



President Lyndon B. Johnson, October 22, 1968

Chicken Wire and Telephone Calls

by THOMAS MEANEY

Robert Caro has been tracking his great white whale for thirty years now. As with any undertaking of this scale, an aura of legend attaches to the labor.

First there is the Ahab-like devotion with which he has pursued the life of Lyndon Baines Johnson. In 1977, not long after publishing his epic biography of Robert Moses, New York City's master builder, Caro decamped to Texas Hill Country for three years to take in the air of LBJ's childhood. He spent a night outdoors in a sleeping bag to better fathom the desolation of the territory. Along with his wife, Ina, he has combed through every possible archive and ballot box; his appetite for firsthand impressions from LBJ's entourage is matched only by his allergy

The Years of Lyndon Johnson

The Passage of Power.

By Robert A. Caro.

Knopf. 712 pp. \$35.

to post-1960 scholarship. All of this fact-hunting and what you might call Method research has made Caro—who started his career as a reporter for *Newsday*—something of a hero for American journalists: he is the guildsman who made good and raised their craft to a level that academics can only envy. But he is far from universally admired by historians. Garry Wills and Sean Wilentz have dismissed him as a myth maker who rhapsodizes the life of Johnson into a morality play. In their view, Caro is hopelessly committed to seeing the thirty-sixth president through the prism of good and evil: LBJ the civil rights crusader versus LBJ the scourge of Vietnam. Caro's anatomy of political power is too crude, they argue; he thinks LBJ's secret was

simply to be always the greediest, most ambitious and ruthless man in the room.

This is a serious criticism, but like the journalistic halo over Caro, it confuses the trappings of his achievement for its core. Caro has always been more valuable as a guide to how power works in postwar America in particular than how it works in some general abstract sense. Biography would not initially seem to be the form best suited to his purpose. The locus of power in this country is never fixed; it doesn't reside in one person or single power elite, or in one institution, agency, economic interest, media outlet or popular movement, but in the shifting imbalances among them. Caro's fortune in choosing LBJ as an entry for understanding the elements of American power is that Johnson moved through so many of them—and responded to and manipulated so many more—throughout

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his long career. Indeed, the great drama of reading *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* comes in watching LBJ master the machinery of American politics like one of those security contractors hired by companies to test the strengths and weaknesses of their systems.

The Passage of Power, the fourth installment of Caro's LBJ saga, takes us from Johnson's last two years in the Senate to his unsatisfactory days as vice president—the one office whose riddle he was never able to crack—to the summit of his political might in the year following President Kennedy's assassination. With unshakable faith in the value of repetition, Caro shows, again and again, how LBJ was not only an expert counter of votes and “reader of men” but also a sensitive monitor of the national pulse. In *The Passage of Power*, that pulse is determined by the civil rights struggle, and LBJ rallies his matchless skills to the cause. But however sincere his convictions were—and Caro convinces us that they were sincere—it's nevertheless clear that LBJ seized on civil rights because it was politically sensible to do so. His brilliance as a politician lay not in his idealism but his opportunism. His career also manifested a corollary dynamic: the more adept a democratic politician is, the more perfect a demagogue he or she will be. LBJ's calculated populism identified tidal shifts in public opinion and then sought to assuage them with just the right degree of reform that would ensure his continued rise within the power structure. As president, Johnson could rise no further, and so Caro claims that his true nature can be discovered by chronicling his exercise of executive power. “Power always *reveals*,” he insists. But in fact something like the opposite happens: we witness how LBJ's lifelong lust for power prevented him from being much more than an opportunistic pursuer of political gain.

This is hardly a novel insight about democratic politicians; nevertheless, by dramatizing the capacities and limitations of the most talented politician of the postwar era, Caro aims to make his readers shrewder citizens, ones who will better appreciate the constraints within which the leaders we elect must operate. As a student of power, Caro is a Machiavelli for democrats, who instead of addressing the prince, addresses the people.

