



Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays

Zadie Smith

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A sparkling collection of Zadie Smith's nonfiction over the past decade.

Zadie Smith brings to her essays all of the curiosity, intellectual rigor, and sharp humor that have attracted so many readers to her fiction, and the result is a collection that is nothing short of extraordinary.

Split into four sections—"Reading," "Being," "Seeing," and "Feeling"—*Changing My Mind* invites readers to witness the world from Zadie Smith's unique vantage. Smith casts her acute eye over material both personal and cultural, with wonderfully engaging essays—some published here for the first time—on diverse topics including literature, movies, going to the Oscars, British comedy, family, feminism, Obama, Katharine Hepburn, and Anna Magnani.

In her investigations Smith also reveals much of herself. Her literary criticism shares the wealth of her experiences as a reader and exposes the tremendous influence diverse writers—E. M. Forster, Zora Neale Hurston, George Eliot, and others—have had on her writing life and her self-understanding. Smith also speaks directly to writers as a craftsman, offering precious practical lessons on process. Here and throughout, readers will learn of the wide-ranging experiences—in novels, travel, philosophy, politics, and beyond—that have nourished Smith's rich life of the mind. Her probing analysis offers tremendous food for thought, encouraging readers to attend to the slippery questions of identity, art, love, and vocation that so often go neglected.

Changing My Mind announces Zadie Smith as one of our most important contemporary essayists, a writer with the rare ability to turn the world on its side with both fact and fiction. *Changing My Mind* is a gift to readers, writers, and all who want to look at life more expansively.

Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays Details

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Jen Padgett Bohle says

I've been daydreaming about Zadie Smith being both my professor and my best friend. We'd go for a sandwich in Camden discussing Jean Rhys or George Eliot and then recount the details of the latest Jud Apatow film and the handsome stranger over by the drinks...

What can't this woman do? And with such charm and perspicacity! She was analyzing postcolonial literature and Zora Neale Hurston when I was still stuck on Sweet Valley High as a 12 year old. She really knows her literary shit. But I really admire her because she's completely unpretentious about it all. I walked into her literary criticisms on Kafka, Middlemarch, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and David Foster Wallace like a fastidious and fussy college freshman --- with my online dictionary open, pencil in hand to take notes in the margins, and a general guardedness and alertness that one has to have when reading, say, David Foster Wallace's heavier essays. I certainly had to think and dissect while reading this collection, but there was no flashy pedantry to deal with.

Smith could, undoubtedly, write scholarly academic obfuscations about the future of literature or Barthes' "Death of the Author" for peer reviewed journal and use fancy, indecipherable jargon , but she keeps it completely real. Her ebullience for her topics, the obvious depth of her intellect, and the fact that she can explicate and untangle authors, texts, and ideas that so many ivory tower types attempt to render virtually meaningless and devoid of any pleasure make her literary essays something rare and extraordinary.

One of my favorite essays of this collection is kind of a boxing match Smith facilitates between Barthes and his freeing of the reader vs. Nabokov and his assertion of a writer's supreme and god-like control over his/her literary worlds. (see ""Rereading Barthes and Nabokov") You see where a discussion of reader-response and Nabokov, and a few mentions of Foucault could've gone, right? Her essay about the opposing directions for contemporary literature is outstanding too and pits Joseph O'Neill's lyrical realist Netherland against Tom McCarthy's more theoretical Remainder.

The collection, as the title and subtitle might imply, is difficult to categorize and the essays range from literary analyses of various works, dissections of authors' lives, film reviews, writing advice, travelogues, personal essays about her family, and probably some other stuff I've left out. Several of the film reviews and the Oscar weekend essay seem to be filler material, though, and the essay on a trip to Libya was pretty unremarkable. But Smith's intimate and detailed piece on David Foster Wallace's Brief Interviews with Hideous Men makes me wonder if she he had a "Being John Malkovich" kind of experience in his head. It's that insightful.

