

Notes on Meet the President! by Zadie Smith

August 27, 2013

Each week I review the short fiction from a recent issue of The New Yorker. If you told me when I was 12 that I'd be doing this I'd have been like, "Dork. There's no such thing as blogs," and I'd have been right...

Issue: Aug. 12 & 19, 2013

Story: "Meet the President!"

Author: Zadie Smith

(Please note: I've developed a highly sophisticated grading system, which I'll be using from now on. Each story will now receive a Final Grade of either READ IT or DON'T READ it. See the bottom of the review for this story's grade...after you've read the review, natch.)

Plot: Set in England, far into the future (lets say 2113) a privileged youth of 15, named Bill Peek, encounters a few poor villagers from a small, abandoned coastal town on the southeast shore. He meets a little girl named Aggie, who is going to her sister's funeral. Peek is cut-off from real life by a sophisticated video game system that is implanted in his head, therefore the entire world seems like a game unless he turns it off. He becomes slightly curious about Aggie, enough to help her get to her sister's funeral. He goes into the funeral and has an actual, visceral experience among the villagers, feeling strange but feeling, ultimately, part of something larger. In other words, he comes to realize his humanity and his mortality, though he probably can't truly understand it.

Review/Analysis: Wow, dude. LOTS going on here. I don't have much experience with Zadie Smith but damn, this was just about the most intriguing, richly symbolic, and poignant piece of Speculative Fiction I've ever read. In case you don't know, spec fiction is essentially fiction that takes place in a post-apocalyptic or otherwise dystopian future in which society has somehow gone completely awry.

In this world, environmental degradation (Scotland has now become a tropical country) and wide-spread warfare have caused the gap between rich and poor to open so widely that little privileged teenagers like Bill Peek now wear computers inside their heads and fly (??) around the world at a moments notice on some kind of jet packs or something (I wasn't real clear about this part), existing literally and figuratively on a higher plane from the rest of humanity, distanced from almost all real human contact.

Meanwhile, places like England have been ravaged by flooding, fires, war, and grinding poverty, and the remaining inhabitants (read: the poor) are essentially left to wander about in squalor and degradation. Aggie's sister, all of 12 years old, had already become the town tart.

What Smith is doing here is simultaneously charting the course of technology, societal stratification, and human alienation all at once. It's clear from Bill Peek's interaction with Aggie and some of the other townspeople that he is completely uncomfortable around actual people, strangers. Not in the normal way one might be uneasy around strangers, but because he has no social skills. When an old woman introduces herself to him, he feels silly, "like someone in an

old movie." He learns everything he needs to know about the nearby village and the people he meets, not by visiting the village or talking to the people, but by scanning everything on his computer.

Wonder what she could be pointing to here? Smith might be accused of laying it on a little thick, but that's what spec fiction is all about, in my opinion: painting a wildly effed-up version of the type of future that could result if all the alienating and debasing aspects of modern life continued unabated and humanity lost its capacity for compassion and empathy. In reality, I doubt it would get this bad, but Smith's not concerned with reality here. She writes enough books about that. She's turning the volume up to 11 on what she sees as some disturbing societal trends, in order to call attention to the absurdities of modern life.

Is it absurd that a 15 year old kid can have the entire history of a town in East Anglia fed to him by computer, in a millisecond, and already be bored by the town before he's ever been there? Ranking it against other towns he's never been to? Well...yes, it is sort of absurd if you think about it. When Aggie asks Bill Peek to take her to the church where her sister is buried, he corrects her, saying "Not a church," and reciting the building's history. Though, mind you, he's never been there. It's as though the overabundance of information has caused an almost inhumane type of arrogance to become the norm.

Smith is painting, in vivid detail, what it looks like when people value information over wisdom, speed over process, and lose their humanity as a result. It's really not too hard to look out into the world, in your daily interactions, and see this kind of behavior everywhere already. In this story the lower class people, who do not have the computers attached to their heads, are the only ones with any manners left. The poor are more refined than the rich; irony has been achieved.

It's a pretty sad and squirm-inducing world that Smith constructs here. Probably so squirm-inducing because she touches, quite acutely, on some of the really negative ways that the Information Class could devolve and the "fabric" (to use an awful metaphor) of society could come apart under the strain of a deteriorating environment and diminishing resources.

Incidentally, "Meet the President!" is the video game Bill Peek plays all the while he's having his encounter with Aggie and the denizens of the town. The game is woven so seamlessly into his view of the world that the people he meets become characters. If I had more time I would touch more closely on this and some other really nice flourishes of detail regarding Peek's Upper Class lifestyle and what those trappings look like in 2113 because she really uses some nice touches there. Just good ornaments on the tree, you know?

Grade: READ IT