Caro writes in three distinct registers: antiquarian, monumental and critical. The antiquarian is what he is best known for: the excavation of huge amounts of historical arcana used to

furnish atmosphere, as when he tells us whether or not a room was air-conditioned, or breaks into an aside about the evolving décor of the Oval Office. An especially rich passage appears halfway through the new volume. It's November 1963, and Lady Bird Johnson is fretting over the arrival of JFK and Jackie, who are scheduled to stay at the Johnson ranch after a brief stopover in Dallas. “Everything had to be perfect,” writes Caro.

When [President Kennedy] had been asked if there was anything he'd like to do at the ranch, he had said that perhaps he'd like to ride. This casual remark brought an influx of new horseflesh.... A Tennessee walking horse, with its easy gait, might be a good horse for Jackie; Lady Bird's Tennessee walker was at that moment back in Tennessee, undergoing further training; a horse trailer was dispatched to get it back before the Kennedys arrived. Supplies of the President's preferred beverages—Poland water, Ballantine's Scotch—were laid in; inquiries were made to determine the temperature (“tepid”) at which he liked to drink the water. Jackie sometimes preferred Newport cigarettes, sometimes Salems; adequate supplies of both were laid in. The champagnes she preferred had of course been purchased, but then it was learned that she sometimes liked to drink them over ice; Bess Abell was assigned to show one of the housemen, James Davis, “This is how you pour champagne on the rocks for Mrs. Kennedy.” A trip to Austin produced new terry-cloth hand towels for Jackie. Then it was learned that she preferred smooth hand towels; another 120-mile round-trip was made. Liz Carpenter recalls “many telephone calls and drives into town...to bring back the very nicest perfumes, scented soaps for Mrs. Kennedy's bathroom.” And one thing wasn't perfect. The bedboard and horsehair mattress for the President's bad back hadn't arrived on schedule, and the empty bed seemed to loom over all the preparations; Mrs. Abell kept thinking, “Will he wander in to bare springs?”

The passage is vintage Caro: the cascade of hard-won—almost ostentatious—facts rush

into place with easy grace. Kennedy would never wander into the bedroom, of course; he would be shot in Dallas. James Davis would never get to pour champagne on ice the way he'd been taught.

This spread of detail is there not only to be savored; it also evokes anew the full contingency of the day's events and the rupture of JFK's assassination. It reminds us too that part of Caro's justification for telling the life of LBJ in 3,000-plus pages is that he is not merely telling the story of a life, but also recovering a world. Readers of the previous three volumes of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*—*The Path to Power* (1982), *Means of Ascent* (1990) and *Master of the Senate* (2002)—may hear additional resonances

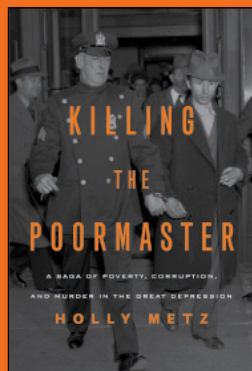
Caro writes in three distinct registers: the antiquarian, the monumental and the critical.

in this passage. We know, for instance, that LBJ repeatedly, and sadistically, told Lady Bird to be more elegant, which must have increased her anxiety. When Robert Kennedy visited the ranch for a deer hunt four years earlier, LBJ gave him a shotgun with a nasty recoil so he could help him up from the ground and say, “Son, you've got to learn to handle a gun like a man.” But now LBJ had to serve the older brother like a king, because he worried that Kennedy wouldn't need him for a second term. Finally, there is the loaded detail about the president's chronic health problems, which LBJ had tried to exploit by leaking information to the press during his primary campaign against Kennedy, but which now he must succor with the right sort of mattress. The way Caro redeems these details and makes them variously meaningful is one of the reasons so many readers are drawn to him. You read him at times wishing that the entire topography of American history could be completely Caro-ized, with each significant figure getting his or her portrait in the finest possible grain.

