ZADIE SMITH

In Conversation with Paul Holdengräber

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening, good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I am the Director of Public Programs at the New York Public Library. As all of you know, my goal here is to make the lions roar, though with Jay-Z recently we made them rap. It is a great pleasure to welcome back to this stage Zadie Smith, who is the author of three critically acclaimed novels, *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, and *On Beauty*. Last year she published *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, which is in part the pretext for having her here. Parts of which, this book, appeared in the *New Yorker*, the

New York Review of Books, and the *Guardian* as well as on this very stage in 2008. She presented the Robert Silvers Lecture, which was called Speaking in Tongues, two years. Zadie Smith is a professor of creative writing at NYU and earlier this month she was honored at the New York Public Library as a Library Lion.

I would like all of you to become members of the New York Public Library tonight. It's a great, wonderful deal. For just forty dollars a year you will get discounts on all of the programs—it's the upcoming year, because we are nearly ending our season. It's been a very intense season from everything Supreme Court justice Stephen Breyer to Keith Richards to Jay-Z to Zadie Smith tonight to finishing the year with a tribute to the *National Lampoon*. And we begin the season early in January with a tribute to Gypsy Rose Lee, so we will have an evening of burlesque. The New York Public Library in fact has the archives of Gypsy Rose Lee, so that might be quite an interesting evening to experience.

What you may not know about Zadie Smith—I read the biography a bit earlier, but you may not know that from the age of five to fifteen, Zadie Smith wanted to be a musical movie star actress. She states, "I tap-danced for ten years before I began to understand people don't make musicals anymore. All I wanted to be was an MGM actress working for Arthur Freed or Gene Kelly or Vincente Minnelli. Historical and geographical constraints made this impossible. **(laughter)** Slowly but surely the pen became mightier than the double pickup time step with shuffle." Please welcome Zadie Smith, who will be reading to you.

ZADIE SMITH: Hi. I'm just going to read a little bit from the book of essays. It's always hard reading from a book of essays with not many obvious entertaining options. I'm always aware of something that Graham Greene said that spending a lot of time with writers if you're a writer is a kind of masturbation, and reading about writing if you're a writer it comes under the same category, I think. So I'm just going to do a little bit of it. This is from an essay called "That Crafty Feeling," and it's just about what it feels like to write a novel. It's in ten parts, and I'm just going to read from four until the end.

Four. Middle of the Novel—Magical Thinking

In the middle of a novel, a kind of magical thinking takes over. To clarify, the middle of the novel may not happen in the actual geographical center of the novel. By middle of the novel I mean whatever page you are on when you stop being part of your household and your family and your partner and children and food shopping and dog feeding and reading the post—I mean when there is nothing in the world except your book, and even as your wife tells you she's sleeping with your brother her face is a gigantic semicolon, her arms are parentheses, and you are wondering whether rummage is a better verb than rifle. **(laughter)** The middle of a novel is a state of mind. Strange things happen in it. Time collapses. You sit down to write at 9 a.m., you blink, the evening news is on, and 4,000 words are written, more words than you wrote in three long months, a year ago. Something has changed. And it's not restricted to the house. If you go outside, everything—I mean, everything—flows freely into your novel. Someone on the bus says something—it's straight out of your novel. You open the paper—every single story in the

paper is directly relevant to your novel. If you are fortunate enough to have someone waiting to publish your novel, this is the point at which you phone them in a panic and try to get your publication date moved forward because you cannot believe how in tune the world is with your unpublished novel right now, and if it isn't published next Tuesday maybe the moment will pass and you will have to kill yourself. **(laughter)**

Magical thinking makes you crazy—and renders everything possible. Incredibly knotty problems of structure now resolve themselves with inspired ease. See that one paragraph? It only needs to be moved, and the whole chapter falls into place! But why didn't you see it before? You randomly pick a poetry book off the shelf and the first line you read ends up being your epigraph—it seems to have been written for no other reason.

Five. Dismantling the Scaffolding

When building a novel you will use a lot of scaffolding. Some of this is necessary to hold the thing up, but most isn't. The majority of it is only there to make you feel secure, and in fact the building will stand without it. Each time I've written a long piece of fiction I've felt this need for an enormous amount of scaffolding. With me, scaffolding comes in many forms. The only way to write this novel is to divide it into three sections of ten chapters each. Or five sections of seven chapters. Or the answer is to read the Old Testament and model each chapter on the books of the prophets. Or the divisions of the Bhagavad Gita. Or the Psalms. Or *Ulysses*. Or the songs of Public Enemy. Or the films of Grace Kelly. Or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Or the liner notes to *The White Album*. Or the twenty-seven speeches Donald Rumsfeld gave to the press corps during his tenure.

Scaffolding holds up confidence when you have none, reduces the despair, creates a goal—however artificial—an end point. Use it to divide what seems like an endless, unmarked journey, though by doing this, like Zeno, you infinitely extend the distance you need to go.

Later, when the book is printed and old and dog-eared, it occurs to me that I really didn't need any of that scaffolding. The book would have been far better off without it. But when I was putting it up, it felt vital, and once it was there, I'd worked so hard to get it there I was loath to take it down. If you are writing a novel at the moment and putting up scaffolding, well, I hope it helps you, but don't forget to dismantle it later. Or if you're determined to leave it up, out there for all to see, at least hang a nice façade over it, as the Romans do when they fix up their palazzi.

Six. The First Twenty Pages, Redux

Because I talk about the first twenty pages, earlier on.

Late in the novel, in the last quarter, when I am rolling downhill, I turn back to read those first twenty pages. They are packed tighter than tuna in a can. Calmly, I take off the top, let a little air in. What's amusing about the first twenty pages—they are funny now, three years later, now I'm no longer locked up in them—is how little confidence you have in your readers when you begin. You spoon-feed them everything. You can't let a character walk across the room without giving her backstory as she goes. You don't trust the reader to have a little patience, a little intelligence. This reader, who, for all you know, has read Thomas Bernhard, *Finnegans Wake*, Gertrude Stein, Georges Perec—yet you're worried

that if you don't mention in the first three pages that Sarah Malone is a social worker with a dead father, this talented reader might not be able to follow you exactly. **(laughter)** It's awful, the swing of the literary fraudulence pendulum: from moment to moment you can't decide whether you're the fraudulent idiot or your reader is the fraudulent idiot. For writers who work with character a good deal, going back to those first twenty pages is also a lesson in how much more delicate a thing character is than you think it is when you're writing it. The idea of forming people out of grammatical clauses seems so fantastical at the start that you hide your terror in a smokescreen of elaborate sentence making, as if character can be drawn forcibly out of the curlicues of certain adjectives piled ruthlessly on top of one another. In fact, character occurs with the lightest of brushstrokes. Naturally, it can be destroyed lightly, too. I think of a creature called Odradek, who at first glance appears to be a "flat star-shaped spool for thread" but who is not quite this, Odradek who won't stop rolling down the stairs, trailing string behind him, who has a laugh that sounds as if it has no lungs behind it, a laugh like rustling leaves. You can find the inimitable Odradek in a one-page story of Kafka's called "The Cares of a Family Man." Curious Odradek is more memorable to me than characters I spent three years on, and five hundred pages.

Seven. The Last Day

There is one great advantage to being a Micro Manager rather than a Macro Planner: the last day of your novel truly is the last day. If you edit as you go along, there are no first, second, third drafts. There is only one draft, and when it's done, it's done. Who can find anything bad to say about the last day of a novel? It's a feeling of happiness that knocks

me clean out of adjectives. I think sometimes that the best reason for writing novels is to experience those four and a half hours after you write the final word. The last time it happened to me, I uncorked a good Sancerre I'd been keeping and drank it standing up with the bottle in my hand, and then I lay down in my backyard on the paving stones and stayed there for a long time, crying. It was sunny, late autumn, and there were apples everywhere, overripe and stinky.

Eight. Step Away from the Vehicle

You can ignore everything else in this lecture except number eight. It is the only absolutely twenty-four-carat-gold-plated piece of advice I have to give you. I've never taken it myself, though one day I hope to. The advice is as follows.

