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The
Autograph
Man
a novel
Zadie
Smith

bestselling author of *White Teeth*

The Autograph Man

Zadie Smith

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The Autograph Man

Zadie Smith

The Autograph Man Zadie Smith

Alex-Li Tandem sells autographs. His business is to hunt for names on paper, collect them, sell them, and occasionally fake them—all to give the people what they want: a little piece of Fame. But what does Alex want? Only the return of his father, the end of religion, something for his headache, three different girls, infinite grace, and the rare autograph of forties movie actress Kitty Alexander. With fries.

The Autograph Man is a deeply funny existential tour around the hollow trappings of modernity: celebrity, cinema, and the ugly triumph of symbol over experience. It offers further proof that Zadie Smith is one of the most staggeringly talented writers of her generation.

The Autograph Man Details

Date : Published June 17th 2003 by Vintage (first published 2002)

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Author : Zadie Smith

Format : Paperback 347 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Contemporary, Literature, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review The Autograph Man for online ebook

Geordie Peacock says

I'd delayed reading this book for many years because of the mediocre reviews but there it was: a lone English novel, in a Spanish book shop, so I decided to take the plunge. Plus I had just finished rereading *On Beauty*, which is enjoyable and insightful, and works so well as an updated *Howard's End*.

Unfortunately the reviews were right. This feels like it was difficult to write; you can sense the sections where Smith must have thrown up her hands in despair. It makes several clunky attempts to offer insight into the vapid nature of celebrity but it feels painfully forced - a reference to a bird singing the first notes of a popular show tune made me blush - and the Jewish/Goyish thing, although amusing at first, quickly becomes infuriating.

I always despair of reviews that complain of the lack of 'likeable characters', but you know a novel is in trouble when you could quite happily punch the noses of those with whom the author intends you to sympathise. Alex is meant to be irksome (I presume) but Adam is just a massive pain in the arse. (Is suspicion of the over earnest a Goyish thing?)

By some coincidence I started rereading *London Fields* halfway through (out of despair and necessity) and the similarities between Smith and Amis and their approach to tales of the city are striking, but Amis wrote about young lust, when he was in his precocious phase, and Smith has attempted to tackle something that Amis wisely left alone for a few years. I have *NW* on my bookshelf and I am afraid.

Zoe says

One of the problems with this book, is that it will inevitably be read with 'White Teeth' in mind, and unfortunately, it really doesn't compare. While it demonstrates Smith's tongue-in-cheek humour, it is incredibly slow to start, and the characters are such superficial creations, that it is often difficult to empathise with them. I agree with another reviewer who suggests that Smith seems to have packed too many ideas in here. This results in a novel which is not as satisfactorily complete as her debut, or indeed, the follow up 'On Beauty.'

'Autograph Man' raises some interesting discussions relating to contemporary consumerism and materialism, but lacks the substance and insight perhaps expected of its author.

Snotchocheez says

My first acquaintance with Zadie Smith's work, *The Autograph Man* has left me convinced of her far-reaching talent. While this book has plenty of flaws, Ms. Smith's story-telling exuberance (for me) wins out and makes my beefs with it seem picayune by comparison.

We follow Alex-Li Tandem, Chinese/English/confused Jew/young alkie/stoner/titular "Autograph Man" as he tries (mostly unsuccessfully) to get past the death of his father thirteen years prior. He's pretty much stuck in Schlob-land, getting stoned and drunk all the time, ignoring his girlfriend working in a go-nowhere profession as an autograph dealer. His life takes a fortuitous turn as he pursues the autograph of his childhood idol, Kitty Alexander, an actress from the 1950's long removed from the public eye.

While I don't agree with most of the criticisms of this book (*The Autograph Man* is, with a 3.1-star cume Goodreads average, the lowest-rated of Ms. Smith's four novels), she does leave herself open for critical attack. Alex is quite unlikable, the story rambles on quite a bit, the ending is, well...not exactly satisfying. Ms. Smith, though, surrounds our protagonist with three childhood friends; their banter is at times hilarious and make up for Alex's unsympathetic character flaws. The story is consistently engaging and clever.

If you're even casually interested in Judaica, old movies, or schlubby characters in search of themselves, I recommend this book to you. Don't let the low GR rating dissuade you (as it almost did me.)