Buck says

Since Mr. David Giltinan has already said everything I wanted to say about this book, plus a lot of other stuff I didn't want to say but can certainly live with, please turn to his review now:

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

For my money—and that's Canadian money, so beware: it'll fuck up your gumball machine—*Changing My Mind* is notable for three pieces: "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men", a tribute to David Foster Wallace that's so astute and generous that it'd almost be worth dying if you could have someone like Smith eulogize you; "Two Paths for the Novel", the smartest thing you'll ever read about the crisis in literary fiction, at least until I find a publisher for my 100,000-word jeremiad; and finally, a review of *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* that makes a strong case for 50 Cent as the Sidney Poitier of his generation (I'm totally messing with you, man, but she does review the movie). That last one is probably expendable, along with some of the more journalistic pieces, but if you care at all about contemporary literature, you really must check out the other two.

See, I can be short and pithy and virtually smut-free. How do you like me now, ass-munchers?

Huh. It turns out Zadie Smith and I have a lot in common: we're exactly the same age, we both come from working-class backgrounds, and we're both strong, proud women of color (okay, that's more of an aspiration in my case, but I did almost sleep with an Irishman once, so that's another thing).

Zanna says

Smith treats a plethora of subjects in this collection; praising Forster and George Eliot, arguing for the demystification of Kafka, illuminating the Black cultural idea of soulfulness, detailing and analysing her visits to Liberia and to LA for the Oscars; recalling episodes from her father's life, and passionately advocating an appreciation of David Foster Wallace.

I feel affection and empathy for Smith throughout this book, admiring her eloquence and sharing her literary and political sensibilities. I was grateful for the light she brought to Kafka and Nabokov, and the experience of reader and author, engaging critically with Barthes. This book is rich in fruitful, personal, political and accessible ethical and aesthetic reflection.

Jonfaith says

One of Ms. Smith's projects in this rather sprawling collection is an assembly of the disparate. That sounds Foucauldian and I think I am wide of the mark with my designation, but only just. Such strange pieces are collected between these soft covers and I remain on the margins of my wits to discern the "what for." It speaks of my amateur treatment of essays that I regard the value of such in its ability to persuade me to the author's perspective. By my metric the early essays were failures. I didn't want to read Hurston or any more Forster; it was quite the contrary, if fact, I thought I don't need to bother. Not now anyway. Ruminations on Barthes and Nabokov were a different kettle but it should be stated throughout these myriad points of interest, I loved Smith's observations and language.

The essay Speaking in Tongues should be a necessary primer for those about to read NW. I wish I had

encountered the essay before the novel. The Liberian journalism and cinematic sketches were sound if egregious. The autobiographical pieces on approach to the novel and her memories of her father are sublime. Such is the dearest under the sun, especially to this cranky sod who can't seem to step aside from the latest United loss.

The collection concludes with a eulogy of sorts to David Foster Wallace. Again Zadie Smith has not pushed my hand into another reading of DFW, I doubt nay one could these days. I am glad to have had this time with Smith's nonfiction.

Helle says

I have been inside Zadie Smith's crafty, clever head for many hours and pages this past week. I have digressed from the essay collection itself a number of times, only to go down various Google holes to read interviews with Zadie, articles by or about her. There is so much food for thought in this collection (and in the stuff I found at the end of the Google holes) that I'm still reeling from it, still digesting it all.

The collection is divided into five sections named: *Reading, Being, Seeing, Feeling, Remembering* with seventeen chapters in all. She starts out really strong with chapters on Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, E.M. Forster and *Middlemarch*. These essays felt personalized. Here Zadie struck a perfect balance between love of the authors and their literary works and analyses of said works. Then followed chapters on Barthes and Nabokov, on Kafka and on Two Directions for the Novel. These essays were of a more scholarly nature, competent and interesting but sometimes a bit dry, on occasion even obscure (especially, of course, when she dissected novels I haven't read, in this case *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill and *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy – her examples of the two directions for the novel).

