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Social History Book Club: Zadie Smith, *The Fraud*

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This is the first in a new series of *Social History* Book Club round-table reviews in which an interdisciplinary panel of historians and scholars of literature discuss important works of historical fiction. The series will consider the impact of historical fiction on the discipline of history, as well as the way novelists' works interact with historiographical trends in a wide range of subfields and adjacent disciplines. Panellists will also talk about the processes of writing about the past and where the novelists' craft might offer inspiration for historians, or help historians engage with diverse audiences beyond academia.[1]

For the first *Social History* Book Club, we selected *The Fraud* (London: Penguin, 2023) by award-winning British author Zadie Smith. *The Fraud* is set in London in 1873. It dramatises the famous case of the Tichborne Claimant, in which a man named Arthur Orton, a butcher from Wagga Wagga, Australia, claimed to be Sir Roger Tichborne, an English aristocrat supposed drowned in a shipwreck in 1854. Although many people connected with the family expressed their belief in Orton's claim, including Sir Roger's mother, Lady Theresa Doughty Tichborne (who died shortly before the trial commenced), Orton lost his bid for the inheritance and was subsequently found guilty of perjury. Convicted to serve 10 years in prison in 1874, he died in poverty in 1898.

The novel is told from the perspective of two main characters, both of whom were real. Scottish widow Mrs Eliza Buckly Touchet (1792–1869) lived with the family of her second cousin, the novelist William Harrison Ainsworth. Ainsworth was the author of *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839) as well as other sensational works of Victorian fiction. Through this relationship, Eliza Touchet's social circle included key literary figures of the period such as Charles Dickens, William Thackeray and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. In 1843, Dickens gave her one of eight pre-

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[1]Readers of *Social History* are welcome to propose books for the group to discuss. Please email socialhistoryreviews@manchester.ac.uk

publication copies of *A Christmas Carol*, which he inscribed to her personally. The book was auctioned at Christies for $290,500 in 2009. Andrew Bogle (circa 1801–1877) was an enslaved man born in Jamaica, where he worked on the Hope estate of the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos. In 1826, aged 25, he was taken into service by a Hampshire Baronet, Sir Edward Tichborne, serving as valet to the Tichborne family in England where he married twice before finally moving to Australia, where he met Arthur Orton. Bogle supported Orton's claim to be Sir Roger Tichborne and his testimony, including his life story, was widely reported in the national and international press. When Orton was convicted of perjury, Bogle was not charged with any crime.

Our contributors to this *Social History* Book Club discussion are: Frances Houghton, Lecturer in Modern British History, Open University; Kesewa John, Lecturer in Black British History, Goldsmiths, University of London; Sheena Kalayil, Lecturer in Intercultural Communication at the University of Manchester and award-winning author of the novels *The Bureau of Second Chances* (Polygon, 2017), *The Inheritance* (Polygon, 2018) and *The Wild Wind* (Polygon, 2019); Eloise Moss, Senior Lecturer in Modern British History, University of Manchester, and Reviews Editor, *Social History*; William Pooley, Senior Lecturer in Modern European History, University of Bristol; Michael Sanders, Professor of Nineteenth Century English Literature, University of Manchester; and Benjamin Thomas White, Senior Lecturer in Global History, University of Glasgow.

How did the novel deal with the chronological scope of its characters' lives?

Eloise Moss: It took me a while to get used to the chronological shifts across the novel, in which chapters move between the 1870s and the 1830s, and different parts of the book shift perspective, first concentrating on Eliza Touchet's memories of joining the Ainsworth family and her experience of witnessing the Tichborne case, and then later, Andrew Bogle's testimony and life story. I thought that structure helped the novel say something really interesting about memory and about periodisation, given that it's based on the perspectives of characters who are encountering the Tichborne trial as it relates to their own life experiences both in the past and in the present, which is how memory works – it's not linear, and a different perspective can completely upend the version of events with which we feel most comfortable. The novel is also about a political awakening for Eliza Touchet especially. So I thought that had a strong relationship to how historians

select particular moments in people's lives and then choose which to prioritise in the narratives that we write.