But LBJ was not just any elevation on the map of postwar America. It is out of a deep conviction that he was the sort of political genius seen in this country only once or twice a century that Caro strives for the monumental. He signals it with an incantatory mode, such as when he refers repeatedly to “Lyndon Johnson,” or through the careful staging of unabashedly heroic

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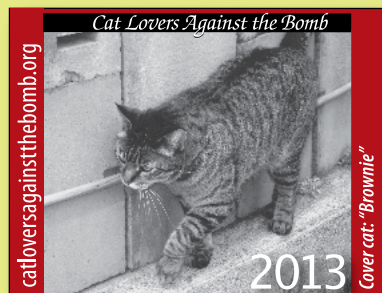
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scenes. In *Master of the Senate*, Caro describes how LBJ treated the Senate like a saloon in his own private John Ford production:

Shortly before noon, the tall double doors at the rear of the Chamber's center aisle would swing open—wide open, so hard had they been pushed—and Lyndon Johnson would be coming through them. As they swung, he would, without pausing, snatch the brown file folder Gerry Siegel was holding out to him, and toss an order to George Reedy out of the side of his mouth. And then he would be coming down the aisle's four broad steps with a long, fast stride. Seeing the journalists' heads turn, [Republican minority leader William] Knowland, realizing Johnson was approaching, would stop talking. He would sit down at his desk, waiting to hear what the Majority Leader had to say.

This passage can be faulted for its mythologizing flair, but it conveys Johnson's sense of political theater. Caro has always been committed to isolating his subjects' animating essence, and in Johnson it's his will to become president. (Caro's conviction about his subjects having some locatable essence began at the beginning—not in his biography of Moses, but in his 1957 undergraduate thesis on Hemingway: "Is there, somewhere, a facet of Hemingway that has remained untouched in all the talk about him?... Is there in the complete picture of Hemingway, besides the two familiar props of gin-and-bananas on the one hand and a typewriter on the other, a force looming up over both of them, motivating the one and shaping what comes out of the other? Is there a continuing theme running through all of his work? There is.")

In *Master of the Senate*, LBJ's ambition to occupy the Oval Office takes two forms: first, in his becoming an expert technician on legislative procedure, to the point that Johnson knew exactly when to drive a piece of legislation forward and when to stall, making him the gatekeeper through which every bill had to pass; and second, in his commanding such precise intelligence about the proclivities and whereabouts of every other senator that he rarely misfired. One of the more memorable moments in *Master* has Johnson rushing to the Senate cloakroom to call air traffic control at National Airport in order to get the plane carrying a crucial vote—Hubert Humphrey—on the ground. But the greater accomplishment that LBJ managed in the

Senate was in distancing himself from his reputation as a tactician for the Southern bloc and making himself palatable to the liberal North (he had been instrumental in halting anti-lynching legislation in the Senate in 1951, so this was not easy). We watch as Johnson strokes and comforts bleeding hearts like Humphrey and reactionary shellbacks like Richard Russell—not out of any holy notion of "bipartisanship," but because he knows it's his only way to the top. The vital center was not a position of principle for Johnson, but a launching pad for the presidency.

LBJ had one of the most spectacular careers in the history of the Senate, yet Caro opens *The Passage of Power* with his protagonist making a series of uncharacteristic political blunders. He enters the 1960 race for the presidency too late; he fails to register how urban the American electorate has become; and he fatally underestimates the appeal of Kennedy, whom he had previously known only as "a young whipper-snapper, malaria-ridden and yellow, sickly, sickly," who "didn't know how to address" the Senate chair. But these miscalculations were followed by one strikingly deft wager: asked whether he wanted to join the Kennedy ticket, LBJ had his staff run the numbers to see what the odds were, historically, of vice presidents taking over from dead presidents. Just over one out of five, came the answer. With LBJ's special knowledge of Kennedy's health problems, he decided to take those odds.

