

## Book Review. 21(Im)Possible New Beginnings in Ali Smith's *Spring*

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Ali Smith's third novel in her Seasonal Quarter, *Spring*, is a very well received novel, just like *Autumn* and *Winter* before it. "The most political book thus far in this earthy and humane series", according to Dwight Garner (2019), *Spring* once again sets Ali Smith apart as "a masterful storyteller" who "with just a few words [...] can build engaging worlds and identifiable characters". (Butter, 2019) It is only fair to mention that not all of the reviews of Smith's third novel in the series were as positive. Sam Jordison's (2019) article in *The Guardian* depicts the plot as "feeling too unreal" while the "summaries of our current woes", that is, the contemporary issues that the novel tackles are considered "too familiar". However, another reviewer in *The Guardian*, Justine Jordan (2019), feels that with each new novel in the series, Smith's "own role in British fiction looks ever more vital". In addition, Ceri Radford (2019) writes for *The Independent* that "*Spring* is an astonishing accomplishment and a book for all seasons", since it is a "timeless novel", which "burns with moral urgency". There is, therefore, general agreement that Ali Smith's *Spring* is a successful novel, statement that is also supported by the fact that it is a *Sunday Times* number one bestseller.

Being used to the Dickensian realism and the poetic style that Smith beautifully combines, as well as with the author's way of depicting the world in motion with its difficult complications like Brexit, racism, immigration, poverty, climate change in a hopeful way, the readers of Ali Smith's *Spring* might expect the most positive novel in the series. However, the third novel is the gloomiest, since spring does not always come in full force, especially after a long winter:

It was the time of the year when everything was dead. I mean dead in a way that meant it seemed that nothing would ever live again.

The sky was a massive closed door. The cloud was dull metal. The trees were bare and broken. The ground was ungiving. The grass was dead. The birds were absent. The fields were frozen ruts of earth and the deadness went down under the surface for miles.

Everywhere the people were afraid. Food stocks were low. The barns were almost empty. (Smith, 2019, p. 225)

Such is the onset of the season of new life, in which everything and everyone receives a new beginning. Thus, after a bleak political rant right at the beginning of the novel, we enter the mind of Richard, a film director, whose lost hope because of the death of Paddy, his closest friend and his source of inspiration, lead him to a premature end: an attempted suicide. Smith plays with time once again, and the novel goes back and forth through Richards's memories, pausing on the character's interior monologue as he remembers different dialogues to the extent that the film director cannot help but wonder: "Is a single minute really this long?" (Smith, 2019, p. 49) Moreover, Smith continues her intertextual and artistic games, depicting Richard as a version of Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* as well as using his ekphrastic narration to shed light on the creative work of Tacita Dean. Richard's remembered conversations with Paddy also stress the importance of literature in the life of the individual, focusing on the avant-garde works of Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke. Therefore, Adam Smyth (2019) concludes that *Spring* is not a Shakespearean adaptation since "Pericles is only the loudest in a chorus of voices from the past" that are used by Smith both "to organize the torrent of the contemporary" and to "offer another way of navigating" it.

The second character that Smith uses to keep the narrative going is Brittany, mostly called Brit, whose name is as symbolic as her function in the chapters of the novel. Brit is a young woman whose future seems bleak as she was financially unable to attend university and, therefore, is currently working "as a DCO at a UK IRC" (Smith, 2019, p. 165), that is, as a guard at a detention estate, where refugees are incarcerated for an indefinite period. Brit's job in "the underworld", as she calls it, numbs her day by day, as she learns:

- How to choose which deets to speak to, and which to ignore
- How to talk weather with other DCOs while they're holding someone in headlock or while four of you are sitting on someone to calm him
- How to say without thinking much about it, they're kicking off. *We're not a hotel. If you don't like it here go home. How dare you ask for a blanket.* The day she heard herself say that last one she knew something terrible was happening, but by now the terrible thing, as terrible as a death, felt quite far away. (Smith, 2019, p. 165)

In addition, Brit's love life comes to an end, as Josh, her boyfriend, cannot help but notice the transformation that her job is doing to her: "You can't give hardly anything. You've

stopped giving. ... It's making you unreasonably self-righteous, ... It's not your fault. You've taken a job that's making you go even more mad than the rest of us." (Smith, 2019, pp. 157-8) Therefore, Brit becomes the embodiment of a post-Brexit England that walled itself against the whole world and is more than willing to indefinitely surround with walls whoever dares to trespass the border: an end for those in search of a new beginning.

Brit's chance, however, is her meeting with Florence, a twelve years old school girl, who convinces the DCO to accompany her to Scotland in search of a place that is illustrated on a postcard. According to Justine Jordan (2019), the presence of Florence "in the novel is a beautiful piece of synchronicity", since Smith writes *Spring* in a time when "schoolchildren are currently leading climate change protests", Jordan obviously referring to the famous Greta Thunberg. A Shakespearean Marina, filled with hope and capable to open doors, enter extremely well-guarded places, like Brit's workplace, and persuade people to do unusual acts of kindness, Florence is actually a foster child on her way to meet her mother, a "deet" who managed to escape:

The story also went that the girl's mother was a deet in the Wood, that her mother'd been picked up by the HO because she'd applied to do a course at a uni, she'd grown up here but she'd no passport and the HO picked her up off the street, she'd nipped out for ten minutes, gone down to Asda, no coat on, bag of shopping left on a pavement when they picked her up. (Smith, 2019, p. 138)

The friendship between Brit and Florence make the former feel smart, alive and happy after a long period of numbness, becoming a symbol of possible new beginnings. In addition, Florence's brief involvement in Richard's life right after his attempted suicide also has a revitalizing effect. The three characters end up riding together in van with a woman who is part of an underground organization that try to help migrants escape detention; a woman who is on the point of reuniting Florence with her mother. Sadly enough, when Brit realizes what is happening she calls her boss and the IRC organization interrupts the family reunion, detaining Florence's mother again.

The novel ends with descriptions of the three characters: Richard takes advantage of his chance at a new beginning, raises money by selling his old belongings and symbolically letting go of the past, and films a movie about ALDA, the secret organization that tries to help migrants;

Brit resumes her job and her life, "got to stop taking my work home with me, she thinks to herself" (Smith, 2019, p. 329), emphasizing her identification with the system; while Florence is reunited with her mother, who "was picked up, kept for two months, got let

out on indefinite in case of media attention (she's got a story now)". (Smith, 2019, p. 320)

Ali Smith's novel is a complex book, offering possibilities more than answers or solutions. While time continues in its cyclical nature, season after season, people are faced with chances that they handle according to their choice. Some might choose to benefit from them, while others might remain the same. However, Smith's invitation, as the author states through the ALDA woman who tried to reunite Florence and her mother, is to take advantage of the chances, "try not to miss them. A missed chance, a ruined life" (p. 276) in order to "change the impossible, to move things an inch at a time all those thousands of miles towards the possible" (p. 275). Accepting change is the prerequisite for an enchanting new beginning:

We are a fairy story. We're a folk tale. I don't mean to sound in the least fey. Those stories are deeply serious, all about transformation. How we're changed by things. Or made to change. Or have to learn to change. And that's what we're working on, change. (Smith, 2019, p. 276)

A serious novel, and certainly not a fairy tale, depicting the harshness of a bleak reality from multiple angles, Ali Smith's *Spring* hopefully advocates that we become a fairy story.

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