

## ARTS &amp; BOOKS

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MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

THE SPRUTH MAGERS gallery in L.A. altered its layout and operating hours to optimize light and space for this installation by 89-year-old artist Robert Irwin.

# ART, ALLURE EVERYWHERE

Artist Robert Irwin wants to help people notice that ‘beauty is all around you’

**By DEBORAH VANKIN** >>> Inside a gleaming San Diego tract home, 89-year-old artist Robert Irwin reclines in his favorite leather lounge chair, snug in his favorite worn baseball cap, sipping a fizzy Coke over ice. ¶ Irwin has lived here about 15 years “because my wife wanted kids on the block for our daughter,” he says of his now-23-year-old. Still, the cozy setting seems incongruous. With dark sunglasses donned and legs outstretched, Irwin appears less the renowned contemporary artist — the one Los Angeles County Museum of Art Director Michael Govan calls one of the most innovative artists of the ’60s and ’70s — and more a relaxed suburbanite, tanned and ruggedly handsome. ¶ But Irwin’s minimalist, site-specific installations toy with the viewer’s sense of perception, and if you look more closely here, his home reveals Irwin-esque touches everywhere — beauty in the benign. Sunlight seeps in through glass panes, apropos for a California Light and Space artist; nearly every window has views of his wife’s garden, nodding to Irwin’s love of artful plantings, like his Central Garden at the Getty Center; the elongated entrance hallway fea- [See **Irwin**, F6]

## Masses yearning to breathe free

Stories of immigration are pooled for an Actors’ Gang play-construction project, ‘The New Colossus.’

By TIM GREIVING

A play in which the cast acts out the real immigration stories of family and friends would seem to have “Trump” written all over it, but “The New Colossus” — the latest from the Actors’ Gang, directed by founding artistic director Tim Robbins — was actually workshopped during the Obama years in reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis.

The current president, whose election campaign was driven by characterizations of Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists, just threw fossil fuel on the fire.

“The New Colossus” has 12 actors, young and old, playing characters from different countries and eras, all woven into a single narrative about escaping an oppressive homeland, drawn to the beacon above Ellis Island.

“There’s [See ‘Colossus,’ F4]



KENT NISHIMURA Los Angeles Times

THE STORIES of people around the world who seek America and its way of life are stirred into the melting pot of “The New Colossus,” an Actors’ Gang presentation directed by Tim Robbins.

### BOOK REVIEW

## Dancing from topic to topic

By WALTON MUYUMBA

Upon opening “Feel Free,” Zadie Smith’s new essay collection, you’ll be surprised to learn that she doubts her literary talent, her critical acumen. I support that many literary writers are skeptical or anxious about their chosen profession. I know I am: Though some invisible force compels us to create, we writers sometimes feel ourselves fraudulent intellectually, not knowing enough about anything to represent human experience or critique the arts successfully.

Smith ought not be one of those writers though. Since 2000, Smith — London born and bred, now a New Yorker — has published six substantial, exceptional works of fiction (including the 2012 novel “NW,” a tour de force formally and stylistically) and an excellent work of nonfiction, “Changing My [See **Smith**, F10]

## BOOK REVIEW



EAMONN McCABE Getty Images

**ENGLISH AUTHOR** Zadie Smith is apprehensive about her intellectual authority yet demonstrates command in her essays.

# A 'Free' stream of ideas

[Smith, from F1] Mind: Occasional Essays" (2009). Across her eighth book's five parts — "In the World," "In the Audience," "In the Gallery," "On the Bookshelf," "Feel Free" — Smith has distributed a slew of essays, reviews (including a folio of Harper's columns) and lectures written from 2009-17.

Over 435 pages, she covers Brexit and the waning British state; climate change; David Fincher, Facebook and internet 2.0; Billie Holiday; Joni Mitchell; Key & Peele; Schopenhauer, Charlie Kaufman and stop-motion animation; black beauty, black sorrow, oil painting and a horror movie about white liberals; the vagaries of lower-middle-class British life in the 1980s and '90s; literary fiction and the discontinuous self; and Justin Bieber, Jay-Z and joy.