Steven says

Of all of Ms. Smith's books, "The Autograph Man," her second novel, garnered the most mixed reaction, which is why I read it last. I can certainly understand the disappointment for those critics and fans who awaited its arrival after her stunning debut, "White Teeth." Its tone, especially in the first half, is somber and claustrophobic, as the reader follows the protagonist, Alex Li-Tandem, through the aftermath of a drug-induced hangover as he prepares for the anniversary of his father's death. It takes a good hundred and fifty pages before the narrative picks up speed, a plot, and finally a broader cast of characters, which is always where this author shines, her biggest gift being the ability to capture the voices and inner lives of men and women from a multitude of ages, races and socioeconomic roles. In this second half, the title and ruminations on fame that seemed so esoteric in the first half come to gripping life as Alex travels to New York in search of a reclusive star and meets an unlikely companion on his journey. But, it's the ending, which in both her more lauded first and third novels she was criticized for over stage-managing, where this novel shines, for though the plot comes to a pleasing conclusion, the characters are all left in very recognizable places of transition, between my generation's extended adolescence and adulthood, a threshold where we must look at faith, love and the relationships in our lives and realize that no amount of pop culture savvy can save us.

Aggeliki says

Ο συλλ?κτης αυτογ?φων ε?νναι ?να βιβλ?ο που τελει?νοντ?ς το, μου ?φησε μια α?σθηση γλυκ?τητας. ?χει μια ιδια?τερα φρ?σκια και ενδιαφ?ρουσα αφηγηματικ? απ?δοση της ιστορ?ας με πολ? ζωντανο?ς και καθημερινο?ς διαλ?γους. Με γραφ? που υμνε? την φιλοδοξ?α, την επιμον?, το π?ρασμα στην πρακτικ? ενηλικ?ωση (παρ? την διατ?ρηση του ?φηβου ?ρωα μ?σα στο εν?λικο σ?μα του) μα κυρ?ως το θεωρ? ?να βιβλ?ο αφιερωμ?νο στην φιλ?α. Απ?φυγε ?ντεχνα τις ?βρεις που συναντ?νται στους καθημερινο?ς διαλ?γους, ξεδιπλ?νοντας ταυτ?χρονα ?να ωραι?τατο λεξιλ?γο που εξυπηρετε? την ιστορ?α της, καθ?λου πομπ?δες ? επιτηδευμ?νο. ?σως να ?δινα και μισ? αστερ?κι ακ?μη αν η - κατ? τα ?λλα - ταλαντο?χα Smith εμβ?θυνε λ?γο περισσ?τερο στους χαρακτ?ρες της που σε σημε?α μοι?ζουν λ?γο επιφανειακο?. Σ?γουρα θα αναζητ?σω κι ?λλα δε?γματα γραφ?ς της.

Barry Pierce says

How can you possibly follow up *White Teeth*? Well you can't, but Smith gives us a very different but equally

enjoyable novel. The plot of *The Autograph Man* is, shall we say, a bit more conventional than *White Teeth*. Smith's wonderful ability to capture speech in her prose is as admirable here as ever and importantly, it's funny! Sadly this novel has been relegated to the sidelines by all of her other novels but true Smith fans will read this and keep it as their dirty little secret.

Donna says

She hopes for nothing except fine weather and a resolution. She wants to end properly, like a good sentence.

Zadie Smith has been on my list of authors to read for several years, but I'd only heard of her more well-known novels, *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*. I found *The Autograph Man* on a bookshelf in the teacher's lounge at my school and immediately picked it up.

The story was difficult to get into at first, as the main character, Alex Li-Tandem, didn't start off being too sympathetic or relatable. Alex is half-Chinese and half-Jewish, but it's the half-Jewish part that gets the most attention in the book. Alex has Jewish friends who smoke pot and spend their days pondering Jewish mysticism, and he has a black Jewish girlfriend. All in all, this book is incredibly diverse without overtly advertising that fact.

Alex is an autograph man, he collects signatures from celebrities (a habit he picks up from a childhood friend) and sells them on to fans and other collectors. He has collected autographs from hundreds of celebrities, but he's missing the pièce de résistance of his collection, the signature of Kitty Alexander. After a drunken night out, he inexplicably finds a copy that she has sent to him, and that discovery sets him on a journey, to find the elusive 40's star.

