I love and also by Barthes and by Foucault and Levinas and all of that stuff, I really don't mean to ridicule that, because it's not to be ridiculed, certainly not by me, but there is a certain kind of theory which calcifies and gets stuck and becomes about careerism, I mean that's inevitable, and if I'd stayed doing what I was doing and if I'd gone on to become an academic I would have got my little corner, I would have defended it against all comers. I would have intimidated my students. You know, I would have been that person absolutely. I was extremely fortunate to get out when I did.

KURT ANDERSEN: And it seems to me you got out, one reason you got out, is because you have the capacity to create moments of beauty which people like Howard don't.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, well, Howard doesn't, but again I say, like, there's an essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences," by Derrida which is extraordinarily beautiful and intellectually sublime. So it's not that these people aren't artists. The best critics are as good as any artist, I think, but English Studies has always had a problem, it's been said many, many times, when it was first introduced in Cambridge by people like Leavis, they needed to make a profession of it, they needed to make it serious. It had to look like math, it had to look like science, and to do that, they did some incredibly twisted things to it, and that was the problem, because it's quite hard to sit in a classroom and talk about love and affective experience and the enjoyment that people get from novels, without sounding like a load of kooks, and nobody wants to sound kooky in a university.

KURT ANDERSEN: But it didn't used to. What changed? I mean, in 1960, say, that didn't sound kooky, in 1975 it did.

ZADIE SMITH: I don't know. I have sympathy for it because when I *did* teach, I realized how difficult it was to make my students feel they were going through a rigorous experience, which is what they want. They get it in other parts of the campus. I think the best way to do it personally, what I tried to end up doing when I was teaching the literary theory part of the class, was to bring everything to the table. So we have the novel, and we don't try and force it into a different shape, to be something else, but we bring things to it to kind of kiss and greet, so you bring pieces of philosophy, you bring pieces of history, you bring things which seem to be relevant in the great circle of it without smashing the book into some shape it just isn't going to go, so you try and keep respect for the novel but add things on top rather than kind of denude it in some way.

KURT ANDERSEN: With the novel you're working on now or imagining or whatever moment in the process you are, beyond what sounded like your slight dissatisfaction with being a nineteenth-century realist, do you feel like, "Well, this multicultural celebration that I've specialized in as a subject, enough for now, I'll let that lie fallow and try something else"?

ZADIE SMITH: Well, it's interesting, I read a bit of *White Teeth* again recently because there were lots of pieces in the papers about it was a great celebration of multiculturalism and not remembering what the hell was in the book I thought, well, maybe I should check this out, and I had a look, and in fact there's even a sentence quite the opposite, particularly Millat is in revenge against that very idea, he can't stand the idea of happy multiculturalism, as he sees it is nonsense and has always been a lie, and that's what sends him on his whole trajectory.

KURT ANDERSEN: But the fact of the book and the takeaway for readers—

ZADIE SMITH: That's the thing. I think you really have to be *white* or something to think that showing people of different colors together is like a *statement* of some kind. It's *not* a statement, it's just a reality. I'm really, honest to God, just trying to show what I see on the subway every single day or on the street or in a restaurant or anywhere. But it is true, certainly, when I get back into universities and into literary life I do walk into a room and I'm the only black girl, a lot, but that's not normal, that's just the world of books and universities and posh fashion parties. It's not life and it's not real.

KURT ANDERSEN: But, but, all the non-“black girl” characters in that novel and the others are not stick figures or shallow . . .

ZADIE SMITH: I do want to try and bring as much sympathy to everyone but I guess the thing is I don’t see the racial differences as the big difference. Particularly in *On Beauty*, I’m really much more interested in the way people *behave* to each other, their personal ethics is the best way I can put it. Of course, race is a difference, but it’s a small difference, the world is much more split into cruel people and kind people or generous people and people who hold things back. I think of it much more that way.

KURT ANDERSEN: Or as Salman Rushdie once said when he was under his *fatwa*, the world is divided into people who have a sense of humor—people who can take a joke and people who can’t.

ZADIE SMITH: Absolutely, that’s a great definition.

KURT ANDERSEN: We would love to take questions from the audience, if there are any, and I believe there are microphones being brought to you and I will reiterate Paul’s plea for questions rather than statements.

Q: Hi. Can you hear me? My sense is that you resist categorization—excuse my pronunciation—so in terms of definition, if you do define yourself, would you place yourself under the category as a British writer or a black British writer or neither?

