



**THE**



**FRAUD**

*A Novel*

**ZADIE**

**SMITH**

By the same author

FICTION

*White Teeth*

*The Autograph Man*

*On Beauty*

*NW*

*The Embassy of Cambodia*

*Swing Time*

*Grand Union: Stories*

NON-FICTION

*Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*

*Feel Free: Essays*

*Intimations: Six Essays*

PLAYS

*The Wife of Willesden*

# THE FRAUD

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*Zadie Smith*

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*For Darryl and Devorah*

## VOLUME ONE

*I've seen this great city of London pulled down, and built up again – if that's anything. I've seen it grow, and grow, till it has reached its present size. You'll scarcely believe me, when I tell you, that I recollect this Rookery of ours – this foul vagabond neighbourhood – an open country field, with hedges round it, and trees. And a lovely spot it was.*

WILLIAM HARRISON AINSWORTH

1.

## *A Very Large Hole*

A filthy boy stood on the doorstep. He might be scrubbed of all that dirt, eventually – but not of so many orange freckles. No more than fourteen, with skinny, unstable legs like a marionette, he kept pitching forward, shifting soot into the hall. Still, the woman who'd opened the door – easily amused, susceptible to beauty – found she couldn't despise him.

'You're from Tobin's?'

'Yes, missus. Here about the ceiling. Fell in, didn't it?'

'But two men were requested!'

'All up in London, missus. Tiling. Fearsome amount of tiling needs doing in London, madam . . .'

He saw of course that she was an old woman, but she didn't move or speak like one. A high bosom, handsome, her face had few wrinkles and her hair was black. Above her chin, a half-moon line, turned upside down. Such ambiguities were more than the boy could unravel. He deferred to the paper in his hand, reading slowly:

'Number One, St James-es Villas, St James-es Road, Tunbridge Wells. The name's Touch-it, ain't it?'

From inside the house came a full-throated *Ha!* The woman didn't flinch. She struck the boy as both canny and hard, like most Scots.

'All pronunciations of my late husband's name are absurd. I choose to err on the side of France.'

Now a bearded, well-padded man emerged behind her in the hall. In a dressing gown and slippers, with grey through his whiskers and a newspaper in hand, he walked with purpose towards a bright conservatory. Two King

Charles spaniels followed, barking madly. He spoke over his shoulder – ‘Cousin, I see you are bored and dangerous this morning!’ – and was gone.

The woman addressed her visitor with fresh energy: ‘This is Mr Ainsworth’s house. I am his housekeeper, Mrs Eliza Touchet. We have a very large hole on the second floor – a crater. The structural integrity of the second floor is in question. But it is a job for two men, at the very least, as I explained in my note.’

The boy blinked stupidly. Could it really be on account of so many books?

‘Never you mind what it was on account of. Child, have you recently been up a chimney?’

The visitor took exception to ‘child’. Tobin’s was a respectable firm: he’d done skirting boards in Knightsbridge, if it came to that. ‘We was told it was an emergency, and not to dawdle. Tradesmen’s entrance there is, usually.’

Cheek, but Mrs Touchet was amused. She thought of happier days in grand old Kensal Rise. Then of smaller, charming Brighton. Then of this present situation in which no window quite fit its frame. She thought of decline and the fact that she was tied to it. She stopped smiling.

‘When entering a respectable home,’ she remarked, lifting her skirts from the step to avoid the dirt he had deposited there, ‘it is wise to prepare for all eventualities.’

The boy pulled off his cap. It was a hot September day, hard to think through. Shame to have to move a finger on such a day! But cunts like this were sent to try you, and September meant work, only work.

‘I’ll come in or I won’t come in?’ he muttered, into his cap.

2.

## *A Late Ainsworth*

She walked swiftly across the black and white diamonds of the hall, taking the stairs two at a time without touching the banister.

‘Name?’

‘Joseph, ma’am.’

‘It’s narrow here – mind the pictures.’

Books lined the landing like a second wall. The pictures were of Venice, a place he’d always found hard to credit, but then you saw these dusty old prints in people’s houses so you had to believe. He felt sorry for Italian boys. How do you go about tiling a doorstep with water coming right up to it? What kind of plumbing can be managed if there’s no basement to take the pipes?

They arrived at the library disaster. The little dogs – stupid as they looked – skittered right to the edge but no further. Joseph tried standing as Tobin himself would, legs wide, arms folded, nodding sadly at the sight of this hole, as you might before a fallen woman or an open sewer.

‘So many books. What’s he need with them all?’

‘Mr Ainsworth is a writer.’

‘What – so he writ them all?’

‘A surprising amount of them.’

The boy stepped forward to peer into the crater, as over the lip of a volcano. She joined him. These shelves had held histories three volumes deep: the kings, queens, clothes, foods, castles, plagues and wars of bygone days. But it was the Battle of Culloden that had pushed things over the edge. Anything referring to Bonnie Prince Charlie was now in the downstairs



parlour, covered in plaster, or else caught in the embrace of the library's Persian rug, which sagged through the hole in the floor, creating a huge, suspended, pendulous shape like an upturned hot air balloon.

