

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Ali Smith

Summer

Presented by: Paul Stewart

This novel is the concluding book of a tetralogy of seasonally-themed works that were published in quick succession: *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017) and *Spring* (2019). The speed with which all four works were written and published allowed Smith to respond to, and critique, pressing contemporary political events within the United Kingdom, ranging from the aftermath of Brexit in *Autumn* to the political climate under Prime Minister Johnson and the onset of the Covid pandemic in *Summer*. Although all the novels engage with the political on a fundamental level, this is not done through charting major political events and intrigues, but through marking how the political is experienced by a diverse range of people in their everyday lives and interactions.

Summer is typical of this tetralogy of novels in that it weaves together a series of narratives around a set of core concerns that have arisen in the social and political spheres of the United Kingdom during a limited period. This period is introduced by a series of questions (all rebutted by a dismissive “So?”) that refer to: the treatment, and in some cases deportation, of the Windrush generation of legal migrants living in the UK; the prorogation of parliament by the Johnson government and subsequent election in 2019 (“When so many people voted people into power who looked them straight in the eye and lied to them”); the catastrophic effects of climate change, in particular the Australian bushfires of 2019/20. The “So?” with which these concerns are met is indicative of what Smith describes as a spirit of “indifference” in the face of political, social and environmental ills which the average citizen feels they are powerless to influence.

The initial focus of book is the Greenlaw family. Sacha (16) is deeply concerned by climate change. Her brother, Robert (13) revels in disruptive behaviour which, it is suggested, is itself sanctioned by the “post-truth” political environment. He is nevertheless fiercely intelligent and a deep admirer of Einstein. Their mother, Grace, who was once an actress, has separated from their father but the split (occasioned by Brexit disagreements with Grace voting to leave and her husband to remain) is amicable and the father lives next door with his girlfriend, Ashley. Ashley has been working on a book on the use and abuse of language in contemporary political discourse and now refuses, or is unable, to speak.

Smith tells the story by switching perspectives between her main characters in a form of free indirect discourse. This allows her to quickly characterise the main protagonists at the same time as setting up a series of tropes and links between apparently separate incidents and ideas. For example, Robert’s interest in Einstein links together notions of relativity (in terms of time and relative truth), migration (as an exile from, and target of, Nazi Germany), disruptive intelligence (which Robert likens to the “genius” of the current Prime Minister and Chief Adviser, Dominic Cummings). It also provides the initial plot mechanism when he plays a joke on his sister and glues an egg-timer on to her hand, resulting in the intervention of two new characters, Charlotte (who Robert finds mesmerising) and her sometime partner, Art. On impulse, the Greenlaws agree to travel to Suffolk with Charlotte and Art, who are to deliver a small, smooth stone to an elderly man who has been bequeathed the object in Art’s Aunt’s will. Robert hopes to visit a spot where Einstein spent a month

after leaving Europe, and Grace the site where she performed the role of Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* as well as a key role in an adaptation of Dickens's *David Copperfield*. The first section of the book ends with a letter Sacha has written to a detainee in a migrant camp, named Hero, in which she details the lives of swallows and how they herald summer.

Part Two seems to make an abrupt shift. Suddenly, it is the summer of 1940, in the midst of World War II, and Daniel Gluck and his father are interned as 'enemy aliens' on the Isle of Man. Daniel, despite being born in England, is of German-Jewish descent and so has been forcibly removed to an internment camp which he shares with fellow German-Jewish refugees as well as Germans who support the Nazi regime. Although the popular press (particularly the Daily Mail) has characterized the camp as one of leisure and luxury, in reality conditions are harsh. It is revealed that Daniel is in fact the man who Charlotte and Art are travelling to meet. In the present, aged over 100, Daniel's consciousness moves seamlessly from memory to the here-and-now, as Smith's prose reflects. (It should be noted that Daniel Gluck, and his neighbour-cum-carer, Elizabeth, also featured in Smith's *Autumn*.) This allows the novel to draw exact – and often subtle – parallels between attitudes towards 'aliens' in the 1940s and currently. For example, the rhetoric employed by the Daily Mail in the 40s is strikingly similar to its coverage of migration issues today. The treatment of Daniel, born and raised in England, also parallels the recent treatment of the Windrush generation of migrants and their descendants. Back in the internment camp in 1940, Daniel writes to his sister, Hannah, who remained in Germany with their mother when Daniel and their father emigrated to England. It is her story during the war that it then taken up. She is working for the resistance in France under the assumed name of Adrienne Albert. Her main role is to aid refugees to escape to Switzerland by scouting routes across the Alps and providing names for forged passports which she takes from tombstones. After an affair with a fellow resistance member (whom she now assumes to be dead), Hannah flees to the south of France with her infant girl. She persuades her landlady, Etienne, and her husband to look after the child as she continues with her resistance work from which she does not expect to return.