When you finish your novel, if money is not a desperate priority, if you don't need to sell it at once or for it to be published that very second—put it in a drawer. For as long as you can manage. A year or more is ideal—but even three months will do. Step away from the vehicle. The secret to editing your work is simple: you need to become its reader instead of its writer. I can't tell you how many times I've sat backstage with a line of novelists at some festival, all of us with red pens in hand, frantically editing our published novels into fit form so that we might go onstage and read from them. **(laughter)** It's an unfortunate thing, but it turns out that the perfect state of mind to edit your own novel is two years after it's published, ten minutes before you go onstage at a literary festival. **(laughter)** At that moment every redundant phrase, each show-off, pointless metaphor, all the pieces of deadwood, stupidity, vanity, and tedium are distressingly obvious to you. Two years earlier, when the proofs came, you looked at the same pages and couldn't see a comma

out of place. And by the way, that's true of the professional editors, too; after they've read a manuscript multiple times, they stop being able to see it. You need a certain head on your shoulders to edit a novel, and it's not the head of a writer in the thick of it, nor the head of a professional editor who's seen it in twelve different versions. It's the head of a smart stranger who picks it up off a bookshelf and begins to read. You need to get the head of that smart stranger somehow. You need to forget you ever wrote that book.

Nine. The Unbearable Cruelty of Proofs

Proofs are so cruel! Breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain. Proofs are the wasteland where the dream of your novel dies and cold reality asserts itself. When I look at loose-leaf proofs, fresh out the envelope, bound with a thick elastic band, marked up by a conscientious copy editor, I feel quite sure I would have to become a different person entirely to do the work that needs to be done here. To correct what needs correcting, fix what needs to be fixed. The only proper response to an envelope full of marked-up pages is "Give it back to me! Let me start again!" But no one says this because by this point exhaustion has set in. It's not the book you hoped for, maybe something might yet be done—but the will is gone. There's simply no more will to be had. That's why proofs are so cruel, so sad: the existence of the proof itself is proof that it is already too late. I've only ever seen one happy proof, in King's College Library: the manuscript of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot, upon reaching his own point of exhaustion, had the extreme good fortune to meet Ezra Pound, a very smart stranger, and with his red pen Ezra went to work. And what work! His pen goes everywhere, trimming, cutting, slicing, a frenzy of editing, the why and

wherefore not especially obvious, at times, indeed, almost ridiculous; almost, at times, indiscriminate . . . Whole pages struck out with a single line.

Underneath Pound's markings, *The Waste Land* is a sad proof like any other—too long, full of lines not worth keeping, badly structured. Lucky Eliot, to have Ezra Pound. Lucky Fitzgerald, to have Maxwell Perkins. Lucky Carver, we now know, to have Gordon Lish. Where have all the smart strangers gone?

Ten. Years Later: Nausea, Surprise, and Feeling OK

I find it very hard to read my books after they're published. I've never read *White Teeth*. Five years ago I tried; I got about ten sentences in before I was overwhelmed with nausea. More recently, when people tell me they have just read that book, I do try to feel pleased, **(laughter)** but it's a distant, disconnected sensation, like when someone tells you they met your second cousin in a bar in Goa. **(laughter)** I suspect *White Teeth* and I may never be reconciled—I think that's simply what happens when you begin writing a book at the age of twenty-one. Then, a year ago, I was in an airport somewhere and I saw a copy of *The Autograph Man*, and on a whim, I bought it. On the plane I had to drink two of those mini bottles of wine before I had the stomach to begin. I didn't manage the whole thing, but I read about two-thirds, and at that incredible speed with which you can read a book if you happen to have written it. **(laughter)** And it was actually not such a bad experience—I laughed a few times, I groaned more than I laughed, and I gave up when the wine wore off—but for the first time, I felt something other than nausea. I felt surprise. The book was genuinely strange to me; there were whole pages I didn't recognize, I didn't remember writing. And because it was so strange I didn't feel any

particular animosity towards it. So that was that: between that book and me there now exists a sort of blank truce, neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

Finally, while writing this lecture, I picked up *On Beauty*. I read maybe a third of it, not consecutively, but chapters here and there. As usual, the nausea; as usual, the feeling of fraudulence and the too-late desire to wield the red pen all over the place—but something else, too, something new. Here and there—in very isolated pockets—I had the sense that this line, that paragraph, these were exactly what I meant to write, and the fact was, I'd written them, and I felt OK about it, felt good, even. It's a feeling I recommend to all of you. (I was talking to writing students.) That feeling feels OK. Thanks.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You wrote that piece for writing students, and you were trying to be helpful to them.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, I don't know, I don't know if I was.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How did you want to try and help them?

ZADIE SMITH: I guess I, when I'm talking about writing with writing students, I just want to demystify the process.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why?

ZADIE SMITH: Because I find it so unhelpful to have it thoroughly mystified. I mean, when I was wanting to write sometimes I'd go and hear a writer speak, and they'd say something like, you know, "I wake up at 6 a.m., I go for a four-mile run, I stand on my head." Well, this kind of supposed essential ritual, and that's not my experience of work. Mine is much more chaotic and not very organized and much—I'm always learning on the job, I don't feel like an expert in that sense.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: "Learning on the job" in some way is a nice way for us to enter the realm of these essays. I particularly like the quotation you have at the beginning which I think in some way can lead us into speaking about the book as a whole, by David Foster Wallace. "You get to decide what to worship." In some way this book is precisely the decision of what you get to decide to worship.

ZADIE SMITH: Um, yeah, what struck me about that quote by David is that for a certain kind of reader that quote is like an epigraph of relativism. You know, it doesn't matter what you worship, you can worship anything, you can pick and choose like some bad New York Buddhist or something, I think that's how people read it. But from David's practice I would take that to be a very serious commitment. You do get to decide to worship, but that also means you have to decide carefully, work hard, and you have to make choices that are genuinely meaningful to you. I don't think it's a kind of a simple thing to do. In this case, the book, I just wanted it to be a record of the things I guess that I have loved.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It has an elegiac quality. Your book, really, it has an elegiac quality the way indeed your not becoming a tap dancer has an elegiac quality—namely, you left that world because it was no longer available.

ZADIE SMITH: I—just for me—I'm sure it's true for most people, I have to keep on moving, and the books I loved as a child, which I think are represented here, a certain kind of British canon, I suppose, that was important, because when I was young I was trying to make some kind of point that these books were for me, too. But I guess once I had established they were for me, too, then I found there were other places I wanted to go.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You say somewhere that most of the books we read actually we read between the age of eleven and fourteen or eleven and seventeen.

ZADIE SMITH: Actually, that's Nabokov's idea, and I find it to be true. He said he'd read an enormous amount between the age of about nine and fifteen, and that reading—in one sense that reading, I think, forms you. I can't rid of the fact that my foundational texts are people like George Eliot and Virginia Woolf rather than I don't know, Camus and I don't know, anyone a million miles away—I have to deal with the foundational texts I have. But I also think that you can stay agile as you get older. You can still try to read out of your comfort zone. You can keep moving, but you can't replace that foundational thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You can't replace it, but it changes, it changes dramatically. And one of the things that I'm becoming more and more obsessed by, which I found to be a common obsession in some way, is the relationship between taste and aging.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, I've wrote a little bit about that in the book. A good example for me is the book *Middlemarch*. Woolf pointed out first that when you're a young woman reading that book, you tend to relate very strongly to Dorothea and think of her as a heroine, and the older you get, the more absurd she seems, you know, she's a completely over-the-top drama queen who makes terrible decisions for six hundred pages. **(laughter)** But at fifteen I didn't see that. I found all her almost obsessive sense of commitment and her self-flagellation and her religious feeling all very admirable, and as I've got older the people in that book who are more pragmatic, who aren't so obsessive, are much more attractive to me. I think I find obsessive people much more frightening now. When I was fifteen, probably I was one of them—that was the difference.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you are attracted to some obsessive characters. I'm thinking in particular a passion we share is a passion for Werner Herzog—you mentioned, you had a small—because you have these reviews, you I think you used to do or continue to do?

ZADIE SMITH: I used to—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you still do them?