'Well, now you see, madam, and if you don't mind me saying' – he picked up a dusty book and turned it over in his hand with a prosecutorial look on his face – 'the sheer weight of literature you've got here, well, that will put a terrible strain on a house, Mrs Touchet. Terrible strain.'

'You are exactly right.'

Was she laughing at him? Perhaps 'literature' was the wrong word. Perhaps he had pronounced it wrong. He dropped the book, discouraged, knelt down, and took out his yardstick to measure the hole.

\*

Just as he was straightening up, a young child ran in, slid on what was left of the parquet and overturned an Indian fern. She was pursued by a nice-looking, bosomy sort in an apron, who managed to catch the child moments before she fell through the house. 'Clara Rose! I *told* you – you ain't allowed. Sorry about that, Eliza.' This was said to the prickly Scot, who replied: 'That's quite all right, Sarah, but perhaps it's time for Clara's nap . . .' The little Clara person, in response to being held so tight at the waist, cried: 'No, Mama, *NO!*' – yet seemed to be addressing the maid. The boy from Tobin's gave up all hope of understanding this peculiar household. He watched the maid grasp the child, too hard, by the wrist, as mothers did round his way. Off they went. 'A late Ainsworth,' explained the housekeeper, righting the fern.

### 3.

## A New Spirit of the Age

Downstairs, the *Morning Post* lay discarded by an uneaten breakfast. William sat brooding, his chair facing the window. There was a brown paper package in his lap. He started at the sound of the door. Was she not meant to see him in his sadness?

‘Eliza! Miladies! There you are. I thought you’d abandoned me . . .’

The dogs arrived panting at his feet. He didn’t look down or stroke them.

‘Well, I’m afraid it’ll be a week at least, William.’

‘Hmmm?’

‘The ceiling. Tobin only sent one boy.’

‘Ah.’ As she reached for his breakfast things he put a hand out to stop her: ‘Leave that. Sarah will take that.’ Then stood up, and seemed to glide away in his slippers, silent as a shade.

Something was wrong. Her first instinct was to check the newspaper. She read the front page and scanned the rest. No friends suddenly dead or disturbingly successful. No unusual or uniquely depressing news. More working men were to be allowed to vote. Criminals were no longer to be transported. The Claimant had been found not to speak a word of French, although the real Roger Tichborne grew up speaking it. She put everything back on the tray. As she understood it, Sarah’s opinion was that breakfast trays were now beneath her dignity. Yet no maid had been hired to replace her, and so it fell to Mrs Touchet.

Turning to leave, she tripped on something – the package. It was a book, unwrapped only so far as to reveal the title: *A New Spirit of the Age*, by R. H. Horne. It was a long time since she’d seen that book. Not quite long enough

to forget it. She picked it up and looked furtively around the room – she hardly knew why. Opening it, she hoped she would be mistaken, or that possibly it was a new edition. But it was the very same volume of literary critiques, and with the same short, damning entry on her poor cousin, towards the back.

\*

Twenty years ago, the publication of this book had merely darkly clouded one dinner party and mildly spoiled the morning after. Back then William was not so easily deflated. She brought the two sides of the torn brown paper together. No postmark. But it was addressed in a clear hand to the man whose life's work was summarized within as '*generally dull, except when it is revolting*'.

## 4.

### *The Lady of the House*

A misfortune of the Tunbridge house: everything could be heard, room to room, top to bottom. But William walked the dogs each morning around eleven. As soon as the front door closed, Mrs Touchet moved to intercept Sarah. She found her kneeling in the downstairs parlour with her child, surrounded by splayed books with broken spines. Three stacks were being organized, evidently according to size. Mrs Touchet wondered if she might be of any assistance.

‘No, we’re getting on very well, thanking you, Eliza, I mean to say, very well without you . . . And you’ll have lunch to be getting on with, naturally.’ Lunch, too, now fell to Mrs Touchet. ‘Hoo, Clara! Look at these! These’d be your dad’s! Ainsworth, Ainsworth, Ainsworth, Ainsworth, Ainsworth.’ This much, at least, the poor woman could read. Her face shone with pride. Eliza despised the part of herself that felt duty-bound to make a correction:

‘But those are periodicals, Sarah, not novels. They will need to go over here with the *Bentley’s* and the *Fraser’s* . . . That’s *Ainsworth’s Magazine* – it had many contributors. But William began it and was the Conductor for some years. That is, the man who chooses the pieces and edits them. Now in fact he edits *Bentley’s*, though for how much long—’

‘Conductor! That’s a manager, Clara. Nothing higher than Conductor!’ Kneeling together, they seemed two daughters, side by side. ‘Ooh, and look at him there!’ Little Clara had picked up the July ’34 issue of *Fraser’s* magazine, issue number fifty, which promptly fell open to a handsome portrait of William as a young dandy. ‘And all this writ underneath! Look!’ Mother and daughter looked at it. Nothing followed, or could be expected to