Being begins with a wonderful essay on her own craft, given as a lecture at Columbia University, followed by a heartbreakingly informative and very real description of the situation in Liberia where she spent a week. This is followed by an essay on Speaking in Tongues, which was also given as a lecture, at New York Public Library, and in which she makes an interesting analysis of Barack Obama's ability to speak to different people because of his mixed race background, which she likens to her own. Eliza Doolittle makes an appearance here.

In the manner of one of her idols, David Foster Wallace, she then moves on, in *Seeing*, to essays on highly idiosyncratic topics like the Italian movie *Bellissima*, the pluck and loveliness of Katherine Hepburn and Greta Garbo, a strange take on the Oscar weekend in which not a single actor is named, and a season's worth of movie reviews – all with the requisite footnotes.

In *Feeling* she explores her family background with a special focus on her father, to whom the whole collection is dedicated. I was surprised to learn that he fought in World War II, and Zadie herself explains that of course he ought to have been their grandfather. We also hear of her brother, a stand-up comedian and of how she kept her father's cremains in a Tupperware box on her desk after he died.

Remembering is dedicated to David Foster Wallace and his vision, as seen in his short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. It is here that we see glimpses of what 'water' is to her, cf. Wallace's *This Is Water*, or the L word, again cf. DFW.

Throughout the essays Zadie Smith displays an enviable abundance of cultural references: literary, cinematic, linguistic, geographical, political. She demonstrates more political awareness than I would have expected from her sprawling novels, which seem like so many multicultural riffs on life and human relations. She is opinionated, sometimes to the point of being rude or condescending, but she has the brains and the no-nonsense eloquence to carry if off.

I alternately admire her, agree with her and feel intimidated by her. But it's when she lets down her guard and admits to her shortcomings that I admire her the most. She's so obviously intelligent that those perceived shortcomings not only make her a rounder person (quirks must balance perfection) but also someone with whom one can almost imagine having a conversation. Or perhaps it's easier to spot the smarts when seen against its perceived opposite.

A selection of quotes (she tends to steer away from aphoristic truths, so it's tricky to extract meaningful sentences):

To love Forster is to reconcile oneself to the admixture of banality and brilliance that was his, as he had done himself.

For Eliot, in the absence of God, all our moral tests must take place on this earth and have their rewards and punishments here. We are one another's lessons, one another's duty.

I believe that flexibility of voice leads to flexibility in all things. My audacious hope in Obama is based, I'm afraid, on precisely such flimsy premises.

(...) style is what you leave out (...).

The popular view of Wallace was of a coolly cerebral writer who feared fiction's emotional connection. But that's not what he was afraid of. His stories have it the other way around: they are terrified of the possibility of no emotional connection.

A splendid collection of essays that I can highly recommend and which I hope Zadie Smith will someday follow up with a sequel.

If you wish to check out one of the things I found going down those Google holes, here is the link to Zadie Smith's essay *Fail Better* on writing and reading:

<http://faculty.sunydutchess.edu/oneil...>

Greg says

I'm going pop off this quick little salvo and then move on to other things. Zadie Smith never calls the novel dead in this book. She also never tries to bury the lyrically realistic novel, one gets the feeling that she enjoys the more experimental side of literature but she seems more to want both sides to be able to live, breathe and grow together. She never calls the novelistic form she works in antiquated. I don't think there was a poor reading done of her, I think there was a willful misreading done to incite people to anger. The actual content of her essay was much more banal.

That said, here is how this review would start: Zadie Smith is not David Foster Wallace. Similarly George Saunders is not David Foster Wallace. As the years go on it might become true that Smith and Saunders will become the closest thing the members of the DFW cult have to a living writer who will still come close to capturing his spirit, but they are each their own awkward and self-conscious/reflexive selves. I say that because DFW lingers around the margins of the pages of both writers, but it is unfair to compare either of them to him. He is he and she is she.