ZADIE SMITH: No, no much I would like to. I like movie reviewing, it's fun.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Reviewing movies in particular, but Herzog, *Grizzly Man* was a film you I think enjoyed.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, no, I love Herzog, it's something to do. My favorite is *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, an absolute classic, but the idea of people in states of extremity and people who make their own lives difficult on a principle, I guess. It's another example of "you choose what to worship." Some people choose to worship things which make their lives impossible, and that fact I find really fascinating.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, with Herzog, I remember asking him once why he believed that a filmmaker needed to know how to pick a lock, and he said, "Because," he said, "because filmmaking is about trespassing!" I also recall when my little boy learned to—on a summer vacation—milk the cow, Herzog called me up to say "That is of monumental importance. A boy needs to know how to pull the udder," and, you know, I thought he was maybe mentioning the Other, but it was the udder, going back to a kind of essential quality.

ZADIE SMITH: No, I like that about him. It's something about Herzog himself as well, that he has a complete lack of ambivalence. And ambivalence is kind of the normal state

of most of us as late moderns, but Herzog is not—he's got that wonderful short film where he made a bet with someone, and he said if he lost it he would eat his own shoe, and he did lose the bet, and he ate his own shoe on film. He cut it up and ate it. And that kind of monomania.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're attracted to characters like that.

ZADIE SMITH: I'm attracted to it. It's not my personality at all, but I suppose I kind of—something about it—characters in my book quite often, there's one or two types like that. I'm just interested in it because I find it very hard to have strong feelings of that kind, I guess that's what it is.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Say something more about that.

ZADIE SMITH: I don't, I mean, in the book I try to work it out a little bit. It's possible that I grew up in a state of ambivalence, which is maybe something to do with being mixed race or living between two things that other people take to be extreme essences. You know, if you're part of both, the essential nature of those two things isn't obvious to you, because yourself you're an admixture, that might be it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is that ambivalence well expressed theoretically, one might say, by the great tension which exists between Roland Barthes and Nabokov? You have that essay where you create a tension. I don't know if you created it or it's there, but you

take the most formalist of Barthes and the most hot-blooded of Nabokov, the Nabokov who says that a novel and a work of art "needs to give you a tingle in your spine," and for Barthes, the Barthes that you love quoting at that moment, there's another Barthes which we'll come to. The Barthes that you love to quote there is a Barthes that is a formalist and rather—doesn't believe, really, that the author as such is important, but the text is.

ZADIE SMITH: You're absolutely right. I chose a particular part of Barthes because Barthes is actually a much more expansive and generous critic than that essay allows, but what I was trying to write about is a feeling that I think is quite common in students of writing and people who care about literature. It was a feeling I had in myself, and I extrapolated, which I guess is what I generally do. If you go through learning the theory of literature and you have some ambition or some wish to be a writer, you find yourself in a great deal of conflict, I think. You're not sure—for instance, reading Foucault for the first time, I really took that as a kind of *j'accuse*. You know, I was accused of wanting to be the producer of all meaning, that's what you're being accused of, and as a writer you have to confess that you do want to produce meaning. At the same time, to write, a certain amount of humility is necessary. It's a strange balance between saying, "I think that I have something to say, I have something to write," which I think my students—they want to be able to say that, but at the same time they fear that as an oppressive statement—you know, "who are you to go around writing things?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you read academic critiques of your books?

ZADIE SMITH: Never! My God, no. No. that would be masturbation on a whole other level, it's bad enough as it is. No.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Someone who is absent from this book who I was longing to find is Italo Calvino. Calvino has a line, a paragraph which I'd like to read to you, and I'd love you to respond to it. "A girl came to see me who is writing a thesis on my novels for a very important university seminar in literary studies. I see that my work serves her perfectly to demonstrate her theories and this is certainly a positive fact. For the novels or the theory, I do not know which. From her very detailed talk I got the idea of a piece of work being seriously pursued but my books seen through her eyes prove unrecognizable to me. I am sure that this Lotaria (that is her name) has read them conscientiously, but I believe she has read them only to find in them what she already is convinced of before reading them.

"I tried to say this to her. She retorted, a bit irritated: 'Why would you want me to read in your books only what you're convinced of?'

"I answered her: 'That isn't it. I expect readers to read in my books something I didn't know, but I can expect it only from those who expect something they didn't know.'"

ZADIE SMITH: That's a very subtle version of the argument. I think—I think the great thing about that Calvino quote is that it doesn't set up an argument between two different ways of reading. Because there needn't really be a row. I mean, for me, when I'm

teaching, I'm trying to encourage the separate spheres, because for me that kind of academic criticism of a novel is absolutely viable and enjoyable, but the thing to remember about it is it's an art in itself, and a beautiful art, but I also want to keep a little place in the university, a small spot, where students also feel free to say things which are emotive, expressive, not particularly academic, to express that little response to novels that we all have. It's not that you can't use a novel to prove the sex life of Germans at the turn of the century or feminist mores in Iran or any other arguments that novels are used for. That's a productive use of novels, but there should be some corner of the university where a student feels free also to say, "I love it. I love this book."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And do you find that a difficult thing to come by in the university? Do students feel bashful to express such emotions?

ZADIE SMITH: I think it's different now. When I was in college I was in an English degree exclusively, whereas a lot of my students I guess are in creative writing and in English, and I did feel that my affective experience in front of a novel was not really for discussion, that wasn't really what we were there for.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It was beside the point.

ZADIE SMITH: It was beside the point and also—I mean, we were a class of maybe eighteen, and I'm sure many of us wanted to write novels, but it was never something you would confess in public, it was like considered something of a sin, and it's so different

from the American model where everyone you meet is constantly going on about how they're going to write a novel. **(laughter)** For me it was not—when I finally told my professor at the end of my course, you know, he was not impressed by that revelation. That was something to be slightly ashamed of, I think. So I don't think that's a bad habit, it's a different way of creating writers. The experience I went through believes that you make writers by reading, and that's what you do, you read everything.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you speak about this appetite for reading. It's as if you can't really stop. Reading—you can not write, but you cannot not read. Reading for you is like a third lung. It's something that you must do at every particular moment. Especially during your daytime. It sounds like most of your time is taken by reading.

ZADIE SMITH: That's my whole life, yeah, I don't, yeah. I think it's true for other writers, too. Some people have writing as a compulsion. I don't have that. I admire the writers who have it, who feel the need, desperate need to write every day, but that's not my compulsion, but reading, on the other hand, I think I said this just before I came on, I recently had a baby and at a certain point in my baby's development, my husband said, "you know, you've got to speak to her, or she's never going to learn to speak. If you're always reading while breastfeeding or whatever, she's going to be a mute." **(laughter)** I was like, "ah, yeah, good point."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But what you are instilling in her is the sound of pages being turned.

(laughter)

ZADIE SMITH: The psychological horror when she goes into therapy twenty years from now.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, I know, it's tremendous when one thinks of that. Five dollars every day is what you need to put aside for the future therapy. **(laughter)** This is what I'm saving up at this moment. But you—one of the important characteristics of reading for you is that and reading with a kind of passion that this book tries to inspire in the readers to have for novels they are reading is that reading no longer does to you what reading did to you when you were much younger, which is isolate you, so in some way you are trying—it is also an elegiac book in the sense that you are trying to create a community in some way where reading, once upon a time, seemed to be such a solitary endeavor.

ZADIE SMITH: For me it was solitary, but it was also person-making, which is something which fades over time. Like, now I can read a wonderful book, but I'm just too old for it to have the kind of impression on me that it would have had when I was fourteen, fifteen. You can take little things, stylistic things, from new great writers that you enjoy, but they're not going to get into your kind of literary DNA the way that people you read when you were young did.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is that sad?

ZADIE SMITH: For me it's sad because I like to be—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Transformed.

