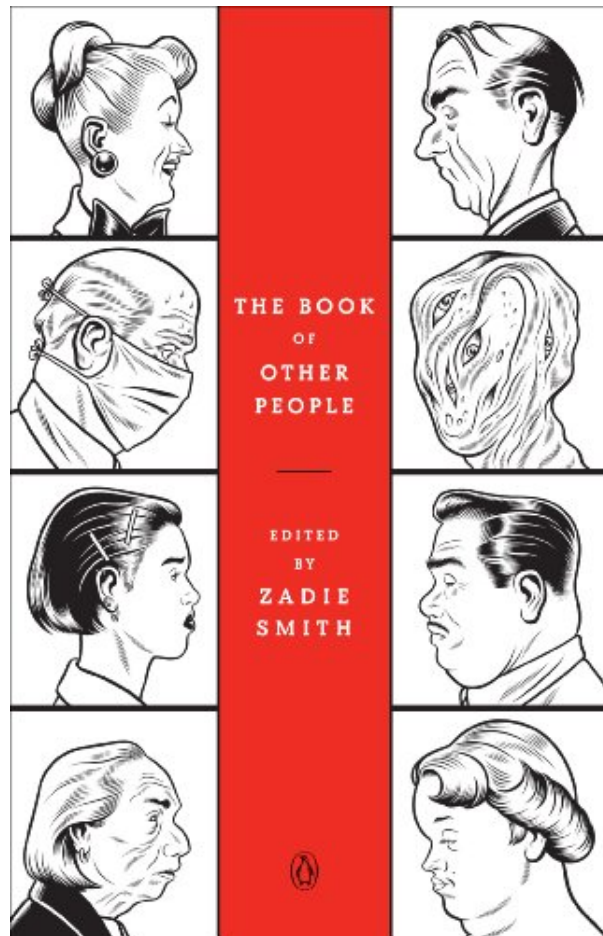
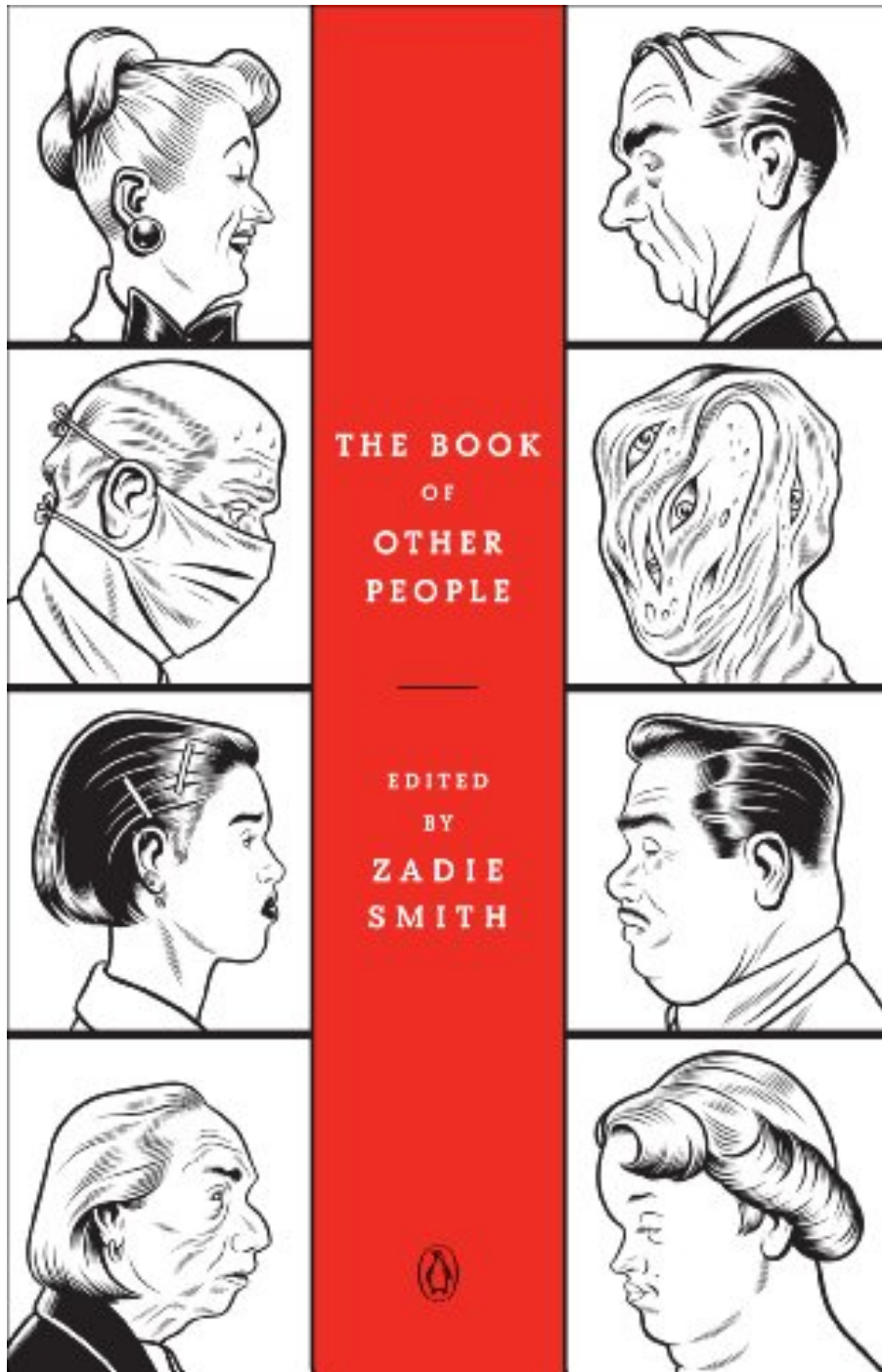