One essay in particular shows their difference. Zadie Smith covers the Oscars and writes a distant and depersonalized version of her surreal journey into LA for Oscar Weekend. She sterilizes the trip to demystify the cult of celebrity. She is there in an awkwardness worthy of DFW but she is almost like an objective camera taking snapshots of what is happening around her. She is uncomfortable and lets the reader know she is out of place, but paints a picture of what is going on around her in big expressionistic strokes. Not only do the celebrity identities get lost in the focus she takes, but also any of the beauty or magic one associates with Tinseltown. It's a weirdly effective essay for the form or style, but it's a giant disappointment if the reader is hoping to learn anything about the Oscars.

Many reviews for this book point out how smart Zadie Smith is. I'll do it too. She is smart. She's smarter than I am. I'm envious of how erudite she is. I picture her as the really smart girl in class who has a remarkable ease about her. Maybe because she's about my age I think about her in relation to other people I know, and she is smarter than them. I don't think of her like DFW though, he never would have been in my classes, he would have been at a totally other level than anything I was ever at. But, Zadie Smith is also the product of British schooling, which I think also makes her seem smarter. She seems to have a wealth of information and cultural references that she readily chooses from. I imagine if she were American she wouldn't be referencing novelists and golden age movies as much as pop-culture ephemera. TV shows. Advertisements. One-hit wonder bands. Kind of like a Klosterman, or a DFW (again, I have to stop this) without the *OED* memorized. (But she mentions her own *OED* in one essay, I don't know what I mean by that, but it's worth mentioning).

Zadie Smith is most entertaining when she leaves literature behind and talks about movies. Her wit comes out then. Talking about literature she seems somewhat restrained; as if she doesn't necessarily want to offend anyone too seriously, or say anything that can be used against her own writing, not that there isn't anything of value in her literature essays, but they are more cerebral and less 'entertaining' than when you get her take on contemporary movies and the stars who drive them. I already returned my copy of the book to the library or I would quote some of her lines here. They are lacerating in their accuracy. In a total goodreads.com world reference, she is Kowalski-esque, in the best sense of the term.

Lisa says

[4+] I think Zadie Smith is a brilliant essayist. I particularly loved the essays "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov" which made me realize that literary criticism can actually be worthwhile and "That Crafty Feeling" about her writing process.

The essays collected here are kind of a hodgepodge - many are about literature, TV and film. The essays that didn't resonate with me were because of my unfamiliarity with the particular topic - but I assume they were brilliant also. She also writes beautifully about her father in "Smith Family Christmas," "Accidental Hero"

and "Dead Man Laughing."

David says

Of the fifteen essays in this collection, there is only one out-and-out dud (Zadie reports on the Oscar weekend). The rest range from good to amazing. Even the superficially unpromising pieces have something to offer. The final essay, an appreciation of David Foster Wallace, is altogether terrific. Her remarks about DFW's deliberate choice to make his writing difficult for the reader are smarter than almost anything else I've read on the subject. She obviously loves his work, but not to the point of foolishness.

The three essays in which Smith remembers her father are probably the most powerful - simultaneously moving and funny. My favorites among the remaining pieces tended to be those about writing, especially the essays on Kafka, Barthes and Nabokov, E.M. Forster, with the piece de resistance being that DFW appreciation. The sections "Seeing" (essays on film) and "Being" were less interesting to me, but that's largely because I have no particular enthusiasm about film.