Smith's continuous stream of productivity, her topical range, the accolades laureling her books, her prodigious artistic abilities should be evidence enough to assuage her fears about credibility. And yet, as Smith explains in the new collection's foreword, her anxiety arises from believing she has "no real qualifications" to write as she does.

"Not a philosopher or sociologist, not a real professor of literature or film, not a political scientist, professional music critic or trained journalist," Smith thinks that her essays rest shakily on evidence that is "almost always intimate. I feel this — do you? I'm struck by this thought — are you?" She worries that her writing has "not a leg to stand on" because it's born from "affective experience" and not argument. "All [the essays] have is their freedom. And the reader is likewise unusually free, because I have absolutely nothing over her, no authority."

Smith, of course, has authority: It often arises from her sentence-level precision, the refined elucidation of her insights, the exuberance and humor that sustains readers' attention. It's there when she parses Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia" and J.G. Ballard's "Crash"; it's there in the hyper-intelligent micro reviews from Harper's. Taking up Edward St. Aubyn's novel, "At Last" (2012), for example, Smith describes how the author draws from "the wit of Wilde, the lightness of Wodehouse and the waspishness of Waugh" as he fashions his meticulous personal style:

*Oh, the semicolons, the discipline! Those commas so perfectly placed, so rhythmic, creating sentences loaded and blessed, almost o'erbrimmed, and yet sturdy, never in danger of collapse. It's like fingering a beautiful swatch of brocade. This refusal to submit to the puritan brevity of the American sentences (or, worse, the artifi-*

*cial naivety of an English sentence intended to sound as if it has been translated from the French) — it's almost enough to make you feel patriotic.*

*These sentences aren't merely decorative. They're important because they enable the comedy: when you create this many compartments in each line, you have space for at least two jokes and one sly dig.*

Effectively a pastiche of St. Aubyn's style, Smith's close reading illustrates and explicates simultaneously. She's also performing what I'll call her "affective" critical practice. Smith seems to define that mode while appraising the intellectual prowess on display in Geoff Dyer's "Otherwise Known as the Human Condition: Selected Essays and Reviews." When she writes that each of Dyer's essays "is an attempt to respond *in kind*, to be equal to the artwork, in some way to meld with it, like a love object," Smith could be describing her own approach. Pastiche melds the critic to the love object and creates intimate, meaning-driven analysis.

When writing about singers and rappers, Smith's pieces seem shaped by the sonic motions of musical voices. In "Some Notes on Attunement," Smith responds pastiche as *in kind* to Joni Mitchell and her 1971 album, "Blue." Like a literary approximation of Mitchell's wandering notes, Smith wanders through Wordsworth, Kierkegaard, Abraham and Isaac, connoisseurship, novel reading (and writing) and the Talking Heads to get to Mitchell.

Considering Mitchell's own artistic and personal transformations, Smith points out that "these days, Mitchell thinks of herself more as a painter than a singer. She is so allergic to the expectations of her audience that she would rather be a perfectly nice painter than a singer touched by the sublime." Mitchell's life demonstrates the "inconsistency of identity, of personality."

Attuning to Mitchell, Smith realizes that while she herself is both "the girl who hated Joni and the woman who loves her," they're divorced from each other. Recognizing her own discontinuities allows Smith to notice "the transformation of [her] listening," shifting away from hating Mitchell to a space where "Blue" triggers "uncontrollable tears. An emotional overcoming, disconcertingly distant from happiness, more like joy — if joy is the recognition of an almost intolerable beauty. It's not a very civilized emotion." In transformation, in the gap between separated selves, Smith finds freedom, the portal to joy.

But there is dis-ease in this transition too. Our separation

## Feel Free: Essays

Zadie Smith  
Penguin Press: 464 pp, \$28

from our various selves, Smith writes, is an everyday sensation, "yet it proves a tricky sort of problem for those people who hope to make art. For though we know and recognize discontinuity in our own lives, when it comes to art we are deeply committed to the idea of continuity. I find myself to be radically discontinuous with myself — but how does one re-create this principle in fiction?" This professional literary problem is enmeshed with Smith's apprehension about her intellectual authority.

