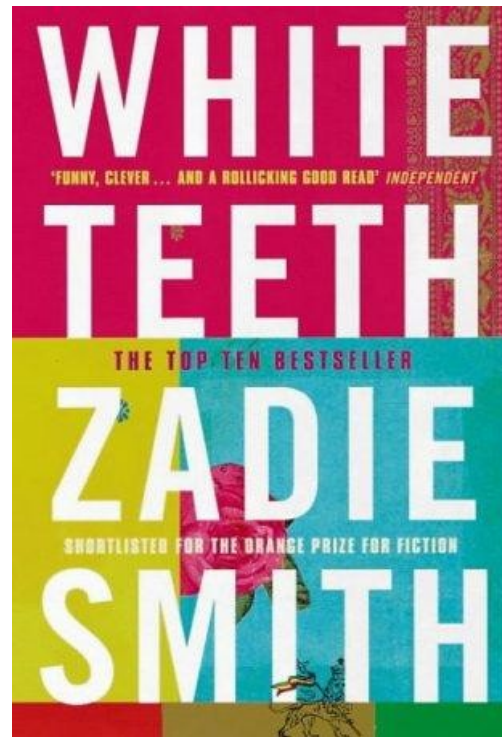


**ZADIE SMITH – White Teeth, 2000**

There was trouble at the Joneses.  
Irie was to become the first  
Bowden or Jones (possibly, maybe, all  
things willing, by the grace of God,  
5 fingers crossed) to enter a university.  
Her A-levels were chemistry, biology  
and religious studies. She wanted  
to study dentistry (white collar!  
£20k+ !), which everyone was very  
10 pleased about, but she also wanted  
to take a "year off" in the subconti-  
nent and Africa (Malaria! Poverty!  
Tapeworm!), which led to three  
months of open warfare between her  
15 and Clara. One side wanted finance  
and permission, the other side was  
resolved to concede neither. The  
conflict was protracted and bitter,  
and all mediators were sent home  
20 empty-handed. (She has made up her  
mind, there are no arguments to be  
had with the woman – Samad) or else  
embroiled in the war of words. (Why can't she go to Bangladesh if she wants to?  
Are you saying my country is not good enough for your daughter? - Alsana).  
25 The stalemate was so pronounced that land had been divided and alloca-  
ted; Irie claimed her bedroom and the attic, Archie, a conscientious objector,  
asked only for the spare room, a television and a satellite (state) dish, and Clara  
took everything else, with the bathroom acting as shared territory. Doors were  
slammed. The time for talking was over.  
30 On the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 1991, 01.00 hours, Irie embarked upon a late-night  
attack. She knew from experience that her mother was most vulnerable when in  
bed; late at night she spoke softly like a child, her fatigue gave her a pronounced  
lisp; it was at this point that you were most likely to get whatever it was you'd been  
35 pining for: pocket money, a new bike, a later curfew. It was such a well-worn  
tactic that until now Irie had not considered it worthy of this, her fiercest and  
longest dispute with her mother. But she hadn't any better ideas.  
"Irie? Wha-? Iss sa middle of sa nice.... Go back koo bed ...."  
Irie opened the door further, letting yet more hall light flood the bedroom.  
Archie submerged his head in a pillow. "Bloody hell, love, it's one in the  
40 morning! Some of us have got work tomorrow."  
"I want to talk to Mum," said Irie firmly, walking to the end of the bed. "She  
won't talk to me during the day, so I'm reduced to this."  
"Irie, please ... I'm exhausted ... I'm shrying koo gesh shome shleep."  
"I don't just want to have a year off, I need one. It's essential – I'm young, I  
45 want some experiences. I've lived in this bloody suburb all my life. Everyone's  
the same here. I want to go and see the people of the world ... that's why Joshua's  
doing and his parents support him!"  
"Well, we can't bloody afford it," grumbled Archie, emerging from the eider-  
down. "We haven't all got posh jobs in science, now have we?"  
50 "I don't care about the money – I'll get a job, somehow or something, but I do  
want your permission! Both of you. I don't want to spend six months away



**ZADIE SMITH – White Teeth, 2000**

and spend everyday thinking you are angry."

"Well, it's not up to me, love, is it? It's your mother, really I ..."

"Yes, Dad. Thanks for stating the bloody obvious."

55 "Oh, right," said Archie  
huffily, turning to the wall.

"I'll keep my comments to  
meself, then ..."

60 "Oh, Dad, I didn't  
mean ... Mum? Can you  
please sit up and speak  
properly? I'm trying to talk  
to you? It seems like I'm  
talking to myself here? Said

65 Irie with absurd intona-  
tions, for this was the year  
Antipodean soap operas  
were teaching a generation  
of English kids to phrase  
everything as a question.

70 "Look, I want your permis-  
sion, yeah?"

Even in the darkness,  
Irie could see Clara scowl.

75 "Permishon for what? Koo  
go and share and ogle at  
poor black folk? Dr Living-  
shone, I prejume? Iz dat  
what you learnt from da

80 Shalfenz? Because if thash what you want , you can do dat here. Jush sit and look  
at me for shix munfe!"

"It's nothing to do with that! I just want to see how other people live!"

"An gek youshelf killed in da proshess! Why don' you necksh door, dere are  
uwer people dere. Go shee how dey live!"

85 Infuriated, Irie grabbed the bed knob and marched round Clara's side of the  
bed. "Why can't you just sit up properly and talk to me properly and drop the  
ridiculous little girl voi-"

In the darkness Irie kicked over a glass and sucked in a sharp breath as the cold  
water seeped between her toes and into the carpet. Then, as the last of the water  
90 ran away, Irie had the strange and horrid sensation that she was being bitten.

"Ow!"

"Oh for God's sake," said Archie, reaching over to the side lamp and switching  
it on. "What now?"

95 Irie looked down to where the pain was. In any war, this was too low a blow. The  
front set of some false teeth, with no mouth attached to them, were bearing down  
upon her right foot.

"Fucking hell! What the fuck are they?"

100 But the question was unnecessary; even as the words formed in her mouth, Irie  
had already put two and two together. The midnight voice. The perfect daytime  
straightness and whiteness.



**ZADIE SMITH**