ZADIE SMITH: —influenced and I like to be transformed. At some times a voice is so strong—think of an example. George Saunders for me is a good example, that an adult writer can read him and really feel the pressure of his style because it's just so particular and so brilliantly done and can create very bad results. I think for a long time, I'd never publish any of them, but for about a year after I read George I was just imitating him, you know, constantly because his influence was so strong. But that's rare and I think might even be the definition of a genius when you come across writing that has the power to do that to you so late in the day.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You call it creative thievery.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, it's really—that's extraordinary when that happens. But mostly I just wanted to encourage and defend an idea of reading which is absolutely passionate and engaged. There's a kind of trend, but I keep on reading in essays by various people there's usually a section where someone will say, "I look at that book, I didn't even bother reading, I could tell what was in it or I could tell what it was about, or I'd read the press about it," and I know that's meant to be the last sign of hip sophistication that

you're so you don't even need to read the book to know what's in it. **(laughter)** But for me it's kind of like—it's like a fetishization of philistinism, and I just find it unbelievable that's become a kind of sign of aesthetic sophistication that you needn't even read something to know how bad it is. That's kind of shocking to me, so I'm just trying to reinforce the idea that there's no replacement for the actual reading. You can read all the press, you can look at the photo on the back, you can talk about it with your friends at a dinner party, you can do all that, but you have to read the damn book, because it's a going through, it's not just something that happens on the outside, it's a process you go through.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The English psychoanalyst one said that the goal and role of the mother was for the child to be alone in the presence of the mother, which seems to me like an extraordinary description of reading, namely that you're alone but deeply nurtured.

ZADIE SMITH: Yes, I'm—I mean, I'm sure there's a lot of people in this room who are the same way—if I go out for a short coffee break, and I know I'm meeting a friend, I have four books in my bag. Why do I have four books in my bag? It's coffee with a friend, at most she might be five minutes late, but it's not going to be time to read four books.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Unless she's *very* late.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, very late, but I always noticed that about writers, too. That if you ever happen to meet a writer for lunch, if you're late, they're delighted. Like, I'm always happy when someone's late. Apart from Geoff Dyer, he hates lateness of all kinds. But every other writer, you're happy for that twenty minutes when you get a chance to read something. And all of time is measured in how long have you got to read, it's ridiculous. But that kind of—I'm rarely lonely for that reason, I guess, because I always have books with me, but writing by contrast I find a very isolating and sad activity, and it is just you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The building—you were saying about reading that it's the building in some way of a persona, and of a person, and of a self. And I read with passion which I imagine many people have read, your recent piece on the new movie, probably all of you saw it, *The Social Network* in the most current issue, or the issue before the most current issue of the *New York Review of Books*. First of all, why did you review this movie?

ZADIE SMITH: The only thing—I have no time for doing any spare work, I've got a kid, I've gotta teach, and Bob Silvers, the editor of the *New York Review*, sometimes sends me things, "would you like to do this or that?" Normally I just say "no, no, no," because there's no time and I can't afford to do it. But something, I don't know why—that's the thing which interests me, when he sent that to me and said, "Do you want to review this movie?" I said yes, and I wondered why it interested me. I think for me for

when I'm writing an essay, I'm not writing from the position of an expert. What you're watching, which I'm sure is perfectly obvious if you read them, is somebody learning about the thing as they're writing it, so something about that subject, I just wanted to know. I knew I had had a feeling when I was on Facebook, and I couldn't really describe it, and I knew it was a way of finding out what that feeling was.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What worries you most about Facebook?

ZADIE SMITH: It doesn't—I don't think Facebook is the end of the world, and, you know, look, it was a playful piece, but I did think, and after I wrote the piece, I got a lot of mail from people, and it made me think. There is nothing at all original in that piece, I was talking about a feeling that I had that I had a guess a lot of people had and it turned out that was correct. It's not—some people write essays where they're giving you, you know, a view from beyond. What I'm trying to do is articulate as well I can with my talent, which is just about making sentences sound okay, just express what a lot of people felt, what I had a gut feeling perhaps they felt, because I felt it, and the little jump you make is, "Well, I'm not a total freak, am I? Somebody else must feel this," and once you've made that assumption, then you kind of go forward, and I e-mailed my students, and I e-mailed my friends and family and just said, "well, how do you feel to be on this thing? How does it feel to you to be on?"

And then I was extremely lucky in having lunch with another writer who just read this Jaron Lanier book and put it in front of me and so then all the dots start to connect. But

for me it's always about just again, sorry, thinking about Wallace, because he was on my mind when I was writing it. He seemed to me to have a basic idea that human beings are sacred, and that can be a massively conservative position to go from. I was very aware when I was writing the piece that it was going to come across as technophobia, and I'm not brilliant on the Internet, there's a lot of it I don't understand. But I'm always interested in is there a way to stick with that idea that human beings are sacred, that there is something sacred about them, which I do believe. Is there a way to take that belief and some—and not go into the first and easiest conservative position, to try and push yourself and consider—is it possible that human beings are sacred and they can exist on the Internet? And I absolutely think that's true. And what's great about the Lanier is he is a real Internet visionary, and he's really interested in how we can have exciting, fulfilling lives on the Internet, which I think is totally possible. But my feeling was just that this particular format is not that fulfilling, and that was the only point I wanted to make, and it doesn't allow for this idea that human beings aren't just flat pieces of data, that they're a little more than that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But your piece is a little more critical than you make it sound now. **(laughter)** Am I right, shall I read the last passage? **(laughter)** I mean, just to give people a sense of what in fact you're saying at the very end. Maybe just the last two paragraphs. "The last defense of every Facebook addict is that 'it helps me keep in contact with people who are far away.' Well, e-mail and Skype do that too and they have the added advantage of not forcing you to interface with the mind of Mark Zuckerberg, but well, you know, we all know, if we really wanted to write to these faraway people or

see them, we would. What we actually want to do is the bare minimum, just like any nineteen-year-old college boy would rather be doing something else or nothing. At my screening, when a character in the film mentioned the early blog platform LiveJournal, still popular in Russia, the audience laughed. I can't imagine life without files, but I can just about imagine a time when Facebook will seem as comically obsolete as LiveJournal. In this sense *The Social Network* is not a cruel portrait of any particular real-world person called Mark Zuckerberg. It is a cruel portrait of us, five hundred million sentient people entrapped in the recent careless thoughts of a Harvard sophomore."

(laughter)

ZADIE SMITH: That's the thing which blows my mind. Five hundred million people. I think that's what the Lanier book is so interesting about, it's just the scale of the thing. Any other revolution that took place with so many people in so little time would have a philosophy, a period of thought, a period of discussion, an argument, but the Internet revolution has happened like that—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So quickly—

ZADIE SMITH: And most of us have just fallen into it without serious consideration.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And become addicts, become addicts, I mean truly.

ZADIE SMITH: in the past two years, no one in this room can deny it, walking down the streets in New York, every day, three or four people walk into me. It's like if you were from a different planet, you would say it looked like a zombie race, like this, down the street.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Everybody is davening, I mean it really feels that way.

ZADIE SMITH: So that just needs to be thought about. It's not that it needs to end, but it needs to be thought about.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But what is lost? Because I am curious about this, I am curious, and I want to push you in that direction because I'd like you to think what I'm thinking, **(laughter)** and then we'll get to *Changing My Mind*. But the—what strikes me, I went to see the film yesterday, and, as you say in your fine review, it is a very well-made film with extremely good—I mean, the acting I would say is perfect, and the way it is cast is perfect, but the subject matter, the paucity of—the paucity of experience.

ZADIE SMITH: But, you see, I think the subject's quite interesting. I think it's interesting about people who perhaps have a positive experience, but, you know, with all these things the problem is that you can't go backwards, like you can write as many articles about the Internet revolution as you like, you can't turn the thing backwards and that truly is a conservative position. There's no putting the cat back in the bag, that's not going to happen, but it might be that we can think a bit more carefully about where we're

going next, and to me if you ask what's lost, it's just a very simple thing. It's something about being relational rather than performative. The weird thing about Facebook is that everybody on it is like their own mini-celebrity. That's what it turns you into You have fans, you're constantly giving them updates, you're like a little celebrity, and the relation, no matter what anyone says, is pretty much one-way and then you're voyeuristic about other people's celebrity profiles and how many friends they have, it's an idea of being human which is one way, and real life is relational—you have to deal with other people, you have to have some kind of relationship with them, and you can't perform yourself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have to look at them.

ZADIE SMITH: You have to look at them, you have to look them in the eye, which has become increasingly difficult for younger people quite often. I have a cousin who is like this all the time. But on the Internet, it's all self-revelation.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So it creates a sense, a feeling or a sense of intimacy without the necessity for it.