I didn't find the lecture on her "craft of writing" valuable, but that's obviously a matter of personal taste. Other than the silly Oscar weekend piece, the two least successful essays (for me) were "Two Directions for the Novel" (Buck disagrees with me apparently) and "Speaking in Tongues". The former seemed to be an exercise in inventing categories when there is no obvious need to do so. The latter, based on a lecture given in New York in December 2008 (in the exuberant aftermath of Obama's election), makes some interesting points, but seems already outdated. A number of the arguments seemed to reflect little more than a combination of wishful thinking and selective interpretation of the historical record. For example, Smith argues that greatness in a leader typically results from an early exposure to two radically different cultures/worldviews, and that the ability to function well in both worlds leads to a flexibility of mind that is characteristic of all great leaders. Given the date of the lecture, her ruminations are clearly motivated by the successful Obama campaign. However, though we may hope, it seems clearly premature to accord Obama the stature of a "great" president. And one only has to think of FDR to figure out that the "reconciliation of two competing worldviews" as a youth is completely bogus as a prerequisite to be a successful leader in later life. Patricians get a bad rap - they too are capable of empathy and "flexibility of mind".

But I'm doing that thing I do when confronted with excellence - focus on a few minor flaws without having made it clear how brilliant I think the work as a whole. (Depending on your point of view, this reflects my total bastard nature, or is just a charming INTJ tic; I suspect the people I worked with may not always have found it charming). So let me be clear - this is an entirely superior collection.

Why are these essays so much fun to read? One of Smith's major strengths is that her criticism tends to be concrete and specific. Thus, even though she can fling the litcrit jargon around with the best of them, it's never obnoxious, probably because she writes so clearly. You may find yourself wondering why academics can't manage to match her clear style, until you remember that they are playing by a different set of rules, under which the last thing anyone wants to do is actually write in a way that's easy to understand.

Zadie Smith is definitely someone with flexibility of mind. Some of these essays are so lucid and witty and smart, it's hard not to just dissolve into incoherent fanboy burbling. A major part of the considerable appeal of this collection is just the fun in seeing such an intelligent mind at work

Melanie says

So there it is: Zadie Smith ties the brooding Karl Ove Knausgaard for Biggest Literary Obsession of 2013. Why I have waited this long before getting to her work is a little baffling to me but she has been a force in my intellectual and imaginary landscape for some weeks now, never relenting, never weakening, only gaining in speed and strength, like a hurricane.

And obsessed I shall remain, especially after reading these essays which are as varied and wide-ranging as can be, crackling with wit and curiosity at every turn. She could not have chosen a better title for these occasional essays for what we are privy to in this exhilarating book is the constant evolution of her own thinking about books, people, places and ideas. We get to see her approach subjects with the quizzical attitude of a scientist conducting experiments. She's never quite sure what to think at the beginning. She turns the subjects upside down. She circles them like a lioness. She throws them in the fire or in boiling water. We get to see her, literally, *change her mind* about everything. Whether it's Kafka or Nabokov, Liberia's rising from its ashes or the craft of writing, the ambivalence and complexity of Obama (one of the best essays in the collection) or the impossible elegance of Katharine Hepburn, Zadie Smith applies her razor-sharp intelligence and unmistakable humor to everything she touches and the result is thrilling as hell. Seeing how much I'm currently enjoying "NW", it will be hard to pace myself and not read all of her books in one gargantuesque orgy.

Obsessed I tell you.

Zadie Smith reading from "This Crafty Feeling":

www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_uAv8L5EY

Joana says

Zadie Smith writes really well but this isn't a book for the consumption of the general public. It is heavy on the literary critique and theory and, if you're not knowledgeable in the field and particularly if you haven't read the books mentioned, it gets dull. I was still able to draw some interesting thoughts from the first part but had to give up altogether in the last section: a lengthy critique of David Foster Wallace's work, which I'm not familiar with.

Thankfully in the middle, there was space for some more personal essays and even for some film reviews (even though the films were popular about 10 years ago, I still found them interesting to read). But you really get the sense that, after the author's great critical acclaim, the publishers were desperate to release anything she managed to write, ending up with this disjointed "book".

Scott says

I gave Zadie Smith's book of essays three stars, instead of four, because it's clear she's still in the process of formation. There are two paths laid out before her, and two personae she adopts in these essays: the Public Intellectual/Star Academic/Writer, and the Reader/Writer.