In "Some Notes," when Smith worries that she cannot develop a connoisseur's command of, say, Mitchell's or David Byrne's music, or some other subject, her anxiety stems from a belief that she doesn't have the time it takes to generate command. Like many of us just entering the long middle section of our lives, Smith's time is taken up by work (writing and teaching writing), parenting two young children, and partnering an equally ambitious and prolific writer, her husband, Nick Laird. Life, in other words, strips time away from taking in or occludes altogether the newness and sublimity that strong artwork can provide.

One way to read "Crazy They Call Me": On Looking at Jerry Dantzi's Photos of Billie Holiday" is as an attempt to solve this riddle. Fashioning her introduction to the photos in "Jerry Dantzi: Billie Holiday at Sugar Hill" as a fictional holiday in Holiday's voice, Smith makes the singer the beloved and tries equaling the wonder of her persona in Dantzi's images. Smith merges her style partly with an imagined Holiday and partly with the sound of the singer's memoir, "Lady Sings the Blues" (isn't Holiday's collaboration with her amanuensis, William Duffy, a form of melding?).

The voice Smith hears emanating from the pictures glides across various points of view to tell her story. Born Eleanora Fagan and known as Billie Holiday, the witty figure who emerges is angular and shifting: "though many aren't hip to this yet — not only is there no more Eleanora, there isn't any Billie either. There is only Lady Day." It's ventriloquism as loving, musical homage.

Like singers, writers create secondary or tertiary selves, using "them to slip from every bind and definition, but... can also prove callous with the lives of others and in their dash for freedom knock their loved ones out of the way." As Smith argues late in "The Bathroom," a funny, gorgeous, mournful essay about what their arrival in the British lower middle class cost

her parents, family life "is always an event of some violence." How then does the writer balance desired freedoms, minimize family as an event of violence, and access joy? Smith has built a career as a novelist dancing among these poles, dancing between (as the title of one her essay names it) optimism and despair.

Smith's most recent novel, "Swing Time" (2016) is an attempt to wrestle with her doubts about fiction's capabilities. To great effect, Smith achieves a formally unified literary novel while simultaneously illustrating a unnamed narrator recognizing her discontinuous selves. It's a novel about dance that ends with a major character, Tracy, herself a lapsed professional dancer, joyously whirling dervish-like with her children. While Smith may not be able to assuage her doubts about her authority, she can "dance" with and around them. In fact, dancing with doubt seems central to her "affective" critical process.

There's so much at play in "Feel Free" that a reader might feel anxious about how to gain purchase on all of Smith's ideas. These essays present her most forceful writing yet about film, visual art and blackness, as well as demonstrating her mastery of the form. However, as she points out in "The Tattered Ruins of the Map," when confronted with the the constellated materials, objects, digital images and ideas that make up Sarah Sze's "Centrifuge," "it is hard to know which element to separate from the rest. Yet if you are to write about something you *must* choose."

I've chosen the bits of this tremendous, enthralling book that might explain how Smith, in spite of her doubts about it, demonstrates authority. My hunch about this book is this: While paying attention to Smith's doubts might get you into these essays, getting out may require some improvised dance moves.

That means, I think, rejecting linear movement through the work. This may not seem a proper way to address this work, but, as Smith writes in "Dance Lessons for Writers," "between propriety and joy choose joy." In any case, she's suggesting that we follow her lead. Early in "Feel Free" Smith describes her writing as the intersection of language, the world, the self: "The first is never wholly mine; the second I can only ever know in a partial sense; the third is a malleable and improvised response to the previous two." It's this improvised Smith whom we're dancing with throughout these pages.

Muyumba, a professor at Indiana University-Bloomington, is the author of "The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism."

