

Artful Duality in Ali Smith's *How to be Both*

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Abstract

American philosopher, psychologist and founder of Dual process theory, William James believed there were two different kinds of thinking: associative and true reasoning. He theorized that empirical thought was used for things like art and design work. According to James images and thoughts would come to mind of past experiences, providing ideas for comparison or abstractions. Ali Smith's novel *How to Be Both* is about art's versatility and a textual order depending on the element of chance its divided into two halves one set in the present day, concerning George, a teenage girl whose mother has died suddenly, the other imagining a life for the 15th-century Italian fresco painter Francesco del Cossa. The book has a dual structure and can be read in either order.

Ali Smith was born in Inverness in 1962 and lives in Cambridge. Her books have won and been shortlisted for many awards. Her novels such as *Hotel World* (2001) and *The Accidental* (2005), both were shortlisted for the Orange and the Man Booker prizes, with *The Accidental* winning the Whitbread novel of the year award.

Keywords: Dual process theory, Duality, art and history. Merging past and present

How to Be Both is a contemporary and historical novel by Ali Smith which recounts the efforts of 16-year-old Georgie to deal with her mother's recent death, and the spirit of Italian Renaissance artist Francesco del Coossa returning to Earth from Heaven to consider Georgie's situation in relation to his own life. Smith's characters revel in surprising us – George has a boy's name but is a girl whose sexuality is only just being explored; Francesco is born a girl but binds her chest and lives as a man. And when Francesco sees George for the first time, she assumes George is a boy, only to discover later that she had been mistaken. This duality is at the core of the book: the dead coexist with the living and their stories intertwine, sometimes in ways that make no sense other than the poetic.

The novel begins on New Year's Eve. Georgie is reflecting on the death of her mother the previous September, and thinks back to the last major trip she and her mother took, to Italy. There, her mother wanted to visit the Ferraro Palazzo in order to see the frescoes painted by Fifteenth Century Renaissance artist, Francesco del Cossa. Georgie could care less about art, history, or anything else at the time, but her recollections of the trip awaken a sense of interest in art and history. Georgie considers things that her mother had told her, about how important history is, and how history is never truly gone.

Georgie finds it difficult to believe that something can be both gone, and not gone. She also finds it difficult that her mother could both have lived, and now not be living. She begins to wonder about death in general, and whether or not people who die keep their memories. Everyone but Georgie's friend Helena tells her that people do not keep their memories. Georgie begins researching Cossa, seeking to learn more about him and his artwork, which has come to fascinate her like it did her mother. Things in Cossa's paintings – such as stone transforming into water – are what fascinate Georgie so much. It is the idea that something can be both things at once.

It is then that Francesco's half of the novel begins. He is called down from Heaven to exist in modern London, drawing near Georgie. At first, Francesco considers that he has been sent to Purgatory for having once painted Christ as older than His 33 years of age, but realizes soon this is not the case. He recognizes that there is something important about Georgie that he has been meant to understand. As he seeks to understand her, his own memories come alive.

Francesco's artistic talent was fostered by his father and his mother. Francesco grows to understand not only things, but their essences – their true natures. Something has both an appearance, and a true nature – things which both exist at once. Because he puts such emotion and understanding into his art, Francesco's career thrives. His greatest moment is when he is called upon to paint a fresco in the Ferraro Palazzo for the Duke Borse. Francesco cannot remember certain things, such as how he died. But over time he slowly comes to recognize that Georgie is very similar to himself through his memories. She has come to be able to sense the world in a far deeper way than she did before because of her mother. She has become something of a photographer, taking up the mantle of art. And she recognizes that things can both be and not be. Francesco is then recalled to Heaven.

When George is in Italy, she tells her mother she is "appalled by history, its only redeeming feature being that it tends to be well and truly over." (34) Her mother counters with a series of questions: "Do things just go away? ... Do things that happened not exist, or stop existing, just because we can't see them happening in front of us?"(53)

The joy of Smith's playful take on conventional fictional form is that the reader understands the poignancy of this before the characters do. Because, of course, all of it is still happening – in remembering her mother, George is bringing her back to life and in looking at del Cossa's frescoes, the artist, too, still lives and breathes through the work. Cambridge is city suburb of London, England. Cambridge is home to George and her family, and to Helena and her family. Much of the novel occurs in Cambridge, especially on New Year's Eve. George spends the night at home, reflecting on the past and recalling memories of her mother with such detail and clarity that it is difficult for her to discern the past from the present. Cambridge is where George and Helena attend school, is where Carol's ashes are scattered, and is where George and Helena go to visit the carpark. London is the capital of England, and is the city to which Cambridge serves as a suburb. London is a beautiful, culturally-renowned city, famous for its art museums among other things. George visits these art museums on a regular basis in order to see paintings by Francesco del Cossa.