Sheena Kalayil: What I particularly liked was that it felt like the characters were modern, they weren't written with a sense of their consequence, they were unaware that we would be reading about them 100 years hence. But I felt quite cheated halfway through the novel when it shifted into the narrative of Andrew Bogle and his father when they were enslaved, and the style changed, and all the wit and humour that Smith had allowed Eliza Touchet and William Ainsworth to have was not allowed for Bogle and his son. And I wondered about that choice because she [Smith] would have thought very long and hard about how she structured this novel. I'd be very interested to hear why she chose to do that. But it was a really big gamble and halfway through the novel I felt quite angry. Elsewhere, the novel created great juxtapositions: the comparison between the women's leaders in the abolitionist movement in England and the experiences of enslaved people; and the fact that even though Bogle had been enslaved, and then worked as a servant, he could travel, like a man (even though he was indentured), but Eliza was never able to travel like a man.

Kesewa John: Yes – I'm really glad you said that, Sheena, because I also felt the novel shifted halfway through and I went from liking it to really not liking it as a novel. I think you've tapped into it – all the wit and the humour was lost, and I felt like Smith didn't understand the Caribbean characters as well, she didn't give them a full sense of self. I read quite a lot of Caribbean historical fiction, partly because of my work, and partly because I like the genre, and *The Fraud* fell quite short of other historical fiction I've read by much less accomplished and celebrated authors. Smith's clearly a brilliant writer. But often when I read historical fiction, I tend to learn more about the period, and I felt with *The Fraud* that I was missing things, although I think Smith covered the major historical context about the region at that time and the interactions between people. It's interesting because this novel really speaks to the way that I do historical research, which is that I track Caribbean historical actors, both analysing their lives [and] thought in the Caribbean and their experiences in the Caribbean and in the UK, which is what Smith's done. But I feel there are a lot of gaps in the story when and I didn't understand why Smith prioritised the stories that she chose. It read as a type of Black British history or Caribbean history in currency 20 years ago. The field has changed so much, there's lots more stories that you would choose to tell, that engage with

contemporary histories of Black Britain or the Caribbean. At times, it felt like Smith was telling quite a dated story.

Eloise Moss: Yes, that also raises the spectre of the extent to which academic histories are reaching wider audiences, and which novelists are using their works to bring light to those more recent histories.

Benjamin Thomas White: I was really interested by what Kesewa said there. I found myself wondering if this is because Zadie Smith has read more nineteenth-century British literature (including, evidently, a great deal of the works that Ainsworth churned out) than, for example, Caribbean historical fiction. She's obviously done research on the life of Bogle's father and his own life. But the main book she credits is the history of the Hope estate and so she's working less with fictional re-creations – and I don't mean imaginative creations are something less than history, quite often imaginative reconstructions are more valuable – but perhaps she was working less with modern fiction. I really enjoyed this book, but I don't feel I have a sense of it as a coherent narrative because of the way it is deliberately structured in these really short chapters, in which there are many different facets of the story that are being given to you, and you're not looking at the whole thing at any one time. You only get the period of the 1830s and the 1870s, interspersed with scenes set in the intervening decades. So I agree, I too felt that there was a quite awkward tonal shift in those volumes because it's structured like a Victorian novel in the sections that tell Bogle's story. I think I'll have lots to think about with this novel for a long time, especially the shifting back and forth between the 1870s and 1830s, which is a transformation from an age of getting around on horseback to train transport and commuting. So the people themselves were very conscious of having lived through dramatic historical changes, and the way that is presented fictionally is fascinating.

In what way does the novel build on existing historical sources about the characters and the Tichborne case?