ZADIE SMITH: Oh yeah, I don’t actually have a problem with definition at all, definitions are easy, it’s just what you draw from them. I absolutely think of myself as black and English as a citizen, very much English and very, very much as an English writer, and very, very much black. I didn’t think that there was any kind of contradiction—it’s just a fact of what I am, so . . .

KURT ANDERSEN: But willfulness comes ahead.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, willfulness. I'm definitely willful first, I should say.

KURT ANDERSEN: Covered it completely? Yes, ma'am. Yes.

Q: You said two or three times that you felt very guilty about your life. Is it because you're not spending your time trying to change the world and doing good political things or what is it?

ZADIE SMITH: That's one of them. That'll do for starters. **(laughter)** It's always—I've been reading this biography of Joyce, the Ellman biography, and to watch a man with literally nothing, begging every day for two pounds from here or there with the children in tow and traveling and writing these extraordinary books, you know, that's a very extreme comparison, but what's that American thing, there's a phrase you have, "the more given, the more expected," or something, you always hear that here, and that's a fantastic, fantastic thing to say, and that's the way I feel about it, that I just don't do enough. Mainly it's just, to be honest, I don't think of writers as—they can, obviously, but I don't think it's a necessity of writers to make political stands or to be considered wise on those issues. I certainly have no wisdom on any of those issues so I don't feel that way, but I do think that by the nature of your profession, you should do your profession well, so I would like to be the best writer I can be with the freedoms that I have, and *that* I don't feel I achieve, always.

KURT ANDERSEN: Yes, ma'am.

Q: Hi. I'm just curious when you first started writing, what was the most difficult aspect for you of writing and how did you kind of work through that?

ZADIE SMITH: I think the most difficult thing—I don't know if Kurt would agree—is just having the confidence to think that anybody cares. That's the main thing, isn't it? Just that whoever gave you the right to do anything at all? That's the thing and then—there's all kinds of just technical difficulties, getting through the middle of a story, ending a book, trying to keep all the characters out of the realm of caricature, which is really genius when you can do it, and is

almost never done, certainly never done by me. And just the work of it. It's a lot of everyday work, and there's a lot of overcoming self-disgust. I think self-disgust is a daily experience of a writer, just at every level, it just seems horrible what you write, and to try and get over the horribleness is a big deal.

KURT ANDERSEN: Do you feel as though from *White Teeth* through *Autograph Man* to *On Beauty* that you've figured it out substantially better? Do you do it more easily now, relatively speaking?

ZADIE SMITH: There's definitely technical things that I really hope I do better, and I do, I feel I do them better, and there's a certain—I've said to my husband, I read this part of *White Teeth* recently, it was a paragraph, I can't remember where it was, but I was so enamored of the sound of things. There are whole paragraphs that don't make human sense, it's really extraordinary. So I hope I would never speed on in that way that I used to write as if I were just singing or something and just carry on and not worry. And also as you get older, you've a little commitment to the truth, a little bit more sympathy, and less, I don't know, there's a boldness that young people have that is lovely and great and I love to read first novels, I love to see someone just say, "Here I am, here's my stuff. Screw you." That's what a first novel is. But it's also a joy to read books, novels in their maturity. I mean, I'm still, I'm thirty, so I think I have a long way to go, but I like personally to read books by older people as well.

Q: Hi. I wanted to know in—more in *The Autograph Man* and *White Teeth*—it seems like you write about male friendships and is that easier for you to do than writing about female friendships, or why, what is that it is to do that?

ZADIE SMITH: I have a little suspicion in my head that if I do ever write a really great book it will be because I've figured out more about women and how they relate to each other and if I could do that, I think, it would be a really good application of skill to a subject which is genuinely difficult. And when I was growing up, I'm much, I suppose my friends are many more male friends than female and particularly when I became an adolescent I was completely horrified by female life I think and the thing of being of a girl and everything about it just

seemed to me a great disaster, a personal disaster for me, but now as I get older, I'm getting better, and I still have, I think I have difficulties with women in certain ways because they're so...

KURT ANDERSEN: As characters.

ZADIE SMITH: As characters and as *people* because they keep so much under the surface. And men—it's an old cliché—but men are much more out there, they speak much more frankly, they seem not to have these levels of disguise which are absolutely necessary to survive as a woman in the west. You need to do these things. But that's why. It was easy for me, more familiar, and I also find male friendship very, very touching when it's genuine, because it seems to me very direct and very much about just a genuine companion. Women's friendships, as any woman in the room knows, have deep complexities and dark holes.