After showing Johnson floundering in the vice presidency—an office that an earlier occupant from Texas had said wasn't worth "a bucket of warm piss"—Caro makes it clear how decisively he sprang into action after Kennedy's assassination. We are treated to another piece of political theater as Johnson choreographs his own inauguration in Dallas aboard Air Force One, not only arranging the famous photo with a blood-spattered Jackie front and center, but also insisting that Judge Sarah Hughes of Texas swear him in. Locating Hughes added considerable delay to the transition, but Johnson had a reason for making everybody wait: two years earlier, he had tried getting Hughes an appointment to the federal bench but had been blocked by Robert Kennedy and the president's aide, Kenneth O'Donnell. That they agreed to appoint her after House Speaker Sam Rayburn intervened only highlighted the vice president's impotence. Now he wanted to send a pointed message to these men that he was not to be messed with again.

In his first two years in office, LBJ led one of the most impressive cattle drives of legislation in American history. “Lyndon Johnson is getting everything through Congress except the abolition of the Republican Party—and he hasn’t tried that yet,” wrote James Reston in *The New York Times*. It was largely a matter of timing, according to Caro. The Kennedy administration had failed to grasp that by attempting to push through a tax cut and civil rights legislation at the same time, it had enabled the Southern bloc to hold up legislative traffic indefinitely. But Johnson knew too well how the Southerners operated—he was one of them, after all—and he brought bills forth in an order that would make it impossible for the Dixiecrats to avoid civil rights by ducking for cover behind another bill. He slashed the government budget to placate the debt fanatic Harry Byrd, who then cleared the way for LBJ to cut taxes. By speeding through the morass of the budget, LBJ was able to concentrate everything on bringing a full vote on civil rights to the floor. “You know,” said Richard Russell, chief member of the Southern bloc and a former LBJ mentor, “we could have beaten John Kennedy on civil rights, but not Lyndon Johnson.” It is perhaps one of the more severe failings of the Kennedy administration that it didn’t mobilize LBJ’s legislative skills when it had them at hand, but the overriding imperative—especially for Robert Kennedy—was that the vice president and his talents be contained.

It’s hard not to share Johnson’s joy for a few chapters in this book, as when he echoes the call of the civil rights movement—“We shall overcome”—in a joint session of Congress, or personally desegregates a club popular with faculty at the University of Texas with a black secretary on his arm. When told by an adviser that he can’t move too quickly on civil rights, he erupts with a winning line: “Well, what the hell’s the Presidency for?” Caro gives ample evidence to show that a genuine passion for equal rights swelled in LBJ. “We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights,” he said to the joint session. “We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law.” But all the while, an important point about democratic politics comes into focus, which is that Johnson’s political gift was not in carrying the banner for the cause of civil rights in the corridors of power, but in knowing the right time to do so. The civil rights cause was good for America, but one gets the unmistakable impression reading Caro that it was prosecuted with

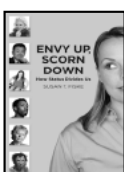
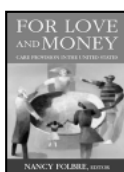
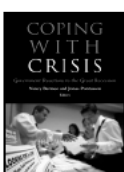
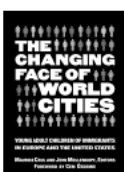
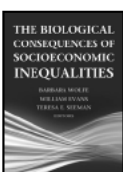
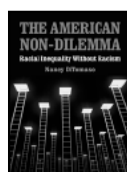
such vigor only because it also happened to be good for Lyndon Johnson.