There's not too much to be said about the plot here, nothing particularly of note happens. However, what I loved about the novel was Smith's use of language and power of description. I found myself thinking of sentences and phrases hours after reading them. Though much of Smith's discussion of Jewish mysticism passed over my head, I was nonetheless intrigued and eager to read.

Susanna Rautio says

Ei Zadie Smithin Nimikirjoitusmiehelle voi antaa tähtiä. Välillä on nollaa ja välillä kaikkea ykkösestä vitoseen ja ylikin. Päädyin samaan epätaajuuteen kuin Swing Timeä lukissa.

Smith on kielensä kanssa uskomattoman taitava. Taitaisin jäädä kakkoseksi, jos joutuisin (tai pääsisin) mukaan Alex-Li Tandemin ja kavereiden dialogeihin.

Nimikirjoitusmies on ihan reaalialaista kerrontaa ja vauhtia piisaa. Kun päähenkilötäkin on vain yksi, kiinalais-juutalainen Alex-Li Tandem, tulee herra nimikirjoitusmieheen pakosti luotua jonkinlainen kiintymyssuhde.

Vaikka en lainkaan ymmärtänyt häntä lapsena - ehkä hän ei sellainen koskaan ollutkaan.

Ongelmaa tuotti myös juutalainen nuorisokulttuuri raamatullisine nimineen, kabbaloineen ja

rabbikavereineen. Sekä nimikirjoituselämä julkislistoineen, näyttelijätärpakkomielteineen ja etenkin showpaini, josta se kaikkia alkoi. Ja hyvin paljon tapahtui erilaisten aineiden vaikutuksen alaisena ja muistikatkojen itsesääliissä rypien. Ilmankos Alex-Li Tandemilla oli "taito kuvitella itsensä pikku episodiksi muiden elämässä".

Nimikirjoitusmies oli ilikurinen, ei mitenkään vakava - eikä siten niin vaikuttava kuin olisin toivonut. Tai sitten olen taipuvainen kolmen kirjan perusteella epäilemään, että Zadie Smithin aura on hänen kirjojaan vaikuttavampi.

B the BookAddict says

One of those serendipitous moments for me: looking for another of Zadie Smith's books NW,, I chanced upon this one. What a find. It did take me a couple of pages to settle in with this story but I was hooked from then on. A novel about a young man, his friends and a few months in their lives shown deftly in the hilarious, droll, sometimes very serious but always brilliant words of Zadie Smith.

Alex-Li Tandem is half Chinese, is Jewish, has a black girlfriend, a best mate who's a Rabbi and another one who (view spoiler). He's writing his own book on the differences between Jewish and Goyish and he's an Autograph Man – he buys and sells autographs of famous people. His father died when he was fifteen and now at twenty-seven, it's coming up for his father's shul to be offered on his anniversary; something Alex has always failed to do so far. He has had a lifetime devotion to a famous 1940s movie-star but has never managed to acquire her autograph. Alex has always felt himself to be something of a failure but life is about to deal him some hands he never thought possible.

Loved it, loved it, loved it. The humor is sly and the descriptions have be Smith's own kind of wonderful. It is sassy and philosophical, it's warm-hearted and funny, it's wise and irreverent. I borrowed a copy from the library but I'm about to purchase one for myself. One of the best reads I've had this year. 5★

Sherrie Miranda says

4.0 out of 5 stars

All Things considered, I Liked the Story

By Sherrie Miranda on April 13, 2018

Format: Paperback

As a reader of Black & Latino authors, I bought Zadie Smith's book in part because she is a black Brit. I thought I would learn something about life as a black, British female in London. The main character is a Chinese Jew and there are several other characters in the story, but the one black Brit is talked about a few times & gets about two minutes in an actual scene. There is even a black American prostitute in the story. She is not realistic at all, but none of the characters are.

That said, once I accepted that the novel was NOT about a character like Zadie, I did finally begin to enjoy the story. Alex Li Tandem and his friends are fascinating and unusual characters. And the story is like nothing I've ever read. I always thought people who collected autographs were rather silly people, but I now see that it is also a business and some collectors will do almost anything to get an autograph, including going halfway around the world, as well as forging a signature if they are desperate or delirious enough.

