

# *Intimations*

SIX ESSAYS

*Zadie Smith*



PENGUIN BOOKS

## Intimations

### *Debts and Lessons*

#### 1. *My Mother*

Energy, vitality, charisma. The source: an undimmed childishness. Which I share.

#### 2. *My Father*

A readiness to admit failure and weakness. An acceptance of guilt.

#### 3. *Ben*

Good humor. The family energy combined with a performer's desire to waste nothing, to turn all gifts outwards.

#### 4. *Luke*

A homemade spirituality. Love of nature and faith in all natural things—including death. An internal clock that pays no mind to the time of the world.

#### 5. *Mr. Rainbow*

In his classroom, what was on your desk, in front of you, was yours to perfect. To do as well as you were able. Handwriting—even back then, a dead art—was to be taken as seriously as spelling, as math, as memorizing the events of 1066. Joy and rigor were the same thing: if the whole choir was to get the benefit of “Bali Ha’i” it would be by way of a martial attention to each part of the whole. There was nowhere to hide in that choir. And no pride to be taken in the fact that we, “the singers,” were removed from the school as a whole every Tuesday afternoon and presented with this task. There was nothing special about us to be found in that fact, not even when, months later, we sang “Bali Ha’i” perfectly, just as he had trained us to do. Yes, we sang it well; the song was beautiful. We owed it to the song.

#### 6 *Darren*

6. *Barack*

That prejudice is most dangerous not when it resides in individual hearts and minds but when it is preserved in systems. For example: an educational system that proves unable to see a boy as a child, seeing him only as a potential threat. That any child who enters such a prejudiced system will be in grave danger. Be he ever so beautiful and talented, inspired and inspirational, loving and loved—he can still be broken.

7. *Kibibi*

How to dance. How to make yourself up from scraps—from whatever is available. How to be continually surprised by small things, like the spring of a jack-in-the-box, your most treasured toy. Here he comes! Here he comes! And therefore: how never to be cynical.

8. *Kellas*

To consider yourself lucky, even in situations which almost anybody else would consider extremely difficult and unfair. To think, reflexively, of whoever suffers. To forgive anyone who has wounded you, no matter how badly, especially if there is any sign whatsoever that a person has, in wounding you, also wounded themselves. To make no hierarchical distinction between people. To tell any story just as it happened, only exaggerating for humor, but never lying, and never trying to give yourself the flattering role.

9. *Christine*

That the diaspora included me. Sistahood.

10. *Muhammad Ali*

“No Vietcong ever called me nigger.” Therefore: solidarity.

11. *Pablo*

A thirteen-year-old, avant-garde painter appeared in school, very unlike the other boys. Out. Unafraid. From Argentina. The most recent immigrant in a school of many immigrants. He needed a model for a nude, which, in the execution, turned out to be abstract: circles and triangles. You couldn’t tell it was me, but we recognized each other. The picture was marginal, he was marginal, I was marginal. How to delight in a margin.

12. *Lorraine Hansberry*

“When you starts measuring somebody, measure him *right*, child, measure him right.” Therefore: compassion.

13. *Jenny, Drama Teacher*

A task is in front of you. It is not as glorious as you had imagined or hoped. (In this case, it is not the West End, it is not Broadway, it is a small black box stapled to an ugly comprehensive school.) But it is the task in front of you. Delight in it. The more absurd and tiny it is, the more care and dedication it deserves. Large, sensible projects require far less belief. People who dedicate themselves to unimportant things will sometimes be blind to the formal borders that are placed around the important world. They might see teenagers as people. They will make themselves absurd to the important world. Mistakes will be made. Appropriate measures will be pursued. The border between the important and the unimportant will be painfully reestablished. But the magic to be found in the black box will never be forgotten by any who entered it.

14. *Zora Neale Hurston*

Just: *brass balls*. Although that’s somebody else’s language. The importance of finding your own language. *Brass titties*?

15. *Tracy Chapman*

“All that you have is your soul.” Therefore: liberty.

16. *Hannah*

Everyday goodness, care, attention, in the form of friendship, daughtership, mothership, siblingship. When did Hannah ever make anyone feel bad?

17. *Daisy*

Practical morality. A calendar filled with every birthday, every anniversary. Nothing put off till tomorrow. No love abstracted, instead everything made concrete and demonstrated. Memory and memorialization as an act of love, completed on behalf of all the other people less organized, less able to remember, and therefore grateful for the prompt. The value of being that person who remembers the childhoods of others better than they themselves recall them, and takes it upon themselves to preserve said childhoods for safekeeping. Sending an old friend’s childhood back to them at the very moment they are most in need of it.