At dozens of junctures in *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, LBJ switches his political allegiance at the most opportune moment possible. He was a Roosevelt New Dealer when it was popular to be one in Texas and not a minute longer. He was anti-McCarthy by inclination, but only moved against McCarthy well after it was politically safe to do so. As LBJ put it to an intractable Texas congressman in 1957: “The problem with you is that you don’t understand that the world is trying to turn to the left. You can either get out in front and try to give some guidance,

or you can continue to fight upstream, and be overwhelmed or be miserable.” Yet it was less the giving of guidance than the getting out in front that defined LBJ. One could argue that Lincoln, too, was endowed with a gift for timing when it came to something like the Emancipation Proclamation, which solved a host of strategic and political problems for him in one stroke. But in the case of Johnson, one can’t escape the sense that, had the growing public support for the civil rights movement suffered a reversal—in response to, say, an upswing of violence in the South—he would have made a hasty retreat and put civil rights back on the shelf



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indefinitely. It's for this reason that the movement itself was always much more of a prime mover than any president.

Caro seems only to half acknowledge this. *Master of the Senate* included some vivid chapters on the civil rights movement, but their perfunctory, montagelike feel left the sense that it took place apart from the main action, which was always on Capitol Hill. Yet without a movement to bring about a major shift in public consciousness, LBJ would have had nothing to respond to—and nothing on whose behalf to exercise his legislative talents. As with the reforms that followed the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was not triggered by statistical indices on inequality, or a president's visionary leadership, but by rampant strikes, looting, rent boycotts and riots of varying degrees of violence. Even the most powerful leaders within the civil rights movement recognized that they were partaking in an

antiphonal-style power arrangement with black congregations, as Taylor Branch has so deftly described in his three-volume history of the movement (an ideal, even necessary complement to Caro's work).

All of this should put to rest any sense, still held by some, that American politicians are agenda-setters, and that in elections we the people choose among competing "narratives." Effective politicians like Johnson are ideologically empty vessels, professional litmus-test takers and inveterate opportunists. There is a critical difference here between opportunists and pragmatists that Caro helps us see. The pragmatist (Truman, George H.W. Bush, Obama) harbors a set of convictions, however vaguely felt, that he cautiously guards and tries to further. The opportunist (LBJ, Nixon, Clinton) is willing to trade those values in and out according to day-to-day shifts in the democratic weather. For all those Democrats who

claim to be suffering a deep nostalgia for forceful presidents like Johnson—it is hard to imagine LBJ getting bogged down in the debt-ceiling crisis the way Obama did—it is worth considering that, though they may be less inspiring, pragmatists are less of a gamble than opportunists.

This is because the kind of political maneuvering, and requisite sense of the domestic political terrain, that spurred Johnson to press his full weight behind civil rights legislation also made quitting Vietnam seem impossible to him. In both cases, LBJ strove to accommodate the popular mood and dominant institutional logic he found in place. He could push a civil rights bill through Congress because it was an institution whose mechanics he understood better than anyone in Washington; but he was not as practiced at outfoxing the implacable agenda of the national security bureaucracy. And this despite some effort: LBJ rebuffed twelve separate attempts by his advisers to authorize the bombing of North Vietnam, and relented only when Robert McNamara withheld critical information about the Tonkin Gulf incident.

Hidden Bird

Song birds enter the morning
the pre-dawn before the fires,
you know, when the night floats away
like vapor on a lake,
or like kisses in the woods.
Songs that even creation
might not remember.

Continuous, threaded, as if
a cherry pit were stuck
in the throat
to produce the trumpet of the branches.
So varies, yet never, changing
through all the days, since
reptiles fell to earth.

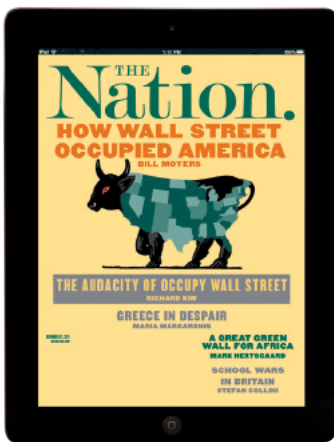
I give up the reason for the sound
I give up the creature of sound
and the creator of the creatures
and of us and of dawn and
air and of vacuum
and human inhumanity.
I give up the song.
I give up the place