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Review

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A stellar host of writers explore the cornerstone of fiction writing: character

The Book of Other People is about character. Twenty-five or so outstanding writers have been asked by Zadie Smith to make up a fictional character. By any measure, creating character is at the heart of the fictional enterprise, and this book concentrates on writers who share a talent for making something recognizably human out of words (and, in the case of the graphic novelists, pictures). But the purpose of the book is variety: straight "realism"-if such a thing exists-is not the point. There are as many ways to create character as there are writers, and this anthology features a rich assortment of exceptional examples.

The writers featured in The Book of Other People include:

Aleksandar Hemon  
Nick Hornby  
Hari Kunzru  
Toby Litt  
David Mitchell  
George Saunders  
Colm Tóibín  
Chris Ware, and more

Read Zadie Smith's newest novel, *Swing Time*.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

- Sales Rank: #773851 in eBooks
- Published on: 2008-01-02
- Released on: 2008-01-02
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Most helpful customer reviews

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Great Concept, Interesting Characters

By Book Dork

The Book of Other People is a compilation of twenty four character sketches by a group of talented writers, some established, some up and coming. What originally drew me to this book was the fact that it was a Zadie Smith project; she had instructed each contributor to write a short story centered around a new character. It was a unique idea that offered endless possibilities. And that's what happened; The Book of Other People presents a snapshot of the diverse world we live in. There's everything from imaginative young boys to snotty rich women, from judges to voice actors. Not to mention the giant and the monster. There weren't any constraints on format (except, they were all put into the same font, Smith reveals in the introduction), so you have the occasional graphic short story, comic book strip and illustrations.

For me, the concept of the book was what really won me over. The stories themselves were decent, some better than others. "Puppy," by George Saunders, is a story about a dog that manages to bring together two opposite families, making you sympathize with both. David Mitchell's "Judith Castle" was an interesting take on how internet dating can become just plain sad. And Vendela Vida's "Soleil" gives you just a glimpse inside a love triangle that leaves you begging for more information. I was slightly disappointed with two of my favorite authors, Jonathan Safran Foer (again, another story about immigrants in America) and Nick Hornby (Posy Simmond's illustrations were good, though, just not the idea of an author progressing through life and constantly changing his image).

All in all this a interesting piece of literature, but don't expect any sense of cohesion connecting the stories, or for them all to be of the same quality.

34 of 34 people found the following review helpful.

