



Discussion Questions

On Beauty by Zadie Smith

Source: Madison Public Library

1. Smith calls her novel homage to E.M. Forster. The book opens with the same 'One may as well begin with...' as Forster's novel *Howard's End*. Both books revolve around two entangled families with conflicting values. In both novels a young member of one family becomes romantically involved with someone from the other family. Were you aware of the parallels? Have you read *Howard's End*? If so, did you notice the similarities? If not, do you now intend to?
2. What keeps Howard and Kiki in a 30-year marriage given their different personalities? Is it the children, the academic environment, their middle class life style? The marriage of Howard and Kiki is certainly a study in contrasts. Once it falls apart, who is Howard then? Does part of who he is (or was) depend on his marriage to Kiki? Did she humanize him?
3. Kiki and Carlene's friendship may be surprising to some readers. Why are they friends? Is Carlene Kiki's only friend? If so, why do you suppose the outgoing Kiki has no real friends, only co-workers and Howard's colleagues?
4. Is it realistic to think that Howard would have an affair with Victoria given that his son was in a relationship with Victoria? Is it that he couldn't resist, as he couldn't resist having an affair with Claire? These are the only two times he has not been faithful to Kiki. Are we to believe that when in the presence of such "Beauty" men lose all sense of responsibility?
5. Toward the end of the book, after Howard and Kiki have their "talk", Kiki indicates the difference between Monty and Howard is that Monty has something in which he believes whereas Howard does not. Did the author sufficiently explore the fundamental differences between Howard and Monty?

6. Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps are on opposite sides of various topics and issues: Rembrandt, religion, politics. How do they work as broader archetypes? Is Smith using their professorial sparring to get at broader issues in American culture today?
7. Why is the book titled “On Beauty?”
8. One reviewer said, “while Race is, of course, a fundamental part of the novel, ... it is secondary to other degrees of difference.” Agree? What are the other differences?
9. Which characters are most believable? Most caricatured? Most likeable? Do Howard’s children remind you of anyone you know?
10. How would you cast the movie?