18. *Zulfi*

To have one layer of skin less than the others, and therefore to feel it all: the good and the bad, the beautiful and the abject. Not only to make art but in some sense to live it.

19. *Virginia Woolf*

To replace that missing layer of skin with language. For as long as that works.

20. *Mags*

Delirium, delight, youth, sunshine, love letters, love songs. “*Love me*,” sang the Cardigans, “*fool me*,” and we did both—it was all we had to do. It is possible to grow disdainful of love songs of this type. But never to entirely forget what it was to hear truth in banal pop lyrics.

21. *Nick*

How to love. How to give. How to grow up. Laughter as a peace offering. Courage. (All intimations still in progress.)

22. *Devorah*

To make use of your missing layer at all times in all things. To read every line of a book with the same sense of involvement and culpability as if you had written it yourself. And, conversely, to write your own sentences as if you had no more ownership over the lines than a stranger. To be never finished thinking, because everything is as infinite as God. To know there is a metaphysics of everything.

23. *Darryl*

History as the antidote to dogma. Identity as area of interest, as the form in which you’ve chosen to expend your love—and your commitment.

24. *Dave*

As improbable as it often seems, it is possible to act. To lead. To use your imagination to build practical structures that will in some form improve the lives of the people who enter them. Paranoia about action—and the motivations for action—is the sickly indulgence of intellectuals and philosophers. The truth is that some people have a gift for action. In some people this gift is outsized, disproportionate, extraordinary to witness.

## 25. Carol

When in the presence of a child, get on the floor. Or else bend down until your own and the child's eyes meet. Mothering is an art. Housekeeping is an art. Gardening is an art. Baking is an art. Those of us who have no natural gifts in these areas—or perhaps no interest—too easily dismiss them. Making small talk is an art, and never to be despised just because you yourself dread making it. Knowing all your neighbors' names is an art. Sending cards at holidays, to everybody you know—this, too, is an art. But above all these: playing. The tales of adult women who still know how to play with children—these should be honored. Collected in a history book, like Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Instead, their grandchildren remember.

## 26. Contingency

That I was born when I was born, where I was born—a case of relative historical luck. That I grew up in a moment of social, religious and national transition. That my school still sang the Anglican hymns, at least for a little while, so that the ancient diction of my country came to me while very young, and fruitfully mixed with the sounds of my heritage. That the tail end of one thing and the beginning of another were both visible and equally interesting to me. Milton and Monie Love. *Hill and gully rider, hill and gully!* Keats and Monty Python. *And did those feet in ancient time?* Kafka and Prince. *Yellow bird, up high in banana tree. Twelfth Night* and *Desmond's*. Malcolm X and Aneurin Bevan. Oscar Wilde and James Baldwin. “Pump Up the Jam.” Peter Cook and Tupac. Queen Latifah and Vita Sackville-West. That there were so many voices in the streets. That such complex convergences were my earliest knowledge of the world. That no one interfered with me, sexually, as a child. That my father was dull and steady and did not drink, due to a weak kidney. That my own love of alcohol and all forms of mood transformers and enhancers for some reason never became excessive. That my mother had no hatred for her own skin, hair, nose, backside, nor any part of her. That my family was essentially matriarchal. That I was considered “ugly” young and “beautiful” later. That by the time the external opinion changed it was too late to create any real change in me. That the kinds of women I admired in childhood were all from what Toni Cade Bambara called the championship tradition: Neneh, George Eliot, Madonna, Katharine Hepburn, Grace Jones, Salt, Pepa, Lil' Kim, Joan Armatrading, Angela Davis, Elizabeth I. That my fear is stronger than my desire—including my desire to self-harm. That my grandfathers—one a violent alcoholic, the other a destroyer of women—were both unknown to

me. That my brothers were a delight to me, from the first. That I was an oldest child, with all the shameful obliviousness that implies. That I met a human whose love has allowed me not to apply for love too often through my work—even when we've hurt each other desperately. That my children know the truth about me but still tolerate me, so far. That my physical and moral cowardice have never really been tested, until now.

## ***About the Author***

Zadie Smith is the author of the novels *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*, *NW*, and *Swing Time*, as well as a novella, *The Embassy of Cambodia*, two collections of essays, *Changing My Mind* and *Feel Free*, and a short story collection, *Grand Union*. She is currently a tenured professor of fiction at New York University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*.