The two roles are easily discernible as distinct entities in her writing, even as it's clear that they may not be so separate in her own mind. In her first role as Public Intellectual, she has pen, will travel, then write about whatever anyone pays her to write, with the implicit assumption that her opinions on any given topic will be of interest. As she moves into territories of less interest to her, or where she clearly is casting about for something to say under deadline, a mandarin Public Intellectual tone creeps into her writing. Philosophical-literary-academic lecture-hall calisthenics take the place of real engagement, and she strays into pomposity. To her credit, one gets the sense that this mantle does not sit easily on her shoulders, that she sounds false in her own ears, too.

As a Reader/Writer, she shines: the first and last sections of the book, where she writes about personal and literary topics that she truly cares about, where she engages with the writers and topics that made her herself, she is outstanding. Here she takes the same philosophical-literary-academic concerns and makes them real, explains with clarity and passion why the questions that the writers ask, and attempt to answer, are important -- because they are her questions, and through them, her explorations of possible answers. She has the rare gifts of being a gifted reader, a formidably intelligent and articulate critic (who very rarely, if ever, gets caught up in tendrils of lyricism or overwriting), and, most rare of all, of being fundamentally generous. Her essays remind me, at their best, of the golden age of eighteenth-century English essays, clear-spoken, elegant, witty, and profoundly true: at the top of her game, she's a present-day Samuel Johnson, only without the gout, and in a considerably better humor.

Having read many of her essays, in this book and elsewhere, and two of her novels, I think she's a better critic than she is a novelist, and I hope she continues to write more in the critical vein. But I also hope she avoids the temptations of the Public Intellectual, chooses her assignments with care, and devotes her energy to developing the persona of Zadie Smith, committed and generous Reader/Writer.

Michael Cabus says

In my 20s I studied computer science in graduate school, my first graduate degree (one more would come later, in my quest to surpass my father, that sort of inheritance of failure I felt I needed to escape). I took the train from work to class, then back home, and on one such night I was reading *White teeth*, Zadie Smith's debut novel on the train. I heard a woman's voice, which I was surprised to discover was directed at me.

"Are you reading *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith?", she asked.

Given the cover said that I was, I said, yes, why I am..it's quite good, in case you are interested

She shook her head, "I've read that book three times already..it's a masterpiece!"

"Oh, grand", I said, pleasantly surprised to find someone else who loved the book, but a bit intrigued why she read it three times. I got an answer.

"You see," she replied, "my boyfriend's cousin is dating the author!"

There was a pause. I replied, "oh really, what is she like?" I was genuinely curious.

"Well.." she began, "I have never met her."

"Ah." I said.

"But...", she could sense I was losing interest. "But..imagine..if I marry my boyfriend, he said he would invite this cousin to our wedding..and then, Zadie Smith would actually be at my wedding!"

I knew it was my duty to express envy or admiration, and I was genuinely thinking it would be kind of cool, so I said so, but I could tell it was not quite enough.

"And," she followed up, "just think..if I marry my boyfriend and his cousin marries Zadie Smith..I could be RELATED to Zadie Smith!"

In this logical gymnastics I saw many of my own (I was after all getting a computer science degree, and I knew then there were a lot of gymnastics going on in my head about what that could bring), so I expressed great admiration to her for the possibility.

She stopped talking to me altogether after that, and I realized she waited for the moment to spot someone reading White Teeth to tell them of her possible new, fabulous, famous relative.

After reading White teeth, and now this book of essays, I can see how being related to Zadie Smith would be a feat worth achieving (even worth a marriage). Smith knows about literature, about pop culture, about films, and can really tell a personal story in a way that manages to be engaging and encompassing of a wider audience.

A good essayist, in my opinion, manages to become someone you wish you could correspond with indefinitely. The last essay you wish was not the last essay...but rather just one letter before they go on an extended trip...you will get another soon enough.

