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Thoughts on Intimations by Zadie Smith

Writing about *Intimations* and what these essays mean to me in 500-750 words is a sly little assignment, a test of reading, writing, and self assessment skills. Let me count the ways in which these essays inspire me. Let me attempt to imitate Zadie Smith, the writer who I long to be *just like*. Forget how I feel when I see a picture of her in her chic headwrap with that gorgeous face. Enough already! I'm dying of envy but I like her too much to hate her. She knows it and stays cool.

An *intimation* is defined as 'an indication or a hint'. There is portent in the word which its definition lacks; and it is an apt, evocative title for this essay collection. The time is 2020: The World Pandemic Begins. Her agenda is clear from the outset with quotations which commingle the timeworn wisdom of Marcus Aurelius with the rueful, self-critical musing of the modern (and unknown to me) writer/social activist Grace Paley, 'whose literary approach is to make a dazzling verbal surface that...reminds us of [the world's] dazzle'. (G.Saunders, *The New Yorker*, 2017) The contrast between her chosen sources is typical of Zadie Smith tradecraft: contrast classical with popular, old with new, elusive depth with surface charm, the universal with the highly personal, the elegant with the funky, and finish with incisive but not acidic humor. She isn't looking for converts, she is thinking and writing her way through the universally terrifying, strange, and bewildering Covid lockdown in New York City. Fear and trembling, indeed.

"I picked up Marcus Arelius [*Meditations*]....with the same attitude I bring to instructions for a flat-pack table- I was in need of practical assistance." I thought of my own grasping with the slim *Meditations* and how it failed to assemble the table for me, and felt the frisson of a common yet uncommon subject and my failure to receive its gifts. Then, in her first essay I felt the frisson

again. In 'Peonies' she sets up how she parceled out 'time' in the hours before lockdown. The unlikely vignette she describes: she grasps the bars of an NYC park staring at gaudy tulips along with three ruefully smiling premenopausal women. She confesses her snotty downtown preference for peonies over tulips to illustrate the values which defined Before. Heightened mundanity is offset by absurdity as she remembers the scene's similarity to Nabokov's professed inspo for *Lolita*, a news article about apes behind bars in a zoo. Frisson again! After a recent read of *Lolita*, I registered this bit in his introduction, and a small empty thought bubble appeared, which I passed with a slight backward glance. Zadie Smith grabs the elusive thought bubble. The *intimations...*

The eternal writer's question of 'Why I write', has a simple answer in 2020. 'It is something to do'. The intimation about time is that our relationship to it is utterly changed. Intimations about the psychological justification for writing is the simple declarative assertion, 'Writing is control'... My intimation exactly. Validation: *Zadie Smith says writing is control.*

What do her essays mean for my writing? Everything. Aspirational. She is knowing, sure of her faults, counters rumination with humor. Practical magic. She has rhythm- command of time and the timely play of information: personal observation, classical sources both written and visual, family lore, casual anecdotes, personal conjecture, interior thoughts. Everything is at play in her deceptively easy conversational style.

Intimations contends with the uncertainty of writing about the present moment with a long view of History. She feels her way, builds her argument with each essay, parsing the personal and universal, culminating in lucid fury at George Floyd's senseless and outrageous death by American contempt. Her final essay is forceful, clear, sensible, profound. It is an argument of moral outrage, and a dare as well.

Throughout the book intimations about personal failure coalesce in acknowledgment of the larger failure of democracy to value the common good over individual concerns. Still, to *see* people is to bear witness, even while waving goodbye. On the final pages, she writes 25 moving tributes to each of her beloveds, plus #26 noted as contingency. On the final page, she donates the book's royalties to benefit The Equal Justice Initiative and the Covid 19 Relief Fund. She's not virtue signaling, she is claiming a small victory for the written word in service of the common good.