All things considered, I liked the story, but I do imagine I will like some of her other novels more. Sherrie Miranda's historically based, coming of age, Adventure novel "Secrets & Lies in El Salvador" will be out en Español soon. It's about an American girl in war-torn El Salvador:
<http://tinyurl.com/klxbt4y>
Her husband made a video for her novel. He wrote the song too:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P11Ch...>

Emily says

What started out as a promising read quickly turned into a...really crappy one. I know this makes me sound somewhat like a whiny seventh grader when I say this, but god, this book was booooooring. I read the entire thing hoping that at some point it'd turn the corner and pick up the pace, but no, it just basically ground itself out into a completely anti-climactic ending. But before that we got pages and pages of...I don't even know what, I disliked this book so much that I immediately purged it from my mind upon finishing it. I think there were some ramblings about Jewish mysticism, autographs, and then some more Jewish mysticism, and then more about autographs. I wanted to claw my eyes out by the end of the book.

Another thing that also dampened my reading experience was the fact that I hated the main character. I mean, I love as much as the next person the idea of the deeply-flawed-yet-still-very-sympathetic character, but I found nothing at all redeeming about Alex-Li Tandem. Instead, I found myself constantly wishing I could reach into the book and kick him in the head.

In conclusion, I recommend this book to no one.

MJ Nicholls says

ORIGINAL REVIEW:

James Wood in his thesis review covers all the thoughts I had on this one (and more and more) and is the most worthwhile review of this book around. For those who aren't that interested, let me sum up the basics: lapsed Anglo-Chinese Jew Alex-Li is an autograph hunter fixated on Kitty Alexander, fictional Hollywood starlet of the 1950s. He spends his time writing a book on Jews v. Christians, spurning his faith, squabbling with rabbis, upsetting his bald girlfriend and cavorting with fellow autograph hunters. In the latter half of the book he meets his idol and develops inner demons.

Smith's other novels are vast multi-character epics and her towering authorial presence benefits from having numerous dummies to manipulate, rather than the one insubstantial dummy. This novel could have benefitted from a less grandiose scope for quite a thin plot and morose protagonist: a slim 250 pages over a hoggish 419. On the plus side, the prose is as comic, stylish and rhythmic as ever, though her longer meandering passages feel like failed snippets from *White Teeth*. Hats off for writing a radically different second book—Zadie put up with some hostility in the UK round about this time.

APPENDED MOAN FOUND IN DOCUMENTS FOLDER:

It does bug me quite how many readers think they have the right to desecrate a writer's work on here with

their off-handed dismissals and oh-so-clever putdowns, usually “steaming pile of . . .” or “a complete waste of . . .” What gives a casual reader the right to take such a stance about someone else’s passionate labour other than sheer spite? Where is this spite coming from? Has the book *personally offended* you?

OK, so you dislike the book. Fine! I can understand the plot or characters didn’t ring your bell, but honestly . . . haven’t we grown as readers enough to weigh a book on its merits? Unless a book offends on a level of stance, in terms of the author’s questionable views, the reviewer should give due weight to each element of the writer’s craft. If they still find it wanting after this, fine! But the arrogance of these people who dismiss books with witless rejoinders—“written by a sophomore student,” or—“I’ve could churned out something better in grad school.” ARE YOU ALL MAD?

This book, and Zadie Smith in particular, is a fine example of this bizarre persecution. Do you know how difficult it is to write a book like *The Autograph Man*? This is why the publishing desks are clotted with ream after ream of dreck: people flinging themselves into writing who haven’t the ability to appreciate an example of lyrical, witty and vital prose, what makes writer like Smith simultaneously as popular as she is cutting-edge.

This disgruntlement is part of a wider beef about our obsession with “grading” artworks on their merits—surely, with such a ruthless system of critical appraisal around books, music, cinema, TV, we’d filter what is “allowed” to get made, what people might want to see based on the endless chatter of feedback—but instead, we have a mainstream that celebrates the lowest common denominator, and an avant-garde relentlessly bitching over what gets published and deemed “cutting edge.” The line between popular and artistic is being tugged to breaking point, whereas a writer like Smith straddles this line, offering a neutral pleasure for both territories. And we moan and moan!

OK. I’m done.