A Book for other people

By Amanda Richards

The premise behind this anthology is simple. A group of contemporary authors having fun, each contributing a short story about a fictional character, with proceeds going to a named charity - 826 New York. This charity is dedicated to helping children develop their creative and expository writing skills.

There are 23 contributing authors, from the United States, England, Ireland, Haiti and further afield, and the vastly different stories showcase their different styles of character development and description. Editor Zadie Smith is herself the author of three books, and also contributes a story for this anthology.

I thought that some of the stories were absolutely brilliant, but quite frankly, I didn't understand quite a few of them, and one or two were way beyond my limited comprehension skills. I have no doubt that fans of great literature will enjoy this book more than I did, but it's only fair that I warn the casual reader that it isn't always easy sailing.

The first story, "Judith Castle" by David Mitchell of the UK is by far my favorite - a tale of love and loss that certainly isn't all it appears to be at the beginning of the story. This one belongs in my "brilliant" category. There are also two stories done in graphic format, and some that aren't about human characters.

For the sake of simplicity, I list below the stories in two categories - "Stories for Everybody" and "Stories for the Literati"

#### Stories for Everybody:

1. Judith Castle, by David Mitchell
2. Justin M. Damiano, by Daniel Clowes
3. Gideon, by ZZ Packer
4. Hanwell Snr, by Zadie Smith
5. J. Johnson, by Nick Hornsby & Posy Simmonds
6. Lélé, by Edwidge Danticat
7. The Liar, by Aleksandar Hemon
8. Judge Gladys Parks-Schultz, by Heidi Julavits
9. Soliel, by Vendela Vida
10. Roy Spivey, by Miranda July
11. Cindy Stubenstock, by A. M. Homes
12. Theo, by Dave Eggers

#### Stories for the Literati:

1. Frank, by A.L. Kennedy
2. Gordon, by Andrew O'Hagan
3. Jordan Wellington Lint, by C. Ware
4. Magda Mandela, by Hari Kunzru
5. The Monster, by Toby Litt
6. Nigora, by Adam Thirlwell
7. Puppy, by George Saunders
8. Rhoda, by Jonathan Safran Foer
9. Perkus Tooth, by Jonathan Lethem
10. Donal Webster, by Colm Tóibín
11. Newton Wicks, by Andrew Sean Greer

I would recommend this book to students of literature, who will enjoy analyzing each author's method of character development, and to people far more literate than myself. I also applaud the editor for organizing this project for a good cause.

Amanda Richards, March 16, 2008

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Uneven but Worthwhile

By Reader in Tokyo

This book was published in 2007 and collected 23 works by as many contemporary authors. The pieces were contributed for free to benefit the Brooklyn chapter of a nonprofit educational group co-founded by Dave Eggers. Nine had appeared earlier in other publications, mainly the New Yorker and the Guardian.

There were eight writers from the UK, 14 from the US, including Yugoslavian-born Aleksandar Hemon and Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat, and one from Ireland (Colm Tóibín). Eight of the authors were women.

The oldest were Tóibín (1955-), Nick Hornby (1957-) and George Saunders (1958-). The youngest were Zadie Smith (1975-), Jonathan Safran Foer (1977-) and Adam Thirlwell (1978-). Others included A. L. Kennedy, David Mitchell, A. M. Homes, Jonathan Lethem, Dave Eggers, Vendela Vida, Miranda July and ZZ Packer. Of the UK writers, all but Hornby had made it into Granta magazine's 2003 issue promoting the "best of young British novelists."

All but one or two of the pieces were short stories. Two contributions (by Americans Daniel Clowes and Chris Ware) were graphic art, and another (by Hornby) contained a few illustrations.

As the editor, Zadie Smith, said in her introduction, the most interesting thing was the variety of ways in which the writers created character. About half the works were written in the first person. A few focused on action, many emphasized recollection. Most enjoyed in this regard were Tóibín's piece in which an Irishman displaced in Texas described his mother's death, which had occurred some years earlier. There were feelings of grief, loss, hollowness and resignation ("There would be no time any more for anything to be explained or said. We had used up all our time"). Anyone who's experienced the loss of a parent is likely to find this story especially moving. Lethem's work, an excerpt from the novel published later as *Chronic City*, introduced the free-associative world of the narrator's friend, an eccentric social critic in an atmospheric Manhattan neighborhood ("If I'm your brain you're in a whole lot of trouble ... you picked the wrong brain!").