JOSEPH CERAVOLO

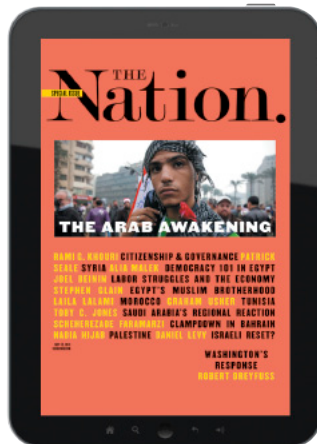
Vietnam will dominate the next installment of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. Still, LBJ's intuitions when it comes to foreign policy are tellingly foreshadowed in *The Passage of Power*. For this subject, Caro shifts into his critical register, which he uses when he wants to cut Johnson down to size. When it came to his dealings with the world beyond congressional districts and the Senate chambers, the full extent of Johnson's provincialism and ham-fistedness was apparent early on. The most revealing instance is the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. When the situation was explained to him, he recommended "an unannounced strike"—bombing Cuba from the air without warning—which very well could have set off a catastrophic Soviet response. A naval blockade, Johnson said, would be "locking the barn after the horse was gone," and any gradual pressure on the Soviets would be "telegraphing our punch." In this case, it was Bobby Kennedy whose more nuanced and cautious plan prevailed—and who, in one of the rare moments in this biography, comes off as the cool-headed figure.

It would be one thing if Johnson's judgment on Cuba was an isolated incident—Caro is careful to remind us how removed LBJ was from the daily deliberations and intelligence reports—but an even more damning instance of LBJ's foreign policy

Which kind of (e)reader are you?



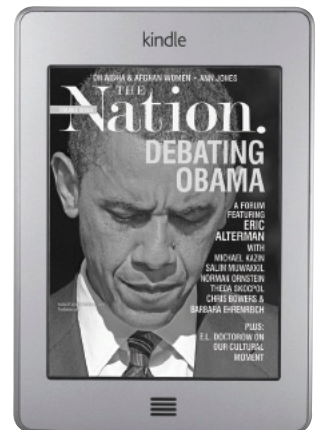
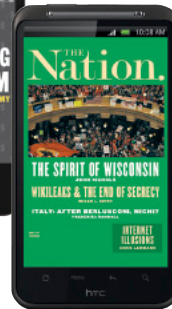
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instinct has already been featured in *Master of the Senate*. In that volume, Caro documented how Johnson became a national figure and first got his face on the cover of *Newsweek*: by steering a Defense Preparedness Subcommittee that claimed the military wasn't stockpiling enough weapons and materiel at its bases across the country, with the unmistakable suggestion that the Truman administration was soft on communism. The reports were heavily doctored, but Caro's point—though never explicitly formulated—is that foreign policy was always subordinate to political infighting for LBJ, as it often is for able politicians.

However much Caro may appear to lurch between Manichean extremes in his assessment of LBJ's exercise of presidential power, he ultimately suggests that the same impulses that led Johnson to be taken as the savior of civil rights are the ones that left him with the badge of shame for Vietnam. But while this is true, it is not the entire explanation. Yes, Johnson did not grasp the dynamics of power in the international sphere—but who in the government did? After all, it was the least powerful faction in the Vietnam War—the antagonists of Ngô Đình Diêm's repressive regime in the South—that forced the North to intervene on its behalf, an escalation as much against the will of Ho Chi Minh as LBJ.