James says

Not Zadie Smith at her finest - but nonetheless a very accomplished, intriguing and of course brilliantly written novel as well as an interesting insight into the bizarre world of celebrity obsession and autograph trading.

Ian says

This book gives the international gesture of 1 finger down your throat.
Appalling, I deserve a medal or an insanity check for finishing this.

Siria says

I enjoyed Smith’s writing style far more than I enjoyed the plot (which promised some things but delivered others) or the characters (who are neatly drawn, but on paper that is very thin indeed); but even the sometimes whimsical, sometimes nervy, sometimes delightful turns of her prose weren’t enough to save *The Autograph Man* from being something of a disappointment. It’s more mature in some ways than *White Teeth*,

darker, and I would imagine in many ways a reflection on Smith's part on the fame which she received thanks to her first novel—certainly, I think, that was the reason behind the emphasis on fame and multiculturalism in this novel. And yet a lot of it seems ephemeral, shallow: full of aphorisms which seem fake and showy in her characters' mouths; reflections and obsessions on Judaism that seem like they could only have come from someone who isn't Jewish; signs and symbols which mean nothing, an empty kind of moralism. Disappointing.

Nate D says

A thoroughly modern fable that seems to be about the over-identification with symbols, from the marks of Kabbalah to the titular autographs. It's brisker and more playful than *White Teeth* (which was plenty playful) but also lacks its human scope. It also suffers from a frequent Zadie Smith problem I have; she seems decidedly more capable of sympathy for her characters than I am. Note to self: reading about alcoholics is annoying if you want to care about their decisions at all.

Ian Mapp says

I am so glad that this is the second zadie smith book that I have read, for rest assured, if it had been the first it would have been the only.

This is appalling and I am not sure what kept me going through its 410 pages.

Its starts Ok with a prelogue that reads as though it has been tagged on. Three kids and a father go to a wrestling match between Big Daddy and Haystacks and the one child gets an autograph. Only by reading reviews of the book did I realise that the father died during the scramble to get the autograph. This is even after revisiting the section!

Incredible.

Then the stort meanders on as the kids are in their mid twenties. Alex Li Tandem is half chinese, half jewish and all dull. He lives a slacker life trading autographs, eventually travelling to America to a collection fayre where he tracks down the elusive Kitty and collect artifacts that make him money.

Whereas *On Beauty* was full of excellent charaterisation - this was bland beyond belief. Chapter headings tried to tie in with Kabbalism, whcih I know nothing about and the whole story (for what there was) lurched from nothingness to nothingness with no drama or interest.

As you would expect, there were some smart observations and turns of phrase but the end (especially the end) was dull beyond belief and a relief to finish.

I will try *White Teeth* to see which part of the spectrum that appears at.

Brady Dale says

One of the single most memorable books I've ever read and totally underappreciated. It's so good. It's about a young man totally at a loss in his life and he has to do a lot of stupid things to realize he actually has it all pretty good. She chooses a very funny little adventure and a very special character to help him get his head sorted.

It's hard for me to say why this book is so great. I think Smith just has a lot of talent but is often constrained by others expectations of her talent. I think she knew that everyone expects the sophomore effort to suck, so she planned for it to suck, didn't worry about it and wrote a book so unbelievably effing good that I can't imagine she'll ever manage this sort of achievement again.

And I'm sure pretty much no one agrees with me on this one, but there it is. This book is one of my all time favorites. Definitely. I don't re-read many books, but I've read this twice and I have no doubt I will reading it again.

Karen J. says

This book has performed a necessary feat--revived my love of literature and STORY post a 3-year, year-round, purely academic stint. An unmatched feeling (exclusive to the luxury of reading for pleasure) constantly arises: I read, I stare at a household object or tree and repeat the gifted string of words, thinking, how in the world did anyone know to write this? How did Smith know to wrap up the humour of philosophy, the elusiveness of fame, the over-the-top sanctity of religious belief, and the ongoing effort to reconcile with death all in one go? It seems absurd in theory, but I seem to have an inimitable connection with the product of her many hours of brilliance.

I've been aching for that feeling of wonder from my younger days for so long--you have no idea. It was previously reserved for classics like "Matilda," then "The Secret Garden," then "The Catcher in the Rye." More recently, "The Namesake." It's come again, with the adorable Alex-Li Tandem and his oddly- or wonderfully-shaped and spoken friends and acquaintances.