## BESTSELLERS

LOS ANGELES TIMES  
FEB 11, 2018

	weeks on list
<b>Fiction</b>	
1. <b>Little Fires Everywhere</b> by Celeste Ng (Penguin Press: \$27) A new family and an adoption upend a quiet Cleveland suburb.	20
2. <b>The Immortalists</b> by Chloe Benjamin (Putnam: \$26) Four siblings grapple with life after learning the dates of their demise from a psychic.	3
3. <b>The Woman in the Window</b> by A.J. Finn (Morrow: \$26.99) A twisted tale with Hitchcockian undertones features a Manhattan recluse who spends her days spying on neighbors.	4
4. <b>City of Endless Night</b> by Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child (Grand Central: \$28) A New York City detective and FBI agent track down a killer who decapitates victims.	1
5. <b>The LARGESSE of the Sea Maiden</b> by Denis Johnson (Random House: \$27) A posthumous short-story collection on mortality and transcendence from the late writer.	2
6. <b>Origin</b> by Dan Brown (Doubleday: \$29.95) A billionaire futurist and former student of professor of symbology Robert Langdon sends him on another quest to uncover the questions of human existence.	17
7. <b>Munich</b> by Robert Harris (Knopf: \$27.95) A spy novel set during British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's last-ditch negotiations with Hitler in 1938.	2
8. <b>A Gentleman in Moscow</b> by Amor Towles (Viking: \$27) In 1922, a Russian count is sentenced to house arrest in a grand hotel for the rest of his life.	73
9. <b>The Wanted</b> by Robert Crais (Putnam: \$28) A single mother hires P.I. Elvis Cole to investigate her teenage son who is on the run after a deadly crime spree.	4
10. <b>Manhattan Beach</b> by Jennifer Egan (Scribner: \$27) The first female diver at the Brooklyn Naval Yard during World War II seeks to uncover the reason for her father's disappearance.	17

## Nonfiction

1. <b>Fire and Fury</b> by Michael Wolff (Holt: \$30) A journalists' inside account of the dysfunctional first year of the Trump White House.	4
2. <b>Barking to the Choir</b> by Gregory Boyle (S&S: \$26) The Jesuit priest shares what working with gang members in Los Angeles has taught him about faith, compassion.	12
3. <b>Power Your Tribe</b> by Christine Comaford (McGraw-Hill: \$27) A set of neuroscience-based tools to empower your workplace team.	1
4. <b>Leonardo da Vinci</b> by Walter Isaacson (Simon & Schuster: \$35) The award-winning biographer, known for profiling geniuses, turns his attention to da Vinci.	15
5. <b>The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck</b> by Mark Manson (HarperOne: \$24.99) How stopping to try to be positive all the time will make us become better, happier people.	43
6. <b>The Book of Joy</b> by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and The Dalai Lama (Avery: \$26) The Nobel Prize-winning spiritual leaders share their wisdom.	56
7. <b>Devotion</b> by Patti Smith (Yale University Press: \$18) The rocker-writer's exploration of the nature of creative invention.	66
8. <b>Astrophysics for People in a Hurry</b> by Neil Degrasse Tyson (Norton: \$18.95) An easy-to-understand introduction to the universe and the forces that govern it.	38
9. <b>Women &amp; Power</b> by Mary Beard (Liveright: \$15.95) A manifesto tracing the origins of misogyny to its ancient roots.	4
10. <b>No Time to Spare</b> by Ursula K. Le Guin (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: \$22) Selected essays from the science fiction author on aging, literature and her cat.	1

## PAPERBACKS

<b>Fiction</b>	
1. <b>The Perfect Nanny</b> by Leela Slimani (\$16)	
2. <b>Call Me By Your Name</b> by Andre Aciman (\$17)	
3. <b>The Sun and Her Flowers</b> by Rupi Kaur (\$16.99)	
4. <b>Ready Player One</b> by Ernest Cline (\$14)	
5. <b>Pachinko</b> by Min Jin Lee (\$15.99)	
<b>Nonfiction</b>	
1. <b>You Are a Badass</b> by Jen Sincero (\$16)	
2. <b>How to Fight</b> by Thich Nhat Hanh (\$9.95)	
3. <b>The 5 Love Languages</b> by Gary Chapman (\$14.99)	
4. <b>South and West</b> by Joan Didion (\$15)	
5. <b>Rise of the Rocket Girls</b> by Nathalia Holt (\$16.99)	

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