William Pooley: I was struck by the contrast between the Mrs Touchet narration and the Bogle narration, because in the Bogle narration Smith uses a lot of his words from the historical record of the Tichborne trial; she has directly reproduced material that was in newspaper reportage of the trial – they're actually the words that he said. I do wonder if, consequently, Smith felt she had more liberty to develop Eliza Touchet's character in whatever direction she wished, because in

a sense Touchet is absent from the historical record. She's the recipient of the famous Dickens book, dedicated to her, but she hasn't otherwise left a lot of sources for the novelist or historian to work with. Whereas Bogle had a unique opportunity to present his life story in the trial, but from a historian's point of view, the way that he presented himself in a trial situation was surely not representative of his entire life.

Eloise Moss: I think some really interesting questions are emerging about authenticity in the novel; as Will was saying, when you include historical transcripts, that changes the tone of the novel and what you're hoping to achieve with it. Smith's claims to be telling a story versus telling a history become blurred.

Michael Sanders: An aspect of the novel I found frustrating were the gestures to things that aren't really followed up. There were constant references to Ainsworth being at work on a novel about the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 and the 'Pretender' King Charles Edward Stuart, and I thought there might be a connection made at some point between that struggle and the Tichborne Claimant, along with a broader theme about working-class radical politics. There's a long tradition in working-class radicalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century of Jacobite sympathising. I once asked the great historian of Chartism, Malcolm Chase, about this and he said that part of the appeal of these narratives was that they called into question the legitimacy of the existing power structures, and I think that's what's going on in the novel. There's that lovely comment in relation to Bogle's belief in Orton's claim, for example, that people need to believe in their own illusions.

Similarly, there's a brief mention of William Cuffay, the Chartist leader, and for someone who's interested in Chartism, Cuffay is a really significant, historical figure. There are also passing references to Thomas Spence and Robert Wedderburn, when Bogle gets to London and another servant with radical politics invites him to attend political meetings. These read as missed chances to address an important history of working-class protest in the novel, although Smith dwells in more detail on the 1848 revolutions, and has Eliza Touchet attend a Great Indignation meeting, which I think is a nomenclature all modern protests should adopt!

Finally, there is another brief quotation from the Chartist song 'the Lion of Freedom's Come from His Den', and a character says 'I haven't heard that since the Chartist days'. I thought that a character having lived through Chartism, but not once mentioning this as being significant in any way, is extraordinary. So some of Smith's attempts to flesh out the historical period by, as it were, a bit of name-dropping, I found frustrating; they never seemed to come together as more than scattered references.

Kesewa John: I was confused by the portrayal of Charles Dickens. In one scene he's shown hugging Eliza Touchet's two younger cousins, when she feels unable to, and I didn't understand what that scene was supposed to illustrate about their characters. I was really curious about that. I liked the commentary on the Victorian literature scene as well, which illustrated the idea that anti-vaxxers have been around since the nineteenth century. That's one of the things I really wish Smith had developed, because she mentions it a couple of times but doesn't tell us more. It's an unfinished conversation in the novel.

On the other hand, one of the things I would particularly highlight is the way Smith depicts the changes to North West London, which in the 1830s was marshland, fords and hills, and it changed monumentally because it became part of London during the nineteenth century. I really like the way that she evoked those changes, in that period. That felt very authentic. It was also enjoyable when the characters walked through these areas and noticed, as we do today, that a church used to be there and questioned where it had gone, or were surprised at how much their former homes had changed and become unrecognisable. If you live in an area that's changed rapidly, as a reader you can really make connections with the characters' experiences.

Eloise Moss: I wonder if that's what we all wrestle with in writing, when trying to cover a vast historical terrain chronologically. It's so difficult to offer deep contextualisation in every single period, while simultaneously exploring contemporary themes including race, gender, class, sexuality and disability, and modern political protest as well. *The Fraud* really is trying to do an extraordinary amount of historical and modern work. The novel also made me think about the historiographical debate over the idea that nineteenth-century citizens were 'absent-minded imperialists' or whether people were genuinely concerned with the empire and the politics of their day, or if in reality it was just a few individuals who really engaged with the moral, economic and ethical implications of empire. I wonder if Smith's novel holds an element of trying to force those discussions into a more active issue for the characters for the purposes of plot and narrative. The middle of the novel shifts to confront the reader with the horrors of enslavement and provoke them into reflecting on how was it possible that people were not engaging deeply with those issues, which I felt was also a modern political statement about the legacy of empire today.

