

READ OF THE MONTH

October is Black History Month in the UK, and to mark the occasion we feature an excerpt from the award-winning *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith – recently included in a list of Britain’s 50 most powerful black women.

Born in London in 1975 to an English father and Jamaican mother, Zadie wrote her first novel, *White Teeth*, while studying at Cambridge University.

On Beauty tells the story of the Belsey family. Howard Belsey is an English academic teaching at a college in America. He’s married to Kiki, an African-American woman. The couple have three children: Jerome, 20, Zora, 19, and Levi, 16. The novel opens with e-mails from Jerome, who is working in London for Howard’s arch-rival* Monty Kipps, a right-wing academic from Trinidad.



On Beauty

One may as well begin with Jerome’s e-mails to his father:

To: HowardBelsey@fas.Wellington.edu
From: Jeromeabroad@easymail.com
Date: 5 November
Subject:

Hey, Dad – basically I’m just going to keep on keeping on with these mails – I’m no longer expecting you to reply, but I’m still hoping you will, if that makes sense.

Well, I’m really enjoying everything. I work in Monty Kipps’s own office (did you know that he’s actually *Sir* Monty??), which is in the Green Park area... I’m a kind of an intern* with the duties of a PA¹ – organizing lunches, filing, talking to people on the phone, that sort of thing – he keeps me really busy. Because it’s such a small set-up, I get to work closely with him – and of course I’m living with the family now, which is like being completely integrated into something new. Ah, the family. You didn’t respond, so I’m imagining your reaction (not too hard to imagine...)... I’ve been in their place a week now, and

“I know you want me to tell you it’s a nightmare, but I can’t – I love living here. It’s a different universe.”

still no mention of any rent, which should tell you something. I know you want me to tell you it’s a nightmare, but I can’t – I *love* living here. It’s a different universe. The house is just *wow* – early Victorian, a ‘terrace’ – unassuming-looking* outside but massive inside – but there’s still a kind of humility that really appeals to me...

The family are another thing again – they deserve more space and time than I have right now (I’m writing this on my lunch hour). But, in brief: one boy, Michael, nice, sporty. A little dull, I guess. *You’d* think he was, anyway. He’s a business guy – exactly what business I haven’t been able to figure out... There’s also a very tall and beautiful daughter, Victoria, who I’ve seen only in photos (she’s inter-railing* in Europe), but she’s coming back for a while on Friday, I think...

Now, listen to this next bit carefully: in the morning THE WHOLE KIPPS FAMILY have breakfast together and a conversation TOGETHER and then get into a car TOGETHER (are you taking notes?) – I know, I know – not easy to get your head around*. I never met a family who wanted to spend so much time with each other....

Love to Mom and Levi, partial love to Zora,
And remember: I love you, Dad

Jerome XXOXXXX

“Please take two Valium and ask Mom to mail me ASAP.”

To: HowardBelsey@fas.Wellington.edu
From: Jeromeabroad@easymail.com
Date: 19 November
Subject:

Dear Dr Belsey!

I have no idea how you’re going to take this one! But we’re in love! The Kipps girl and me! I’m going to ask her to marry me, Dad! And I think she’ll say yes!!! Are you digging on* these exclamation marks!!!! Her name’s Victoria but everyone calls her Vee. She’s amazing, gorgeous, brilliant. I’m asking her ‘officially’ this evening, but I wanted to tell you first... She just arrived here last week – sounds crazy but it true!!!! Seriously: I’m happy. Please take two Valium* and ask Mom to mail me ASAP². I’ve no credit left on this phone and don’t like to use theirs.

Jxx

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Language Activity

- 1 What do you learn about Jerome from the e-mail?
- 2 What do you learn about his father?
- 3 Find three different techniques Jerome uses to emphasise something he is writing.
- 4 Find a basic grammar mistake in the second e-mail. What explanation could you suggest for the mistake?

¹ PA: Personal Assistant
² ASAP: as soon as possible

* GLOSSARY

arch-rival: (n) a person’s main opponent
intern: (n) a student getting practical experience in a job
unassuming: (adj) not arrogant or pretentious
inter-railing: (n) travelling around Europe by train
get your head around: (n) understand
dig on: (U.S. expression) like
Valium: (n) a prescription drug used to reduce anxiety

 Now go to page 31 for a language activity.