I personally connected with Smith because I am also obsessed with literature (it's become a hobby), and could get absorbed in her writing on Forester, Wallace, Nabokov, and Kafka. Indeed, much of this work falls under the category literary criticism. Her essay on David Foster Wallace, for instance, is enlightening as textual interpretation as well as of using his literature as socio-cultural reckoning.

Even her essay on the Oscars is unpredictable in its conception and conclusion, and offers a much needed criticism of celebrity culture (who are those people anyway?, I often ask, and I have found I have at least one comrade).

For those really into literature, this book is for you. If you are not, you may find the sparseness of personal essay a bit disheartening. For me, it gave me a sort of validation in my love in literature and good books at time when compositions on Twitter count as worthy of discussion in the news. Not that I need validation all the time, but it never hurts.

Ironically, David Foster Wallace (whom Smith writes about) is another writer whose book I was reading in public sparked a memorable comment from a stranger. I was traveling to visit my in-laws in Seattle, flying Air Canada, and working for a startup (when you tell your in-laws you work for a startup they kind of groan, or eye roll, or any number of things that are barely hidden). I had my copy of the Pale King in hand as I left

my Air Canda flight, and a very sincere Canadian came up to me and asked, are you reading David Foster Wallace? I was reminded of my friend a few years back, who touted her connected to Zadie Smith. Why, yes, I am, I replied, it's quite good. The woman gave me a very sincere look, and said, that's impressive, congratulations. No irony, all sincerity.

I left thinking yes, congrats to me..I may be working on designing a game that will probably never see the light of day, but, yes, I am reading David Foster Wallace.

I also thought of my friend on the train when I read that Zadie Smith gets a bit queasy even trying to read her first novel; I smiled and pictured a very uncomfortable Zadie Smith, at a wedding for someone she hardly knows, and the bride talking endlessly about a book she had read three times.

The Canadian is right (they have a way of being right, always)...the reading part is worth the congratulations, without the whole famous relative nonsense.

Oh by the way, did I tell you my cousin is a soon to be famous actor?

Jesse says

As nearly every single review of *Changing My Mind* goes out of its way to emphasize, Zadie Smith is a smart person. A smart, smart, smart person. And in this collection of essays—which span from literature to cinema to autobiography and many places between—intelligence is on full display. But what makes Smith stand out from the vast majority of intelligent people who write today is that she has a knack for taking intricate theoretical issues and making them comprehensible for, well, if not exactly the layperson, than for her likely reader (that is, someone already aware of art and invested in it on some level already). She's one of the few individuals I've ever encountered who can reference and/or quote Spinoza or Robbe-Grillet in passing and not make it seem jarringly pretentious. She's a smart person writing not for fellow experts, but for other smart people, which means many of her essays are less didactic lectures than points of engagement, almost—if it was possible in this format—a dialogue. And sometime during the course of my reading, I realized how very, very rare that really is, as writing and its intended readerships today seem to be increasingly stratified, tending either towards the lowest-common-denominator or the closed-off jargon of connoisseurs, with only the very brave daring fall somewhere between.

The title *Changing My Mind* is appropriate, as the content in this collection is almost schizophrenic, something the foreword readily admits. Smith, unsurprisingly, is at her most provocative and articulate in her literary essays (topics range from *Middlemarch*, E.M. Forster, David Foster Wallace, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Kafka and more); an extended book review originally printed in *New York Review of Books* takes to task the current vogue for "lyrical realism" in contemporary literature, and almost seems an unnecessary harsh—that is, until one realizes that Smith herself is one of the leading writers of this mode, and is thus indicting herself in her criticism.

Thus the other meaning of "changing my mind:" Smith never burdens herself with rigid ideology, but gives herself the space to reverse course, switch positions—constantly throughout the book she pokes fun at herself, and freely embraces any potential contradictions in her constantly evolving opinions and views. It's a

marvelously heady and stimulating position to take for both for the reader, and one would hope, the writer herself. If a general respect for the intelligent reader is generally in short supply these days, then supple intellectual reasoning sometimes seems practically nonexistent. Thank goodness for writers like Smith, and now I await her next collection of essays as much as I do her next novel.