(laughter)

KURT ANDERSEN: As opposed to the simple-minded male friendships.

ZADIE SMITH: That's terrible, but yes, I do think that way, it's my prejudice. It's true.

KURT ANDERSEN: Yes, ma'am.

Q: [inaudible]

KURT ANDERSEN: The question is how you chose the title *White Teeth*?

ZADIE SMITH: I think that's the question I get asked most often and I must be not giving satisfactory answers, but—the answer's quite boring, the only reason I can think of—and I always used it, it was always the title, I never thought twice about it, but after it came out, my mother suggested there's kind of a joke in England, that you can only see black people in the dark from their white teeth, it's kind of an old 1970s joke I used to hear as a kid, so I think that's

probably it. But on a much more conscious level, there's a series of incredibly labored metaphors about teeth and roots and stuff in the book, so that was the actual conscious reason.

KURT ANDERSEN: Will you make every book you ever write have two words in the title?

ZADIE SMITH: I don't know. I'm very fussy about titles. I think of them at once and they never change, and I'm amazed when people are writing and they're choosing between titles and they don't choose till the end, or the editor chooses it. That's amazing to me. I'm very set on even the typeface of the title when I start.

KURT ANDERSEN: What's the next novel called?

ZADIE SMITH: I haven't decided yet. **(laughter)** I haven't started writing it, though—it's still, it's just murmurings in my head at the moment.

Q: Why did you create Kiki as a large woman?

ZADIE SMITH: It's a kind of—obviously it was a book about beauty. I myself was a pretty big girl when I was a kid so obviously it was a thing that I think about and experienced and also if you've ever had a big physical change from being very big to very small or vice versa you understand what these things mean in the world and how extraordinary it is to pass through the world as one physical person and then as another. All those books about women dressing as men, or a black person whiting up and all those things. Sometimes they're not that interesting, those books, but to live the experience, if you can manage it, is quite striking. So I wanted to write about that and the feeling of carrying a body like that around, and also, I suppose I wanted to make a point which isn't that disguised in the book that it's often said but I do think it's true that in the black community, in my mother's community, the Jamaican community, there's a lot of beauty in bigness as well. Sometimes I felt bad when I was big, I *did*, but a lot of the time I *didn't*, and all through my life in terms of all the things that bigness is meant to keep you from is no different, you have the same amount of lovers, you have the same life, and nothing really

changes except this culture which is screaming at you that you're all wrong, so I wanted to write about the kind of beauty, of that kind of physicality, as well, it can be really hot.

KURT ANDERSEN: When *White Teeth* came out, and it was said again and again and again in the coverage and even in the reviews of it, like, "Oh, it's a great book, but she got published because she's so pretty, because she's so beautiful." Did that strike you as though you'd suddenly taken off your glasses, and having not felt yourself so beautiful, were.

ZADIE SMITH: It was incredible irony, absolutely, given my childhood, but I used to be really like—shy away from a question like that and be all, "Oh, well," and actually now I'm older, I'm really angry about it. It's really irritating. And I worked really hard to write my book and I worked really hard to get through college and it's just a real—it's just *outrageous*, to be told after all that, that, "Oh, you just—it was because you put your photo on the manuscript." That was a story that used to go around London, a complete untruth, and in fact it's just a nasty piece of sexist nonsense, and adding the race to it, as well, of course. It's just unpleasant.

KURT ANDERSEN: Sir.

Q: Given the imminent collaboration on *Metamorphosis the Musical*, Kurt Weill-ish though it may be, I'm wondering if you're a fan of Mel Brooks, and if so, what your favorite films are.

ZADIE SMITH: If I could get a ticket to that show, then I would be a fan of it, but I've never got a ticket to *The Producers* in London or New York, so I can't be a fan of that show, but I am a fan of Mel Brooks, actually, I like comic films maybe almost as much as musicals. We were having a conversation recently, at a dinner party, where people would bring up all these incredibly sophisticated Italian and French films. And I have no experience in that area. I really am a straight down the line, American comedy-stroke-musical fan. So yes, I am a Brooks fan.

KURT ANDERSEN: Sir.

Q: You mention Tupac and Jay-Z oftentimes in interviews. What is it about these rappers that inspires you?