Sheena Kalayil: I can forgive the historical gaps because I think that's the difference between reading a novel and reading an academic text, and I think I would forgive Smith more for those gaps that you have identified because you have more knowledge of that period. But that's why I wondered about the different treatment of the characters given that Smith isn't writing an academic text, she's writing a novel. Smith treats the daily lives of Eliza

and William with a lot of love and attention to detail, but then when Eliza finally meets Bogle she says 'tell me everything', and then we go into Bogle's narrative which is more of a reproduction from the historical record, and it becomes jarring. From the beginning it's clear that Smith's writing a novel and it's got all the hallmarks of a Zadie Smith novel, transferred 200 years into the past, but then we have that strange decision to move away from a novelistic treatment of the characters and use the historical record for Bogle.

Benjamin Thomas White: Thinking about other characteristics of a Zadie Smith novel, on the whole, most of the action happens in Willesden, or around Willesden, which is the same territory that Smith has mapped out in other novels and where she still lives according to the author bio. But the novel is set at the point when Willesden is still a village outside London, as it is in the 1830s. In terms of the relationship to historical change, this is glancingly referenced. I think this is reflective of the way we live in history, to a large extent we just sort of glance off the surface of the times we live in, but then at other certain times, and for many of us this might be one of those times, we're kind of consciously active – we are aware of larger historical events taking place and we give them focused attention. I liked the way the novel did this with the history of nineteenth-century Britain. It begins with the perspective of the characters living through the 1870s and coming to the end of fairly long lives, for Eliza and William. The novel actually starts after the real Eliza died in 1869. So it's about looking back to the 1830s with some sense of the history they have lived through, and then it takes us back to bits of that history, but it's not the kind of conscious 'here I am in history', it's more about how history impinges on us in our everyday lives as we go about doing the cleaning and the housework. This again makes that shift to the section narrated by Bogle more jarring, because that is a coherent chronological narrative.

Kesewa John: I will return to my earlier point about Caribbean historical fiction. I wasn't thinking that historical fiction so much has changed, as that history teaching and research and the way we understand Black British history has changed a lot in the last 10 to 20 years. There's a lot more work on Black British lives from the seventeenth through to the nineteenth century, and I think what is thought-provoking about some of the issues the novel raises is that in my opinion, what makes for good historical fiction is when novelists pick up the tools of the historian. They actually do their own original research and they bring that to the general public along with the story that they tell. It makes it magical because you can learn something and be drawn into a fantastic story of some description. But I think that's what was missing here because it read as though Smith only drew on some older research that was long published. The novel mentions the Cato Street conspiracy and she mentions the Peterloo

Massacre but these events don't really mean anything in the context of the novel, they're not narrative devices that accelerate the plot, they're just there. And that's disappointing, I think, ultimately, because these events are so rich in stories.

There aren't many works of historical fiction about these events, yet Smith could have developed something really exciting with any one of those incidents. For example, for me Mary Prince was a very significant absence. Smith's novel sweeps through the 1830s and the 1870s but the only narrative we get of an enslaved person is Bogle's, which is fine in the context. But to never cross paths with Mary Prince at all of these abolitionist meetings that the characters go to, and were so invested in, at the period when Prince was in England and her book is a bestseller, in the context of characters talking about contemporary Victorian literature? Prince's absence just feels like such a weird thing to miss. Did Smith not know? It felt like a missed opportunity in the novel, which picks up some really fantastic bits of history. I'm not a historian of the nineteenth century and I would have loved to hear more about this. I agree with Mike that there were passages where it felt like something was going to happen that capitalised on these important parts of the history of protest and abolitionism in the nineteenth century but they never went anywhere, they were only hinted at.