Really, this is hardly a magnificent review or an adequate description of the work, just a sentimental few paragraphs of HOW MUCH I LOVE ZADIE SMITH.

But, you should know, concerning points of interest:
Chinese Jewish professional autograph man (check)
African girlfriend with a pacemaker (check)
London, New York (check)
Heaps of tea and booze (check)
Both heaps of Torah and goyishness (check)

A million thanks, Zadie! You are forever my author girl-crush.

(Now, to the end. I don't suspect my feelings will change much.)

Bennard says

From The Book Hooligan

"All fandom is a form of tunnel vision: warm and dark and infinite in one direction." - The Narrator

There is nothing more treacherous than fame. At one point, it is an asset then, at the next, it is a liability. This is because nobody is the master of fame and everyone, even the Brad Pitts and the Angelina Jolies of the world will fade into obscurity. The only people who can profit and prosper from fame are those from the outside of fame, those that make the fame of others their source of livelihood. They are called Autograph Men, those who sell the signature of famous people varying from Star Wars-era Harrison Ford to the taboo that is Adolf Hitler. Only such men, these Autograph Men, can make fame an ally.

Zadie Smith's The Autograph Man is a story of such a man mentioned above. Alex-Li Tadem, a half-Chinese, half-Jewish man who walks through life peddling the signature of others; offering to people the chance to experience and own a sliver of other people's fame for a price, of course. For Alex-Li, his ultimate goal is to get an autograph Kitty Alexander, a reclusive star of Hollywood's Golden Age, who rarely gives autographs and memorabilia. For Alex-Li, Kitty Alexander is the Holy Grail and he is one of King Arthur's knights who will do anything to get it. In this case, "anything" constitutes writing letters to Kitty. Alex-Li's world is overturned when, after a very wild trip due to drugs, he acquires two autographs of Kitty Alexander. From this point, the story goes haywire with Alex-Li being questioned about the authenticity of the autographs; Alex-Li going to New York to participate in an autograph convention and visit the home of Kitty Alexander; encountering a mysophobic prostitute; Kitty Alexander living in his home; dealing with his father's death; dealing with his friends, girlfriend and mistress; and imbibing different alcoholic drinks alphabetically.

The people in Alex-Li's life are as much a character as Alex-Li himself. Accompanying him in the colorful cast of characters is his girlfriend Esther, a lovely girl whose only fault for Alex-Li is that she is real to him unlike Kitty Alexander; Adam, Esther's brother and Alex-Li's best friend, who is a very devout Jew who engages in the occasional (read: a lot) joint; Joseph, another friend of Alex, a former Autograph Man who is now an insurance salesman who envies Alex-Li's vocation and love life; and Rabbi Max, another friend, who is a rabbi that tries to guide Alex through the Jewish faith while fitting Brobdingnagian furniture in Lilliputian cars. These are the core characters, including Kitty Alexander that helps move the plot forward, backward, and sideways.

The story is not conventional as it does not follow a specific plot. It is more of "a week in the life" kind of story that details what happens to Alex-Li in the course of a week. The story is interposed with a lot of graphic and written intermissions in the form of jokes, drawings, Jewish illustrations, and (in the case of the prologue) the four-letter word for the name that cannot be named of the Jewish faith. All of this, along with Zadie Smith's mastery of language, creates a rich and textured book even though it only clocks at around 340 pages.

All in all, it gave me an insight into the inner workings of fame, as interpreted by Zadie Smith. We see characters who try to catch a sliver of this elusive good and yet not everyone is successful in this endeavor. One has to suffer, as some of the characters in the book did, embarrassment, neglect, ridicule, and even death. Being an Autograph Man is not only a business because it is also a sacrifice. Alex-Li sacrificed his relationships, his cleanliness, and his health just to complete his search for his Holy Grail. And, in the end, did he achieve the only thing, which is the resurrection of his father that can make him happy? Sadly, no.

The Autograph Man is a good book that exceeded my expectations since I have read that this is Zadie Smith's weakest work of fiction. If this is indeed her weakest work, I am now more excited to read her other books especially her magnum opus, White Teeth.