Duality is an important theme in the novel "How to Be Both" by Ali Smith. Duality is the idea that something can both be, and not be. It is the idea that something can represent more than one thing, and it is the idea that something is both what it appears to be, and what it truly is. It is also the most physical form reflected in the construction of the novel. The novel is divided into two halves, each entitled "One" which make up the number two. Each half of the novel bears the story of either George or Francesco, and taken together, form a whole story and a whole novel. The novel is both the stories of George and Francesco, and it is one story altogether. It is both one novel, and it is not one novel.

Both parts refer to the other so that past and present merge at moments, characters collide in curious ways, and mysteries of the plot are unified by the clues dropped across both parts. Consider the opening line in the section on George, when she remembers her late mother's words: "Imagine it. You're an artist." The line is repeated at the end of the section, which then segues into the part on Francesco del Cossa; is this section an enactment of George's imagining, prompted by her mother's words? It can't be for the reader who encounters the line in the second half of the book, but can be for those who read it, as I did, in the first half. George, for us, could be seen as the author, or imaginer, of the second part. Neither is there one story within each part but layers of secret stories, rather like the concealed fresco in the book which is discovered hundreds of years later behind a wall.

How to be both shows us that the arrangement of a story, even when it's the same story, can change our understanding of it and define our emotional attachments. We may have known this, but to see it enacted with such imagination is dazzling indeed. Those writers making doomy predictions about the death of the novel should read Smith's re-imagined novel/s, and take note of the life it contains.

The book is in two parts - one of which is called "Eye" and is about a fifteenth century artist, the other of which is called "Camera", about a teenage girl of the present day who has very recently lost her mother. And I'm sure you're all aware that the book is available in two versions - Eye followed by Camera, or the other way round. To say that there's more than meets the eye in this terrific book is a gross understatement; it encompasses wonderful mothers, unconventional love and friendship, time, mortality, gender, the consolations of art and so much else. As George comments, "there's always more to see, if you look." "You know, Georgie, nothing's not connected," George remembers her mother telling her. It's another apt assessment of this gloriously inventive novel.

Dual process theories are a group of theories in social, personality, and cognitive psychology that describe how people think about information when they make judgments or solve problems. These theories are called dual process because they distinguish two basic ways of thinking about information: a relatively fast, superficial, spontaneous mode based on intuitive associations, and a more in-depth, effortful, step-by-step mode based on systematic reasoning. Dual process theories have been applied in many areas of psychology, including persuasion, stereotyping, person perception, memory, and negotiation. In general, these theories assume that people will think about information in a relatively superficial and spontaneous way unless they are both able and motivated to think more careful.

Dual process theories are built on several key ideas that have a long history in psychology. Dual process theories also build on Gestalt principles explored by psychologists in the 1930s and 1940s, which suggest that people have a natural tendency to make experiences meaningful, structured, and coherent. By focusing on how one thing relates to the next and seeing patterns in the way that events unfold, a person can understand and predict the social world, which allows him or her to anticipate, plan, and act effectively.

As dual process theories became increasingly popular, they were adopted by more and more areas of psychology to describe how people think about information and arrive at conclusions. Dual process theories differ in various ways. For instance, some assume that the two ways of thinking about information are mutually exclusive (either/or), whereas others suggest that they happen one after the other, or even at the same time. Dual process theories have been applied to many other research areas in social psychology. Strong positive or negative attitudes can guide behavior directly, without the individual thinking very much. Or, individuals can construct their attitudes in a more bottom-up, systematic fashion and then use this new attitude to determine their behavior.

Smith's language throughout is gorgeous, sparse, realistic and painful at others and warm elsewhere. There are philosophical and political stances explored in the novel but at no time does it detract from the humanity created within its pages. the intertwined stories of a 15th-century painter and a 21st-century teenager illuminate questions of art, identity, and immortality. We also see the frescoes from the point of view of the artist, as the book recounts del Cossa's experience of painting them. It shows how a work of art can not only speak to us across hundreds of years, but how it can be viewed through the prism of our own experience. The story flows in a first person, stream of consciousness style, which is disorientating at first, but creates a sense of intimacy between the reader and the two protagonists; it is as if we are hearing their every thought.

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