ZADIE SMITH: I think that's true but I also think, and I wanted to try to say in the piece that you don't need to have a "Oh, God, where are we going to?" reaction, because young people will always find their way out of these things. No generation is more foolish than the one that came before. They will always find creative ways to work themselves out of the situation. You can already see it happening. There are already

artists on the Net, all kinds of radicals on the Net, they'll find some way, and in fact the more culpable, and I don't know if I made this clear in the piece, are not the kids who went on Facebook, but all the adults, it was the adults who didn't even—it behooved them to sit back and think for a minute and question "What is this platform? What is it doing?" but they fell like, you know, girls fainting in a puddle over this stuff. They all went on Twitter, they all went on Facebook. It was the adults who really fell for it. What the kids do will be more interesting. We'll see.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm struck by the title of your book, *Changing My Mind*. How does one change one's mind? Because it's something that I think that people don't do very often and they certainly don't speak about it with such relish as you do. It seems that so often we're stuck in thinking what we think and don't want to change our mind.

ZADIE SMITH: You know, definitely everyone will I'm sure feel this. It gets harder as you get older, as your positions become entrenched and your relationships become entrenched. It's not so easy to flit around. But I guess just for me personally when I look at my life, you know, I have a pretty staid life, I'm married, I teach, I'm no kind of Bukowski or Hemingway running around the world having wild experiences, so it kind of—the place where I try and be free is in my reading, it would kill me if not only this part of my life is so staid but also my reading I shut down, you know, then there would be no hope, and I think also for a writer who has come out of books—and many writers don't. Some writers come from experience, some writers come from trauma, there are all different kinds of writers, but I obviously am a writer who came out of other books, so

my whole arena, the way I can move forward is through reading creatively, so this book for me was just a record of what I have read and to be honest what I don't intend to read any more of, because I need to go elsewhere.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You need to go elsewhere, and one of the impressions one gets when reading this book is that this book is a farewell in some way to many of the earlier passions and also an acknowledgment of some new desires. Maybe one of them might be rap music.

ZADIE SMITH: That's an old one, gifted from my family.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because of your two brothers.

ZADIE SMITH: I guess they started it. I think I gave them good soul music and they came up beneath me with hip-hop. Yeah, that's probably true.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And now you're reading a lot of graphic novels.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, I've been reading—only for about a decade, not like, you know, proper comic heads who start when they're very small and never stop. But I love graphic novels, it just kept on striking me in the past decade when people asked you for your books of the year or your best books, when I was honest with myself it was graphic novels that were so frequently the answer. It just seemed to be so much genuine

imagination on display. Even if you just buy those Best American collections that come out every year in America, the breadth of styles and risk-taking, and it just really struck me that something exciting was going on there.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There is a passage I love of Nabokov which I'd like to read to you which in some way I think may be in communication with *The Social Network* and the difference between *The Social Network* and the way Nabokov sees reality. "Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information, and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person, but it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer so to speak to reality but you never get near enough, because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perceptions, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable, you can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing. It's hopeless."

ZADIE SMITH: Of course he had a better chance than most with all his extreme knowledge. To read *Pale Fire* I always feel such a surge of jealousy because for most people, for most novelists, the tree is just a tree, but Nabokov is able to look at the tree and the insect on the tree and the cycle of the insect on the tree, and it's more than just information. Anybody who reads Nabokov doesn't feel like he's just an information machine. It's loved detail—you know, he understands it and loves it and sees things

which without that knowledge you wouldn't even see. He's extremely fortunate, and the most fortunate novelist for that reason, but yet he's right. I mean, the perfectly obvious example it always strikes me, I guess as someone who writes a lot about family, is that if you sit down this Thanksgiving coming with your family and try and go over any incident from your mutual background—anything—you cannot get two yards without a storming row. It becomes really obvious to you that you and your siblings, for instance, have literally lived different realities, I mean absolutely different realities—not versions, different realities, and that just is so amazing to me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And what is amazing about that from the point of view of being a novelist?

ZADIE SMITH: Because whenever you're writing—whenever I'm writing, you know, you think you have some kind of perspectival authority, you think you know what's going on, and then you're constantly disabused of that, the inability to absolutely fix on the thing and say exactly what happened and how people felt about it, it's what gives you space to continue, because you know you can't pin that thing down precisely, but the shock of it and the shock of relative experiences of the same incident is very overwhelming to me, because it's also—it destabilizes you morally. The things you think you know are right. The right actions you think you made from somebody else's point of view are a horror or something that was extremely painful to them. When you're very young I think you don't know that, you don't realize.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Among the great passions in this book that you describe is your passion for George Eliot—George Eliot is and *Middlemarch* in particular but not only *Middlemarch*, is a book that is extremely important to you and extremely important to you as you said earlier in the rereading process, in rediscovering it. What is it about George Eliot in particular that is so deeply moving? And I might add that just before coming down here we showed you some manuscripts of George Eliot, and I felt that the greatest attraction in the Reading Room in the special collections was to see George Eliot's penmanship.

ZADIE SMITH: I was actually quite overwhelmed seeing that. The thing about Eliot it's a lot of my love affair, maybe it's true of a lot of women writers, is kind of extraliterary. I do think the books are astonishing. But it's more the fact of Eliot—her life, if you ever read the biographies, her life was so difficult for so long, and she had a will of iron. What she achieved she achieved with her entire self, and it was so hard. She was incredibly ugly, she felt, she was completely unloved, she was totally isolated, she was not educated at university. She was an autodidact par excellence. It's unbelievable.

What we saw upstairs is her research notes for *Daniel Deronda*, which I don't know if you've read, it has a Jewish theme. And in order to write that book, in which the Jewish theme appears, but isn't the whole of the book she, clearly from the notes upstairs, researched Judaism to the nth degree, she learned everything, she made notes on everything, and knowing that in the end she would only use small amounts but she felt she needed in that Hemingway sense the whole of the iceberg even if you only saw the

tip and that kind of work that she did without support, without institutional support, without love, which is extremely important, I think, for writers generally. She came to love late in her life and then she was able to write more but so much she did alone in a society which made her—I mean treated her like a pariah because in the end when she found love she didn't marry. It's just—to me it's really extraordinary and so I don't often think about role models in that sense, but her will is so impressive that when you have no will left it impresses you—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: She would be one. She would be one.

ZADIE SMITH: I can't help it even though it's the cheesiest choice for any woman writer to choose George Eliot, but the scope of her achievement is just mind-boggling to me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're particularly interested in many of the essays by the power and virtue of empathy, and George Eliot has a wonderful line not included in your book which I'd like to read to you. She said, "the greatest benefit we owe to the artist whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Art is a nearer thing to life. It is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. That was an introduction she wrote to *The History of Life in Germany* and then in your book one of the most exquisite passages from *Middlemarch*, which I had completely forgotten but which makes me want to reread the book, is this one: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life it

would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat and we would die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As if the quickest of us walk about well-weighted with stupidity." Incredible.

ZADIE SMITH: It's an incredible quote, but the older I get the more I feel it can lead to a dangerous conclusion. There is a kind of philosophy of the novel, a kind of religion of the novel, which puts that principle, empathy, and the empathetic feeling for strangers or for other people or for animals at the center of its philosophy. If you could do that, if you understood how another person lived, you would care and do right by them. And that's a very entrancing belief in something that I grew up hoping was true and believing, I suppose, but it can also be a very lazy belief.

There's a story on the front of the *New York Times* which really struck me. I'm a massive dog lover, but there was a dog recently who performed some heroic action in Afghanistan—I can't remember what kind—but he was brought here and then accidentally euthanized when he ran away one night, he was euthanized. So I was reading this story with sympathy for the dog, and then I realized you turned the page and there was two more pages about the dog, and about the vigil for the dog, that's a candlelight vigil which is going to happen soon. And there you see where this kind of fetishization of empathy skills—sometimes they go in one place, like the poor dog, and the major part of that story—what's happening in Afghanistan—took up about three lines.

So there can be a kind of sentimental reaction, and also there's a good piece by Terry Eagleton recently talking about this—that in the end empathy, it is one of the most useful social glues and one of the most wonderful things for us to behave rightly towards each other, but it's nothing without political systems that function, without a kind of exercise against injustice, which is slightly more active than "I read *Middlemarch* and I felt sorry for Dorothea." There's a limit to that kind of empathy in action, and I think the novelist should always be aware of that. You can fool yourself writing novels that you're saving the world, you know, one by one, opening the hearts of people so they become better, but people's hearts can be opened extensively, and they can do nothing—you have to be careful with that idea.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So you're fighting the sort of meliorist feeling that literature actually makes us better.