"The novels we know best have an architecture. Not only a door going in and another leading out, but rooms, hallways, stairs, little gardens front and back, trapdoors, hidden passageways, et cetera. It's a fortunate rereader who knows half a dozen novels this way in their lifetime."

-from "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov"

Aubrey says

3.5/5

Let it be known that I have horrendous taste in film. Every smidge of desire for exploration in the realms of literature is countered by an equal or greater absence of such when it comes to movies, to the point that I'll happily rewatch the likes of the 'Pirates of the Caribbean' trilogy in the midst of rereading *The Tale of Genji*. As such, when I pick up a book of essays about bookish things, that's exactly what I expect. Bookish things. Throw in comedy and personal history if you must, but remain aware that for every Hollywood movie/actor outside the latest Avengers group you reference (I watched the latest *Star Wars* without knowing any of the real people behind it. Although I think there was a J. J. Abrams? Maybe?), you're going to have to do what DFW did with Lynch and sell it to me so hard that I can be disappointed with the actual movie without regretting reading the essay that led me to it in the first place. If you can't do that to the point that I'll choose to venture into new territory rather than watch '*Howl's Moving Castle*' for the bajillionth time, I'm afraid we'll both be wasting our time.

I was pleased with the beginning of this. Very, very pleased. Hurston, Forster, Evans/Eliot, yes, yes, yes. This was the mud I was only too happy to snurfle around in after a quarter of 23 school assigned authors, most of them hurled at me brand spanking new at a speed that required a stripping down of familiarity and an upgrading of reader read, writer write, student move on. Great for the critical expansion, impossible for getting one's relaxed footing. After this, I was happy enough take in stride the colder names of Barthes and Nabokov and yet another word on Kafka that tries to wrest him from his being Jewish in the name of Universal Themes (I pulled the same shit in another review of mine that I'm going to eventually fix, so in the meantime I can't complain) with a heightened level of interest. I had a bad feeling when I hit "Two Directions for the Novel" and got little out of it beyond some Goodreads searches and recognition of various namedrops, but there was still three-quarters of a multifarious collection to go, so I buckled in to finish as I do with every work.

I don't know if this is Smith or the general literary scene of the 2009 New York Times Notables or the decade previous to it or what, but she throws "crazy" around a lot. And "delusional". And various other words that make it real hard to take seriously what's being said when it's obvious the author's internal picture of everything egotistical or dangerous or just plain weird is a person wrapped in a straight jacket. I could have dealt with Liberia, Oscar Weekend, and memorials to fathers if the "crazy" business had stopped at the metaphor level, but then she had compose an ode to David Foster Wallace. A note to her and whatever howling fantods are out there: you don't get to pick and choose which crazy people you make universal and which you line up against the wall. There are very few authors I as someone with major depressive disorder

have as fact checked and identically diagnosed representation in the larger literary sphere, and those I have I'm not going to gloss over in vaguely reverential and ultimately useless overtones. I learned in this essay collection that DFW himself used the trope of the psychopath, but guess what? That's an intercommunity issue of us crazy people. Neurotypicals are better off telling schools to stop forcibly institutionalizing us and cops to stop murdering us.

Yeah, I'm not too pleased with how this turned out either. However, for a while there, reading this felt somewhat like coming home. That, and the fact that I five-starred both of the other works of Smith's that I've perused, will have to suffice.

MJ Nicholls says

I love Zadie Smith. Her essays are so fluid and learned and passionate, so intimate and insightful and intelligent, how could I not love her? Among the pieces collected here include the moving "Dead Man Laughing" about her father (Smith comes from an atypical family background), a horrifying report on Liberian aid workers, and the dissertation "The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace."

Essential fodder for the passionate modern reader.