Part Three sees all the various narrative strands converge. The first section, told in an authorial voice, tells the true story of the Italian film-maker and writer, Lorenza Mazzetti who migrated to England following her harrowing experiences in the Second World War. She and her twin sister had been living in Tuscany with their Aunt and Uncle, who was a cousin of Albert Einstein. Whilst Einstein was absent, Nazi troops murdered the remaining family of women and children. The Mazzettis were only spared because they didn't have a Jewish name. Throughout the novel, Smith has used Mazzetti's early films as a touchstone and now her life is used as commentary on how refugees overcome immense adversity to create works of art based on notions of connection and consolation. This theme, present throughout the work, becomes more apparent in its final stages as the Greenlaws, along with Art and Charlotte, deliver the stone to Daniel Gluck and we learn that it is the missing half (the child) to Daniel's statue (the mother) which is the work of the English artist, Barbara Hepworth. Gluck mistakes Robert for his long-lost sister and it is suggested that the child abandoned by Hannah/Albertine was Robert and Sacha's grandmother, although none of the characters realise this. Grace takes some time to herself to revisit a significant moment in her life that had occurred in the summer of 1989. Whilst touring the Dickens and Shakespeare shows, she had spent an afternoon with a man restoring the furniture in a nearby church. This "uncomplicated afternoon in a summer that'd become way too complicated" seems to have unlocked something in Grace who that night gave an utterly compelling performance as the orphan child in Dickens: a feat which drew upon her own memories of her dead mother and which led the audience to feel a deep sense of connection. This connection and consolation through art is reinforced by the parallels with *The Winter's Tale* in which a statue of a woman thought to have died long ago miraculously comes

to life and ushers in a spirit of renewal and reconciliation. The story then shifts to Spring when the UK is under its first lockdown due to the pandemic. Charlotte is now living with Art's aunt, Iris, in a huge ramshackle house in the country. She is suffering very badly from the imposed isolation. Now living with Elizabeth, Daniel Gluck's carer, Art tries to encourage Charlotte to collaborate in a web-based art project, but she cannot see the point and locks herself away. She is brought out of her isolation by remembering a moment during the trip with the Greenlaws in which, despite their apparent antagonism, Robert and Sacha had suddenly showed how connected they were as they shared a joke emerging from Robert's love of Einstein. This moment of connection, allied to what Robert describes as Einstein's 'love of the universe' which leads to a recognition that "you are a mix of all of the things [a]nd it's not possible to be just one of them", seems to allow Charlotte to re-commit herself to society. She and Aunt Iris open the house to refugees who have been evicted from detention centres (the government, it is suggested, just threw them out as they didn't want a scandal over COVID deaths amid the asylum-seeking detainees), and one of them is Sacha's correspondent, Hero. The final chapter is a letter he writes to Sacha detailing his new life and how he is using his medical knowledge to help others. He signs the letter: 'your friend and brother'.

Smith's approach in *Summer*, the tetralogy of the Seasonal Quartet, and her work more generally, is to disperse the focus of the story across a number of narratives and viewpoints. This is in contrast to more traditional political novels which tend to focus on a single, dominant narrative of the development of a protagonist (the genre of the *bildungsroman*). Indeed, Smith highlights this through the repeated allusions to Dickens's *David Copperfield*, a novel whose opening lines have David questioning whether or not he would turn out to be the hero of the story we are about to read. This tendency for novels to focus on the individual as the agent of the political is held in tension by Dickens with his insistence on the interconnectedness of various levels and aspects of society. It could be argued that Smith is attuned to this tension and is eager to further emphasise the interconnectedness of those in society and that this informs the style and narrative approach of her work. Another important allusive resource is Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. This allows Smith to pursue her other major theme: that it is through art that feelings of connectedness and empathy can be furthered and that this will be some form of consolation and will counter the "indifference" that she fears is encroaching into modern political discourse. Finally, she weaves together actual historical personages into her fiction – both of them artists – to reinforce this idea: Mazetti (as noted above) as well as the German-Jewish painter and writer, Fred Uhlman, who was interned on the Isle of Man and who offers consolation to Daniel Gluck. In sum, in both form and content, Smith has fashioned a novel that disperses authorial control to create a more democratic and inclusive form of political fiction.

LANGUAGE: English

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