The work by George Saunders, not clearly understood, was still interesting for its description of a woman's thoughts on love amid an atmosphere of vague menace, and for the author's ear for the way some people speak. The humorous piece by Nick Hornby -- a series of capsule biographies from an author's jacket copy -- showed the depressing arc of one writer's life, from promising debut as a young novelist to hackwork as an aging ghostwriter. David Mitchell's story shadowed the day of an unreliable, deluded narrator. In Miranda July's work, a narrator described a brief encounter with a celebrity, which seemed momentarily to offer an escape from mundane reality. The piece by Homes recounted the bored, superficial conversation of wealthy art collectors waiting for their private plane to take off.

Many of the other stories made less of an impression. They were too short (Hemon) or cryptic (O'Hagan, Litt, Thirlwell, Julavits, Eggers), faded to an ending that seemed weak, and/or had little to say that I could enjoy. The less interesting pieces have been described by another as "bright but empty," and this seemed apt.

Still, the book was worthwhile for a quick introduction to the styles of a number of younger contemporary writers. And it was far more entertaining than *Granta #81: Best of Young British Novelists* (2003).

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Editor and contributor Smith (On Beauty, 2005, etc.) invited 22 other authors, many of them (like her) better known for novels than short fiction, to write a story inspired by the creation of a character. "The instruction was simple," she writes in her introduction, "make somebody up." Yet the stories correspond to no consensus about the role of character in fiction, or a return to realism, or the responsibility of fiction to mirror society. To the contrary, what Smith believes the stories show is that "there are as many ways to create 'character' (or deny the possibility of 'character') as there are writers." The title of each story comes from the name of a character or type ("The Monster") with the selections sequenced alphabetically. Many of the writers, including Smith, come from the McSweeney's and/or Believer literary circle (Dave Eggers, Vendela Vida, Heidi Julavits, Chris Ware, Nick Hornby et al.) and most of the contributions range from the short to the very short (Toby Litt's "The Monster" is a four-page paragraph). With proceeds benefiting 826 New York (a nonprofit organization for the inspiration and development of student writing), none of the writers were paid for their work, with the results sometimes more playful (and occasionally sly) than one has come to expect from them. Jonathan Lethem's Dickensian titled "Perkus Tooth" offers a hilarious dismissal of rock critics. A.L. Kennedy's "Frank" provides an existential parable about a man who isn't who he thinks he is. Though many of the stories have a first-person perspective, the narrator is rarely the title character, and some of the challenge for the reader can be determining whom a story is really about. In Colm T-ib'n's "Donal Webster," the name of the title character is never even mentioned, leaving the reader to guess who is addressing whom.

While the quality inevitably varies, the spirit of the anthology is that reading should be fun rather than work.

-Kirkus Reviews

Review

"...But just when you're ready to howl in frustration at the anthologification of the book world-I've seen the best minds of my generation, live blogging about recipes that inspire them-along comes The Book of Other People...Other People collects 23 pieces by a who's who of 21st-century geniuses and wunderkinds, from Dave Eggers to Edwidge Dandicat...Smith sent her contributors just one instruction: Make somebody up."

-USA Today

"Truly hip."

-The Boston Globe

"Whether they are old-fashioned narratives, playful improvisations or comic-strip-like tales told in pictures, these stories force us to re-evaluate that old chestnut "Character is destiny." They remind us that an individual's life is itself a narrative with a beginning, a middle and at least the intimations of an end. And they showcase the many time-honored techniques that writers use to limn their characters' predicaments, from straight-up ventriloquism to the use of unreliable narrators to a "Rashomon"-like splitting of perspectives."

-Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times

"From its strange, graphic-novelesque cover-an array of cartoonish sketches of odd-looking faces in profile, stacked like ladder rungs-to its uncommonly eye-catching lineup of contributors, "The Book of Other People," a 2008 paperback from Penguin Books, is extraordinary."

-Charlotte Observer

"If you only read one book, make it this dazzling selection of short stories..."

-Eve Magazine UK

"...Some of the wittiest and wisest stories you'll read all year..."

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