ZADIE SMITH: I just think that the English tradition of the novel, as represented at the kind of apex of it by Eliot doesn't always recognize that people are perverse. People are profoundly perverse. The French understand that very well, **(laughter)** but the English, they tend not to look at things which are—there are certain parts of human nature they'd rather not think about. And that kind of perversity, I guess, interests me more than it used to.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Can you teach perversity?

ZADIE SMITH: No, I think that's a natural, God-given right. No help needed.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you were here two years ago, you gave a lecture which is now published in this collection of essays, "Speaking in Tongues," and you said that Obama was a man from Dream City and when you came here he had just recently gotten elected, and I'm wondering how you see him now, if you still see him negotiating well coming from Dream City, which for you meant belonging to so many different worlds, maybe different kinds of worlds that you belong to as well.

ZADIE SMITH: At the end of that essay I said what I feel, which is that basically my thought when I was writing that essay is you have just elected a novelist to be president, and we'll see how that goes. The argument was on the one side, there are lots of great things about novelists, on the other side they do tend to have this strong sense of ambivalence. And I think you've seen that in Obama. In that campaign maybe the ambivalence as far as I read it seemed such a relief and so necessary given that people were screaming at each other so loudly and so absurdly, but I imagine it doesn't function as well in government when, as W. would say, you have to make decisions, you have to be the decider. So I don't know, I still find him—you know, for me, I know Jay-Z was saying here last week, it will never stop being an extraordinary fact that there is a black man in the White House. You know, at some very fundamental level as a black kid growing up, you feel—you kind of sublimate a feeling of, I don't know, it's some kind of insecurity or some sense that certain things can't happen and so when it did happen, I felt that it kind of broke something open in me, and I'm sure a lot of black people felt the

same way. It's not probably a very sensical reaction, because Obama is Obama, he's not me, to feel proud about somebody you're not related to, you have nothing personally to do with, but it was a feeling of relief and pride, which was a lovely experience.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The title of the book comes from in part from seeing *The Philadelphia Story*, is that correct?

ZADIE SMITH: Of this book?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah.

ZADIE SMITH: I don't know! Maybe, slightly, I mean *The Philadelphia Story* is in there a lot but I hadn't thought of the direct connection, but you're right, yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What does the title mean?

ZADIE SMITH: I guess I saw that film when I was very young, literally a kid, and in fact the last time I saw it was right here in Bryant Park.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: On the huge screen.

ZADIE SMITH: On the huge screen, which was so wonderful. It just struck me. That film is about somebody who is in her personal life a kind of militant and is made to

change. And when I first watched it, I was very offended by the idea that here was a bright, strong feminist woman who is broken in some way by her father and then the other men in her life and is changed and I didn't like that, and then as I—it's another case of growing older and watching the same movie and feeling differently and you realize it's really not about a person being broken down, it's not about a man against a woman, it's really about somebody opening up and realizing that things aren't really black and white, that ambivalences exist, that she isn't always certain, and I love that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The line from *The Philadelphia Story* is "the time to make up your mind about people is never," which I love.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah. I always loved it as a kid and I think a lot of is, you know, if you're not a white man—white men have the kind of experience of never being pinned down exactly, they can be what they like, they can do what they like, they're kind of free in the symbolic world. But if you're anything other than a white man, wherever you go, decisions are made about you—what you're capable of, what you do, what you think, what you like, and I was always very aware of that as a child and I suppose to a certain extent, I mean looking at this book and the books I picked up as a kid, I was always working against the assumption that I should read a certain kind of book, listen to a certain kind of music, so in a way I went a long way round to avoid people making decisions about me, which is not a free choice, of course, it's a choice made in opposition to something.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In the first—I think in the very first page of *The Great Gatsby* F. Scott Fitzgerald says that reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope.

ZADIE SMITH: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And when you were a child, maybe eleven, twelve, is that when your mother put in your hand Hurston to read, she said to you you must read it, and she sort of gave it to you, you rejected it at first.

ZADIE SMITH: At first I rejected it because I felt always that I didn't want to be tied naturally to an experience—it's very different being a black woman in England from being a black woman in America. The idea that we were sisters just because of skin color I didn't understand and I read the book and I think I loved it more than any book that I'd read up to that point. It was a kind of—it was transformative book for me, and it was annoying because my mum was really hoping that that would happen, **(laughter)** so I had to concede her wisdom. And I read Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, all these extraordinary writers. And I felt that there was some kind of sisterhood that despite this extraordinary historical difference which should change so many things. I did still feel something intimate and it's a very simple thing it's because they had my hair, they had my skin, they had my looks, they had my experience of the world, and your physical experience of the world is no small thing, you know, it means the way people react to you, the way people respond to you, so for me it was a real, it was just as everybody

always says, suddenly I saw people like me in these things that I loved, books, and it was just wonderful.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you speak about—in that essay, the first essay of the book—you speak about the physical reaction you had to that book of being nearly overwhelmed and drowned by it, you read it in one sitting of three hours.

ZADIE SMITH: I was totally overwhelmed by it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Was your mother surprised that she had finally gotten through to you?

ZADIE SMITH: No, she was very cunning, she knew all the time, she was just lying in wait. I think the thing which really struck me is that when white people are reading, they're not even aware of this identification, it's so neutral to them they never think twice, they just think they're reading about humanity, never realizing that humanity is always dressed in their clothes with their color skin, with their habits, their cars, their lifestyles, and so to read something in which for once—something that looked like you, felt like you, was humanity, was a thing under discussion, is no small thing. And now when I'm writing, like some of the books I've written, *On Beauty*, I think particularly, you know, it's quite an old-fashioned structure, it's kind of a nineteenth-century book, but part of the reason for writing it for me was a kind of sublimated desire to fill the books that I used to read with people I recognize and hoping that some kids would pick

up that book and think, “oh this is, you know, big book about people and the things they do, but the people aren’t all white, for once they’re not all white.”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This is the other side of empathy. You were here the other day when Cornel West and myself interviewed Jay-Z, and there was that moment which I probably will never forget, where he—where Jay-Z basically said, “you can’t imagine what it was to be me, you can’t imagine what it was to be me, coming from Marcy Projects, being a nine-year-old kid and seeing my friend shot in front of me.”

ZADIE SMITH: No, I mean it’s not—I don’t think it is something you can imagine, but through his music you can get really close. And that’s the most—for me Jay-Z is and I’m sure for a lot of people in the room is a big hero because he is able to, particularly the early music, his rap is a way of thinking, that’s why it’s strange to see him on this stage because he’s a great intellectual in his music, it’s hard to describe, but he’s thinking through this form called rap, and he thinks extremely eloquently in that form, and then seeing him onstage is like a fish out of water because I want to hear him doing that extraordinary thing he does with his language, but that gap in experience there to me, and I still feel this, far more than race is class. What you can’t imagine, I think, is being poor like that, and that’s the thing that I always, particularly in my own experience from being relatively poor and then not being poor I see already how you stop being able to remember what that felt like.

That is really, really hard, that gap, to cross and to contain. And what's fascinating about rap music is it's all about that—it's all about "I used to be in the hood and now I'm no longer in the hood, am I still a rapper or not a rapper, am I still black or not black, am I still real or am I not real?" It's an articulation of that experience of not being working class anymore. It's extremely painful on one hand, because everything that—in Jay-Z's example—everything that's fresh and meaningful and beautiful about his music came from that experience, and he's slowly moving further and further away from it. It's a way of trying to talk about that, and what's brilliant about Jay-Z and the rappers like him is instead of pretending that movement hasn't happened, he recognizes it, he talks about it. Dre is the same way. If you pretend that you're still in the hood thirty years later when you're living in Beverly Hills, some terrible betrayal has happened, but Jay-Z doesn't do that, he discusses the progression. And talks about how it feels, what it means not to be that type of gangster anymore, to be this different kind of gangster.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A different kind of—and he will say it himself, he has not abandoned at all the hustler mentality in him. He spoke about it with great eloquence. Now, I think that what happens also is that transformation changes you as a reader. The fact that your own life has changed and that your situation in life has changed has changed the way you read books.

