

Dedication's What You Need

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An easy quiz: which novels have won this year's premier fiction prizes - Man-Booker, Whitbread, James Tait Black, and Orange? For the cultural dunces among us, they are: *The Sea*, *The Accidental*, *Saturday*, *On Beauty*.

A hard quiz: who (don't peek) are the novels' respective dedicatees? John Banville dedicated his novel to his children. Ali Smith dedicated her opus to a trio of friends and helpers. Ian McEwan, like Banville, kept it in the family with his children. If there were a Lucozade prize for the sweetest dedication of the season Zadie Smith would win, hands down. *On Beauty's* dedication to Nick Laird ("for my dear Laird" - as in "laird and master") fizzles over to the acknowledgements page: "Most of all, I thank my husband, whose poetry I steal to make my prose look pretty. It's Nick who knows that 'time is how you spend your love', and that's why this book is dedicated to him, as is my life."

Literary dedications began with scribblers in the 18th-century sucking up to rich patrons. It was only in the past 100 years that they became vehicles for private missives and Valentines.

Decoding them is fun - with luck you can catch an illuminating flash as the authorial skirts are momentarily lifted. But, when love turns sour, loving dedications can have a horrible, inexpugable irony. Novels have an unfortunate habit of surviving marriages.

Peter Carey - two-time Booker winner and one-time divorcee - is reportedly asking his Australian publishers to remove the dedications (four, by my count) to the ex-Mrs Carey, Alison Summers, from future editions of his work. His current novel, *Theft*, dwells on the "eviscera-



British author Zadie Smith with her book, *On Beauty*

tion" the central character undergoes at the hands of the divorce lawyers. "Alison Summers, with all my love" was the dedication to Oscar and Lucinda. He may have toyed with "Alison Summers: with a sizeable proportion of my cash" for *Theft*.

If the story about Carey is true, he would join a line of writers who have traced their love history on their dedication pages. In this paper, a couple of years ago, Susan Johnson, who had followed her husband's new life through his dedications, consoled herself with the experience of those other members of the literary first-wives club, Vivien ("Graham") Greene and Vivian ("TS") Eliot.

On the night of the Orange Awards, Smith and her dear Laird were photographed, he gallantly carrying her bouquet of flowers and her handbag, as she wept and signed autographs. What if - horrible thought - the couple ever broke up? Would *On Beauty*

read as sweetly? Would Zadie remove him from the literary record?

James Atlas, Saul Bellow's biographer, records that to get his muse working the novelist liked to change wives. He got through five and his dedications are a trail of marital gore. His last great novel, *Ravelstein*, contains a vicious portrait of Mrs Bellow No 4 (Alexandra Ionesco Tulcea, Romanian physicist) and a fulsome dedication to Mrs Bellow No 5 (Janis Freedland, former student):

"Ala bella donna della mia mente.

To Janis

The star without whom I could not navigate"

Luckily for Janis, if not for his fans, the old fellow died before he hitched his fiction to the next star. ■