Three thousand pages into *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, our hero has been president for less than a year. Among the most impressive accomplishments of that period is his historic pace in the first hundred days—one that seems particularly hard to imagine from our present vantage point. Johnson was both the embodiment and the upholder of a powerful liberal consensus that has all but vanished from this country. The cracks began to appear in his administration and proliferated soon after it, when the epigones of Goldwater became a viable force, the critique of the Great Society became a new orthodoxy, the McGovern idealists entered an electoral abattoir, and the credibility gap became the norm. Nostalgia for this period of liberal triumph still runs deep in the Democratic Party, as its leaders, including the current one, try to recover it. It may have been the particular circumstances of the postwar era that made such a liberal alignment possible in the first place, but Caro's antiquarian history helps us revisit them in detail: both how much depended on the ambition of elected leaders being fed high ideals at the right time, and how much that idealism was held together by chicken wire and

telephone calls. The point of Caro's epic is not to make us see through Lyndon Johnson—it's a sign of its success that, like any person one knows well, he remains a

bit opaque—but to make us recognize that the greatest promulgators of our ideals are at the same time uniquely suited to be their most corrosive agents. ■

I'm Nobody, Who Are You?

by ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

"But can't a rapper insist, like other artists, on a fictional reality, in which he is somehow still on the corner, despite occupying the penthouse suite? ... Can't he still rep his block?" So Zadie Smith wondered of Jay-Z on an afternoon not long ago. The two were lunching for a profile by Smith published in *The New York Times Magazine* in September, a few weeks before the opening of the Barclays Center, the new entertainment and sports mecca in downtown Brooklyn for which Jay has served as the homegrown poster boy.

The premise of the novelist's questions was the criticism that the rapper-mogul might be "too distant now from what once made him real"—the poverty, the drugs, the hustle, the street, all the themes he's kept riffing on well past his first million and 100 million. It's a charge familiar to Jay-Z's fans, and Smith's response in the article to her own line of questioning will be equally familiar to hers: "Who cares if they're keeping it real?" she retorted on behalf of Jay-Z and his recent collaborator, Kanye West. The question neatly summarizes the climax of the second section of "Speaking in Tongues," her wonderful 2008 essay on Barack Obama, in which she demolished the accusation that any success blacks achieve in wider Anglo society amounts to a betrayal of their roots.

To me, the instruction "keep it real" is a sort of prison cell, two feet by five. The fact is, it's too narrow. I just can't live comfortably in there. "Keep it real" replaced the blessed and solid genetic fact of Blackness with a flimsy imperative. It made Blackness a quality each individual black person was constantly in danger of losing.

"How absurd that all seems now," Smith concluded, and the fact, put so simply, seemed indisputable.

"Speaking in Tongues" appears in the

Alexandra Schwartz is on the editorial staff of *The New York Review of Books*.

NW

By Zadie Smith.

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collection *Changing My Mind* (2009). The title is a disclaimer for whatever contradictions and inconsistencies might arise between the autobiographical reflections, reportage, film criticism and book reviews gathered in its pages, but it's a credo as well, both literary and personal. Smith may be contemporary English fiction's most ardent champion of the right to change one's mind and, above all, one's self, an idea that's been at the center of her work since the publication of her first novel, *White Teeth*, in 2000, when she was 24. There is a moment in that book when the young Londoner Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal is discovered by his Bangladeshi parents to be going by the name Mark Smith at school. Uproar ensues, but still the question hovers: Well, why not? Magid, longing to be part of a different, more middle-class, more British family, unintentionally grasps what his parents, clutching their old-world ways, don't: that he can be—and on some level already is—a Smith who covets holidays in France as well as an Iqbal who never gets farther than "day-trips to Blackpool to visit aunts." He's only 9, and could already plot a small map from the blocks he has to rep.

White Teeth is a comic novel brimming with a rare fondness for the foibles of the human condition, and where a different writer might have insisted on casting Magid's split state as a grim symbol of alienation—generational, racial, postcolonial, that Triple Crown of modern angst—Smith observes it with a wink. She sees humor in all this identity confusion, and hope, too. "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean," Walt Whitman warns readers liable to be baffled by his giddy mutations in *Song of Myself*, then alchemizes the threat of his strangeness into a communal blessing: "But I shall be good health to you nevertheless." Along with the rest of *White Teeth*'s motley crew, Magid Iqbal hails from Willesden, the multicultural London neighborhood