ZADIE SMITH: Yeah, I'm very—I guess I've become wary of I suppose a sentimentalization of working-class experience, I always find that a bit annoying, maybe more so than when I was younger. I think the principle of hip-hop is a very good principle for literature, the idea of "keeping it real," even if the real has transformed, is a good one, you have to be honest to your present experience, and the good thing about that rule is that if you're extremely honest, you will always be extremely weird, that's why I always want to say to my students, the honest expression of experience is always strange. And it kind of—there's a movie I went to see recently, I don't know if many people have seen it here or love it or hate it but a movie called *Tiny Furniture*, which is by a girl who is incredibly entitled, a rich family and all the rest of it, but most kids in that situation, they're trying to run a million miles because they're kind of ashamed of where they come from, they think there's nothing there to say, but she managed a way of just being brutally honest about this situation, and that to me is a kind of hip-hop spirit; it doesn't matter what the subject is, if you can be honest to that experience and to tell the truths which aren't always pretty and not particularly flattering to yourself, art will find a way, it will kind of squeeze out the situation.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And in some sense your recent piece about *The Social Network* is an investigation of what constitutes reality. You say this—

ZADIE SMITH: Yes, and that's difficult to measure.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I feel you answer that question by sighing.

ZADIE SMITH: Because I don't know if I—I guess that's my Nabokov speaking in my head—that reality is a kind of cant term, there's no such thing as reality in the general sense, there's only a very particular personal reality, and it is up to artists to try and be as accurate as possible to that experience of the world. Like I always say to my writing students, always worrying about their subject, their subjects aren't always interesting enough, "I wish I had a more interesting life," but none of that is relevant. The only relevance is to be as accurate as possible. It's not even about churning out autobiography. It's something, I don't know, lying to tell the truth is a weird dynamic, but you have to be honest in your practice of it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I was saying to you a little earlier that you had chosen a part of Barthes which was the formalist Barthes, but then when you read the other books, for instance his kind of autobiography—

ZADIE SMITH: Well, he changed his mind. He was a great example of that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He changed his mind, but I'm curious about that, because you didn't quite answer it. You know, how does one go about changing one's mind? What do we need in order to—because I mean, in a way, changing one's mind is a way of ensuring that we remain interesting and young.

ZADIE SMITH: I think you have to put yourself in the way of things you wouldn't normally be in the way of, and to be honest, that's the main reason I teach is because if you're in a room with twelve people under the age of twenty-five, they're going to force you to read things you don't want to read, to watch films you don't want to watch, to look at things on the Internet you don't want to look at. That's all positive to me, it's just the feeling of being around younger people with different ideas, who challenge your ideas. I need that particularly in a job like mine when you have very few colleagues—you know, you have writers here and there you can e-mail, but you don't get a lot of company, and I find my students throw things at me that I have to handle. So that's part of it.

You also I suppose have to—and I'm—I find this very difficult, but you have to keep on trying to do. You have to be willing to realize that what you did before isn't very good. You need to see the problems in it in order to change them. The thing which I've always had a horror of, and maybe I'm too much in the other direction is that when I first started writing and first met writers—I'd never met a writer before in my life. When I first published I started meeting all these writers, and every now and then you'd meet someone who'd become so defensive and angry about their work and would claim that the worst books they'd ever written had been their best books, and I just thought "God, I don't ever want to not know that this was good and this was bad, I never want to lose the judgment of a reader in the ego of a writer."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You don't suffer from that at all, because you can't read yourself.

(laughter)

ZADIE SMITH: I'm maybe too extreme at the other end. You can have too much nausea and then not be able to write at all. But having come from the world of readers, I just always wanted to be—to continue that feeling because I find readers to be good, expansive people, and writers sometimes can close down. You know, you become the defender of your own little backyard of novels even when you know they're not good, and then you get older and they give you awards just for being old, and then it gets worse and worse. **(laughter)** I kind of have a horror of that scene.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How was it getting this big award at the Library, becoming a Library Lion?

ZADIE SMITH: It made me feel very old, that was an example. It was the reason I took it, the reason I liked it was the idea of for me it's so surreal to be sitting here like a girl from Willesden, it's like if something from the story of a musical and to be in New York and to have a life in New York, to be able to write for New York publications for—all of that stuff to me is extraordinary, I never expected anything like that to happen in my life. So and then to have some involvement with the Library, it was just amazing, so, yeah, that's why I took it, and my mum was delighted. She was very pleased.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* he has a passage which I love and which is very different from the Barthes you bring about in your "Nabokov versus Barthes," which is *j'aime, je n'aime pas*, I like, I don't like, and in the like "I like salad, cinnamon, cheese, pimento, marzipan, the smell of new-cut hay (why doesn't someone with a nose make such a perfume?), roses, peonies, lavender, and then he goes on, I am honored to list *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Sartre, Brecht, Verne, Fourier, Eisenstein. I don't like women in slacks, geraniums, strawberries, the harpsichord, Miró, tautologies, animated cartoons, Arthur Rubenstein, villas—"

ZADIE SMITH: Villas?!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, villas.

ZADIE SMITH: That's a bit harsh.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The afternoons, but here what interested me and the reason I'm bringing up this passage is that *Changing My Mind* is most forcefully in my mind a book affirming the importance of taste. I mean, taste, which seemed to me such an important thing growing up. The reason we were friends with people is because they in some form or another shared our adjectives.

ZADIE SMITH: I like the idea, particularly when you're young that you're friends with someone because they like the same band as you, it's so inconceivable as you get older and older that that would be the thing which joined you. Something I love about teenagers is that kind of seriousness, like if you don't like this band, we cannot be friends, it's a profound thing. It's terrific.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It is serious, but isn't it in your book that you speak about an old boyfriend who you left because he—

ZADIE SMITH: He didn't like *Adam's Rib*. I didn't leave him for that reason, but it didn't help, it's true. That's a beautiful passage of Barthes and the wonderful thing about Barthes, and the reason why I think he's a savior to a lot of people who are in those literary theory classes like I was feeling desperate is that Barthes is the man who is brave enough to say "I like, I like, I like," to bring this aesthetic joy and pleasure, *jouissance*, as he said, back into the classroom, and I think for him changing his mind was really a very personal matter. He became this kind of intellectual superstar and then very quickly realized that you have to then defend your position and do all this tedious stuff that I don't think he was interested in. He was really a lover of objects, a lover of the arts, he wasn't out to be the king's semiologist, that was not his mission, and some of his writing, *A Lover's Discourse*, you realize that—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: *A Lover's Discourse* is extraordinary.

ZADIE SMITH: It's exquisite.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you remember that passage on waiting? It's one of my favorite moments.

ZADIE SMITH: It's amazing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He analyzes what it means for a lover to wait.

ZADIE SMITH: To wait for the other person.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And we feel so tremendously original when we're in love, but we are really not at all.

ZADIE SMITH: He dissects anything.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I mean, we are waiting, we're looking at our watch. If we're waiting too long we will leave not to be seen waiting. And he goes through it in a way that really makes you be in pain for having been so lacking in originality.

ZADIE SMITH: That book is just a revelation. We said at the beginning that criticism and the creative arts don't have to be in an argument, because Barthes showed that criticism is an art, it's a separate art, it's a beautiful, intelligent, wonderful art. It doesn't

have to be the same as the creative arts, it's something different. But he was—he made me have respect for the critic as someone who has absolutely as much genius as his supposed subject, the novelist.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because when I was growing up, there was a sentence in our Latin classes a hundred years ago, which was De gustibus non disputandum est, "of tastes you don't discuss," and it seemed to me always that the most interesting part of our life was to discuss and debate tastes, but when your taste changes, is changing your tastes the same thing as changing your mind?

ZADIE SMITH: Yes, because I think all tastes are expressions of belief. I'm going to choke, I'll have to stop soon, because I'm coughing already. Each novel I've written, any novel anybody writes, it's not that you sit down saying, "I believe this and now I will write this," but just by the nature of your sentences, just by the things you emphasize or don't emphasize, you're constantly expressing a belief about the way you think the world is, about the things you think are important, and those things change, they do change, and the form of the novel changes as well. A very simple example is in a lot of my fiction I've delved very deeply into people's heads into their consciousness and tried to take out every detail, the older I get the more I meet people and realize I don't know them. My own husband is a stranger to me, really, fundamentally at the end, you don't know these people. That should be reflected in what you write, total knowledge is impossible. I'm going to have to leave and choke backstage.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Total knowledge is impossible. Thank you very much.

