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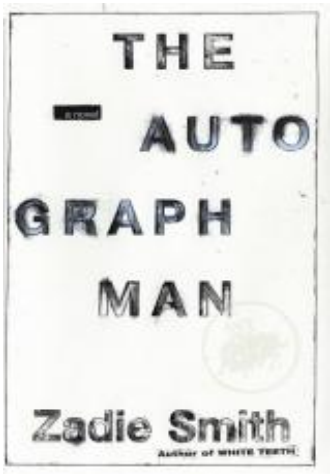
The Autograph Man

by Zadie Smith



About the Book

When twelve-year old Alex Li-Tandem meets Joseph Klein at a wrestling match in London, he couldn't have possibly predicted that their conversation about collecting autographs would change the course of his life. Alex grows up to be an Autograph Man, making a living buying and selling famous names, obsessively pursuing the very rare autograph of 1940s Hollywood movie star, Kitty Alexander.

But Alex's life is a shambles. He's wrecked his car during an acid trip, injuring (and alienating) his girlfriend Esther; his friends are mad at him; and he's still grieving over the death of his father, Li-Jin. His friends, Adam and Rabbi Rubenfine, want him to say the Kaddish for his father on the fifteenth anniversary of his death, but Alex sees that as nothing more than an empty gesture, a ritual he can't believe in. His girlfriend Esther wants him to grow up and stop being so selfish. But all Alex seems to want is the autograph of Kitty Alexander. He has written her hundreds of letters over the years, all of them unanswered. Until the fateful day when his wish is miraculously granted with the arrival of a signed photo. Now he plans to find her. And thus ensues a wild trip to New York, where he is guided by the "famous whore" Honey Smith, and where he finally meets the woman behind the name he has sought for so long.

Smart, hip, daringly imaginative, **The Autograph Man** gives readers a vivid glimpse of the signs (and signatures) of the times, and shows once again why Zadie Smith is one of our most admired young writers.

Discussion Guide

1. The text of **The Autograph Man** is interrupted by drawings, unusual typography, diagrams, lists, boxed jokes, and other features not normally found in novels. What do these add to the story? How do they change the texture of the book? What do they indicate about Zadie Smith's attitude toward her story and toward the conventions of the literary novel?

2. What emotional impact does his father's death have on Alex Li-Tandem? In what ways does it determine much of what he does and does not do during the rest of the novel? Does he achieve an acceptance of his father's death and undergo any sort of healing process by the end of the story?

3. Brian Duchamp tells Alex, "Women are the answer. They are. If you'll only let them into the story. Women. They are the answer" [p. 144]. Why does he say this to Alex? Is he right? In what sense do women turn out to be "the answer" for Alex?

4. When Kitty Alexander discovers that Alex is the author of the letters she has found so moving, she says, "it *worries* me that you write these. *Why* did you write? You are really too young even to remember my last film, no matter my first?. There is no girlfriend, or she is not effective. There is a lack somewhere. I think this must be true" [p. 240]. Why *does* Alex write so many letters to Kitty? Why is he so fixated on her? Is Kitty right in pointing to Alex's less than happy love life as a reason?

5. Throughout the novel, Alex and other characters make international gestures for any number of things, from "He's crazy" to "shut up," and usually these have a comic effect. But near the end of the novel, when Alex suggests that the Kaddish ceremony is "nothing more [than] a gesture," Adam asks: "What's more important than a gesture?" [p. 340]. In what ways are gestures both comic and seriously communicative in the novel? In what ways are they significant?

6. Alex grows hysterical observing autograph collectors at the convention in New York. "As if the world could be saved this way! As if impermanence were not the golden rule! And can I get Death's autograph, too? Have you got a plastic sheath for that, Mr. Autograph Man?" [p. 207]. What function does collecting and selling autographs serve for Alex?

7. When Honey and Alex find Kitty's apartment, Alex thinks it's too easy. "This just doesn't happen that I want something and then it's just *there*. With no *effort*," to which Honey replies, "Baby, that's *exactly* how it happens." Later she adds, "The plan is no plan." [p. 226]. Is Honey the most "Zen" character in **The Autograph Man**? Why would Zadie Smith make a prostitute perhaps the wisest figure in the book?

8. The Autograph Man doesn't have a conventional plot, where unfolding actions drive the narrative. What elements create and sustain the reader's interest in the absence of a strongly defined plot? Can **The Autograph Man** be considered a postmodern fiction?

9. What kinds of relationships does Alex have with his friends? With Esther? What do they all, at one point or another, try to tell him about himself?

10. What does **The Autograph Man** suggest about the role that race, ethnicity, and religion play in shaping personal identity? To what extent do the characters in the novel define themselves along these lines?

11. When Alex fills out the hotel questionnaire, he offers a pithy, one sentence summary of his philosophy of life: "Regret everything and always live in the past" [p. 247]. Is he merely joking, or does this statement reflect the way he sees and lives his life?

12. Why is Alex writing a book that divides the world and everything in it into the categories of *Jewish* and *Goyish*? How do his friends regard this endeavor?

13. During a fierce argument near the end of the book, Alex says to Esther, "it's like you think I have, like, the morals of a sewer rat, or something," to which Esther replies, "Let's not talk about morals. Let's not do that" [p. 331]. What is the cause of Alex's shabby behavior towards Esther? Is it a moral issue?

14. In what ways can the novel, as a whole, be read as a critique of modern western culture? How do the characters, in the way they live their lives, exemplify this critique?

Author Bio

Zadie Smith is the author of the novels WHITE TEETH, THE AUTOGRAPH MAN, ON BEAUTY, NW, SWING TIME and THE FRAUD; as well as a novella, THE EMBASSY OF CAMBODIA; four collections of essays, CHANGING MY MIND, FEEL FREE, INTIMATIONS and DEAD AND ALIVE; a collection of short stories, GRAND UNION; and a play, THE WIFE OF WILLESDEN, adapted from Chaucer. She is also the editor of THE BOOK OF OTHER PEOPLE. Zadie Smith was born in North West London, where she still lives.

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