ZADIE SMITH: That's a good question. You know, in *On Beauty*, there's a Tupac quote, where there was meant to be a Biggie quote, which I then had to change because Biggie's estate were trying to charge me something like eight thousand dollars for one line, and I just thought, "Come on, man, what's that about?" You're meant to be exchanging ideas, and you're meant to be able to sample, but it's eight thousand dollars for one line of hip-hop. What do I like? It's just the music that I love. I have quite two separate areas of taste. I really like forties show tunes and I really like gangster rap. **(laughter)** I don't know how that came to be. I really don't think of it as gangster rap, so whenever I read those articles kind of—just so aggressive towards it, and then somebody defends it, or—I never get involved in that, because to me the music is so—it's so beautiful, so that whole argument is kind of to the side. I know that people are arguing about the representation of women—but what I see in it is a bit like—you know like in epic poetry, where they have a boast, someone will boast about the size of the army, I think of rap like that. So a lot of the things that people find offensive, I don't even register, I just think, that's the boast, that's what you do to get to there, and then you do the song, so I don't notice that stuff. And there are certain things like the Biggie video to "Mo Money, Mo Problems," they just seem to me ecstatic, they're so joyful, you can't help but be delighted to hear them. So part of it is just I find it joyful and the wordplay is extraordinary in the best rappers, they're just beyond belief.

KURT ANDERSEN: So I guess when Jay-Z did "A Hard Knock Life," which was a pseudo-Forties musical . . .

ZADIE SMITH: No, I *hated* that, oh my God, that was awful. **(laughter)** No, that was too much of a good thing, that was a bad song. And I really like Jay-Z, but not that.

Q: Who or what was the inspiration for the character of Levi?

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, that's an easy question, because it's my little brother.

KURT ANDERSEN: Who is the son of Howard.

ZADIE SMITH: That would never be true of many other characters, but that is a very direct picture of my little brother who, unfortunately, like Levi, will never read the book. But I told him about it, and he's heard bits of it, because I read a bit out loud to him. We were in a bookshop—he heard me read a bit. He said to me, “You should let me do the accent. It was terrible. Let me do the accent.” Obviously, he's English, so there's a difference there but I think there's a lot of Luke in Levi, not only in his interests, in his interest in hip-hop and his interest in the idea of being “of the street,” but also my little brother is quite—I think anyway—quite innocent, in a very enjoyable way. Just a very direct way of relating to the world and once you become educated, or overeducated, you feel nostalgia for I suppose what I see as Luke's kind of immediate relation to the world. That's very nostalgic of me, but I do think that.

KURT ANDERSEN: Time for one more question. Ma'am, back here.

Q: I wanted to respond to your statement about gangster rap. I understand that England is becoming a much more violent society, and if we could hear some response from you as a writer, or even as a citizen. . .

ZADIE SMITH: You're absolutely right. England is getting more violent and I don't know how responsible—see the thing is, I think of rap as an expression of that violence, I don't think of it as the instigator, though of course in every medium, a kid will watch *Halloween* and then go and kill—you know, there will always be those relations, but I think that kind of communication is quite rare. I just don't really understand why you can have kind of hardboiled literature or serious literary fiction like *American Psycho* which deals with urban horror, and then in hip-hop, it's always taken to be almost like it's politics, like someone's speaking in the first person and directing people to behavior. I think of hip-hop as narrative, I always have.

KURT ANDERSEN: Although isn't the difference, I mean, to, one could argue between *American Psycho*, say, and hip-hop is the order of magnitude of impressionable people that it can affect.

ZADIE SMITH: Absolutely. I can't—you see, this is the reason why I never write op-ed pieces defending rap, because I absolutely know I couldn't, and I'd be given all this evidence in the contrary, but I just know that within the community, the people who listen to hip-hop, the understanding is quite different from the piece you read in the *New York Times*. It's not the same thing at all, they're not hearing the same words, it's not the same. There's a fondness for some of these songs, songs which will make you weep. There's Tupac. All of you can pick up any Tupac song telling you the most terrible things and then you can also hear "Brenda's Got a Baby" or "Changes" or these kind of *gospel* songs, is what they are. I think rappers are people who are not consistent. They are completely inconsistent. They'll write incredibly radical songs about change and transformation, and then they'll write the stupid song about the bitches and the hoers. They're like that. That's what they do.

KURT ANDERSEN: They're willful.

ZADIE SMITH: They're willful. That's what they do. But I kind of try to keep the best of it and then love it for that.

KURT ANDERSEN: I want to thank Zadie Smith.

(applause)

ZADIE SMITH: Thank you.

(applause)

KURT ANDERSEN: And I want to thank the New York Public Library, which I love, and PEN, of which I'm a member, and all of you. This is the—I do these sometimes, and—no dumb questions, no statements. Thank you very much!