Benjamin Thomas White: I agree; the novel feels more informed by the broad historiography of nineteenth-century Britain than specific research on nineteenth-century Black British lives or the nineteenth-century Caribbean. I think that helps to explain this kind of imbalance, perhaps.

Kesewa John: I think it's fair to say that Smith is British and her education and understanding of the world comes from Britain, which is her area of expertise and it shows in the novel. But that also presents an issue with the novel, because there seems to have been less effort to make the sections set in the Caribbean and the characters based on Black Britons more believable for the reader.

Sheena Kalayil: I think Kesewa's point is really key, that Zadie Smith writes this novel through a very British lens. Britain is at the centre of this story and everything else happens around that. Yet the danger with historical fiction is that some readers won't reflect critically on that history. Even if it's an unconscious choice, the author has decided that Eliza Touchet is the right person to be telling the story. That will be accepted, which then becomes part of society's way of talking about that history, and Zadie Smith will be regarded as an expert because she has Caribbean heritage. Very few people will make the distinction that Smith's outlook might actually be very British,

and I think that's where foregrounding Eliza's perspective was an interesting, ambitious, and possibly problematic choice.

By contrast, what I very much liked about the first part of the novel in particular was how people were discussing the issues of the day. This is not present in the canon that's normally taught about nineteenth-century fiction; what did people think about what was happening in the West Indies, in India and other countries? Historic authors never seem to mention it, there are fleeting references in [Jane Austen's] Mansfield Park, and [Charlotte Bronte's] Jane Eyre, but the kind of conversation that families had in their home about the issues of empire and slavery are absent, so it was really nice to see those reimagined in *The Fraud*. But what I wasn't convinced by was how religion was portrayed. Specifically, the relationship characters had with religion in the novel felt very modern, in the sense that it didn't read as though it was very important to these characters, despite its significance in the lives of nineteenth-century people. In *The Fraud*, the references to religion are made in relation to dissatisfaction with slavery, when characters assert that it's not Christian. But other than that, religion isn't portrayed as playing a major role.

Benjamin Thomas White: Eliza was actually Catholic; I'm not sure how many middle-class Scottish Catholics there were since the status of Catholicism in Scotland remains a contested one.

Would you use this novel in teaching?

Michael Sanders: Regarding the ways in which you might teach this novel, I would get students to note all the references to historical names and events that are referred to in passing, and ask them to go out and research them for class discussion. In other words, I wouldn't use this to teach the nineteenth century.

Eloise Moss: I would use this novel to teach students about public history, in seminars thinking about history-writing as a form of fiction and the implications of that. I'd particularly use it to reflect on how a general reader would interpret a historical period based almost exclusively on historical novels and historical drama. By contrast, I wouldn't introduce this novel when teaching a course on British imperial history, where I think students would question why the novel is mainly told through the lens of a middle-class white woman.

William Pooley: This makes me think about why historians read historical fiction and what we find compelling about it, and of course one of the things that Smith can do in her novels that we don't allow the historian to do is to use an unreliable narrator. The reader knows that there's meant to be

a development in Eliza Touchet's character, for instance showing that she has different attitudes towards race and gender in her youth, but then there's a process of discovery followed by a turn to bitterness towards the end of the novel. Part of that is about her recognising what she thinks Englishness is, and the transformative scenes where she encounters Bogle, and when Bogle's son comes out of a music show with a Black female companion and Eliza shrinks away from the young woman who he wants to take for a walk. I was struck by the shortest chapter of the of the book, called 'Mrs Touchet's Theory', which reads:

> Mrs. Touchet had a theory. England was not a real place at all. England was an elaborate alibi. Nothing real happened in England. Only dinner parties and boarding schools and bankruptcies. Everything else, everything the English really did and really wanted, everything they desired and took and used and discarded, all of that they did elsewhere.

So I do think Smith addresses the tension in the book, that it's written from the perspective of a middle-class white woman, but there's a question mark whether readers are supposed to identify with Mrs Touchet as she goes through a process of realisation of her prejudices. Sometimes I found that Eliza's character appears too obviously to be speaking for the author.