ZADIE SMITH: Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: . . . a few questions if you like. So we'll bring up a mike.

ZADIE SMITH: I'll take this first and then we'll move on. Just a few, don't worry, I won't be long-winded.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Come up the mike if you would.

Q: I'd like to go back for a minute to the whole question of the Facebook and so forth and so on. I was talking about that with somebody, and they used a word I had never heard before, and it was "defriend." And I was wondering do you have any ideas like that about the effect that these new technologies have in creating neologisms beyond technical neologisms, but like "defriend," emotional neologisms.

ZADIE SMITH: I have to admit that I quite like the neologisms that technology creates. And I find "defriend" a really useful one. I quite often in the real world think, "I must defriend that person." But again the difference in the real world is that defriending should be a long—it needs to be a proper process, you need to have the conversation. The Internet makes it a little easy to defriend the people that you want to defriend. But anything that makes new words. I know that you're meant to find them barbaristic, but I

kind of love them. That's the bit of the Internet I love the most, is the word creation, half of which I don't understand, particularly the acronyms, but I kind of love that that's happening. To me that's the creative part of the Internet, that's kind of terrific. Touré, you're not serious.

Q: I'm a journalist. I have to have a question. From the piece, the *New York Review* piece, you talk about what it means to be a person 1.0 versus person 2.0 and at your age it must be a bit of a struggle not to become Person 2.0.

ZADIE SMITH: I don't—I have to be honest, I don't know because I am opting out, I can see it happening. As each new platform happens, I shrink back into my old ways. So I really feel that when I was writing the piece, that was my point of commentary, from now on I'll be completely invalidated, I won't be able to comment, because I won't know. Just from what I see I think that my friends who are heavily involved in it, there does seem to be an inverse relation between the capacity for intimacy and the kind of self-revelation that goes on online, in a very basic way, the inability to form eye contact, kind of nervousness in person, and the wish always to text rather than phone, all that kind of stuff, those kind of minor ways of being, of relating to someone. But it might be that those relations are the way the world's going to operate, you know. The thing which I do find exhausting as a Person 1.0 is the amount of time everything takes. It's easy to remember that fifteen years ago that—that e-mail thing that we're doing, at that time didn't, we weren't doing that, you know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How were we functioning?

ZADIE SMITH: Well, it's interesting, so in thinking about seeing that Virginia Woolf manuscript upstairs, I do remember from the diaries and letters, that she's writing about twenty notes a day, right, someone comes and picks them up and takes them down the street and puts them all over London, that's about the same as e-mail, right? Not so different, though her notes would tend to be shorter, I guess, but the amount of time I have to give to this self-admin, I just don't think in 1994 I had this thing in my life called "self-admin" that takes hours, and that seems a bit scary to me, self-generated unnecessary e-mail.

Q: Hello. First, thank you so much for mentioning George Saunders, I love him. The article was wonderful, I sent it off to other people, whose then young son wrote back and said at the beginning he knew there was something wrong with it, he was about sixteen when he went on it, and he started making fake like groups, and he said there was something about people just trying to celebrate the normal things of life. He made a group where if he turned the light on in the bathroom, sometimes he would forget, so then he'd go to the bathroom, and he didn't turn it off. "Do you like this?" He said lots of people were doing that, were becoming part of his like group, are you like me, do you turn the light on or off when you leave the bathroom.

One of the main things I think it can be used for—after reading your article—I know two people, one severely emotionally damaged, another one definitely Asperger's. They're

having a great time. The damaged one said because of the family situation she's been able to go into the little—I don't know what it is—farmland, houseland, whatever it is, and she can sit on the couch in the living room with her severely damaged sister and herself and talk about the family problems, it's fascinating. She can't talk to her in person, they can't get along, and it's interesting that it has aspects to it that normal people who have friends and who talk and write, we don't like it, it's creepy—

ZADIE SMITH: I think those thin relations can be useful. It's the same with TV, it's not that you go to TV for everything you need, but it's also useful sometimes to have on in the back of Thanksgiving when you're about to kill your aunt, so I don't think those thin relations are evil, it's just that you worry that they become the only thing and you forget that there were other ways of relating to people, but everybody knows that there are some certain people you'd rather text than talk to. There is a criteria of person you really don't want to talk to, a text is just good enough. So I don't think that's an inherently evil relation, it's just the idea as the way we should relate, and the way Zuckerberg talks about it as a philosophy—that slightly unnerved me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's take a couple more questions.

Q: Ms. Smith, I bunked work in Washington, D.C. to be with you here today. Thank you so much. My question is relation to empathy and your article that you wrote about *The Social Network*. What does empathy do for the art of writing the novel—what does the

social network or Facebook and does that reduce empathy and does that reduce empathy and has that reduced our innate ability to be in other places or imagine them.

ZADIE SMITH: It just might be that the novel as we've known it or the way that Eliot wrote that that novel just changes into something else. I'd love to read a novel which managed to capture truly the texture of our lives now, which are a great deal of them spent online. To me the responsibility of a novel is to try to be honest to the times it exists in, so it will change the form of the novel but that's a good thing. The novel can't stay the same place forever. It can't have the same beliefs that Eliot did forever, because people aren't that way anymore, and that's okay, I think.

Q: The conversation reminded me of another Foster Wallace essay, which is the E Pluribus Unum one where he talks about television, and it seems like one of the insights from that applies to the Internet conversation, that it's not inherently bad, it's actually extremely good at what it does and that it's just easy and the real issue is its easiness and in some ways that seems to parallel with what's going on with reading right now, where readings' job is increasingly to convince people that a harder medium, a process as you said, is the way that they want to absorb life lessons and information and so forth and reading is now a niche process tool. I was wondering you just said that the novel should evolve. Do you think about how it could be, I don't know, easier, it's almost a bad word.

ZADIE SMITH: I think the reason novelists are attracted to difficulty, or the reason Wallace was, is he's trying to slow you down really, that's really what it's about. He's

trying for you not to process what's coming at you in the same way you would process TV or the Internet—it's not always easy the Internet—but the job of the novel has always been to try to slow you down to be attentive to this thing and Wallace was trying to say is that job has become a little harder, I have to slow you down in different ways, because you're so—such a great media consumer that I really have to go around the houses to make you stop and think. And I think that's why the novel is attracted to complexity and maybe that is annoying to a lot of people, but I really feel with so much that's easily consumed can't we have this little corner which is occasionally a bit difficult. It's not going to be the end of the world is it, nobody's forcing them on anyone, if it ends up being a small community who are interested in that kind of complexity, that's okay.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The way there was a movement for slow food, there should be a movement for slow reading.

ZADIE SMITH: Exactly. It's just a different way of being in the world. It doesn't seem to me to be a bad one.

Q: I have a question I'd like to ask you with the aim of sort of demystifying the process of writing, coming from a former NYU creative writing student, actually. But I'm curious when you sit down to write a novel, how fully fleshed out is your idea for the book, do you know each character intimately, do you know each location, each step, and it's just a matter of organizing it?

ZADIE SMITH: No, no, no. Not at all. And just upstairs when we were looking at *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf, I already knew this about Woolf because I've seen other manuscripts, she will have for each chapter a word, pretty much, maybe two, and what she's trying to get at is a sensation. She's made a little edit for herself on the one page saying, "I see I used to be start loose and get tighter where now I always start tight and get loose." That means something to me immediately; I don't know whether it means something to you. But that is the way that novelists really talk to each other, that is why in a creative writing class, like you've been in, like I'm in, there's so much dishonesty, because it's very hard to say to twelve kids, "how about if you start loose and get tighter?" but that's the truth, that's how writers really think about their work in that completely random, stupid, stupid way. It sounds stupid, but it's something you do with your gut and it happens sentence to sentence. So a character is barely in my mind until I get to it and then I start making the sentences but I make absolutely no extensive plans, I have an idea of a sensibility and a color and whether it's going to be loose or tight, literally.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very much.

ZADIE SMITH: Thank you.

(applause)