How does *The Fraud* address the intersectional themes of class, gender and sexuality?

Kesewa John: On the one hand, Eliza Touchet is portrayed as a woman of means, she's got all this extra money that she comes into on her husband's death but she doesn't ever spend or even access it. But at the same time, she's dependent, not only emotionally, but also financially on her cousin [William Ainsworth] who does have money. She's also educated, but by whom and how is a bit of a mystery. She's widowed early enough in her life that she could remarry if she chose to, but she does not. The Ainsworth family treat her like the maid but she's also part of their family. Finally, the novel suggests that she's a queer character through her romantic and sexual relationship with Ainsworth's first wife, although she doesn't even fully understand herself in that way. Consequently, she occupies an insider/outsider character. But exactly what she's inside and what she's outside is often unclear, and she never fully explores her sexuality as far as we can tell from the novel – although she does explore William's sexuality, in the erotic relationship she then forms with him. But is a deeper exploration of her feelings a deliberate silence in the novel? As though, after Frances [Ainsworth's first wife] died, Eliza mourned her for the rest of her life.

Sheena Kalayil: I thought the absence of sex in Eliza's later life was a strange narrative choice. Is it that easy to give it up? She's clearly portrayed as enjoying it with both Frances and William. Was it so easy then to have this chaste life when William began to have relationships with other people instead? So again, I would have liked to have seen that story told as well.

Michael Sanders: At the point where Eliza's bisexuality is revealed, and then Zadie Smith kind of reinforces Eliza's queerness by making her a dominatrix as well, I thought it read as slightly over-determined. A middle-class Scottish Catholic, who is bisexual and a dominatrix: it made this character read as though they were being made to do a little bit too much work for the story, which slightly mystified me. In regard to her class, Eliza is middle class in terms of upbringing, income and education and there's a sense in which she has to be widowed for the plot, because otherwise she can't be in Ainsworth's house and act as a kind of housekeeper-cum-hostess. She veers uneasily between running a salon on Ainsworth's behalf, a bit like the Countesses Blessington or D'Orsay, and there's a sense in which Eliza repeats that on a slightly smaller middle-class scale at Ainsworth's house, so she needs to have that kind of education and to be, in nineteenth-century terms, sexually 'safe' because she has been married. That makes it okay for her to associate in that domestic sphere and be the only woman at the table, but she needs to be sufficiently educated to be able to hold her own in that context.

Benjamin Thomas White: I like the way that Eliza Touchet is very sure of herself and then she's unsure of herself when she's looking back from the perspective of her seventies to her late twenties, thirties, early forties. We're also given external views of her from the very start, in the opening scenes with a lad who comes to look at the floor of the Ainsworths' house. I think it gives a really complex sense of her, and of her self-understanding. I thought that was really well done. It's not something that was given with Bogle later on. You do get given a sense of his awareness of how he is being seen by others, including after Edward Tichborne dies and Bogle essentially gets inherited by the new occupants of the big house, and they clean a glass that he has touched before bringing it to their lips. But it doesn't bring his narrative into question in quite the same way that Eliza Touchet's narrative is brought into question from inside and from outside.

Sheena Kalayil: I think Eliza learns, doesn't she? Because she also learns about the new Mrs Ainsworth [Sarah Ainsworth], in the scene where the new Mrs Ainsworth talks about growing up in poverty and accuses her of having no idea about poverty. I saw that scene as a kind of reparation for the representation of the second Mrs Ainsworth elsewhere in the novel, which was almost a parody of a white working-class woman as a racist, so then

she's given an opportunity to show more depth of character. I liked the way that the characters learned and grew, even at an older age, throughout the novel.

Frances Houghton: I really liked the second Mrs Ainsworth. She was one of the best characters for me, because as you say she started off being a parody of the working-class woman made good, but then she moves across class boundaries. Even from the beginning there was a lot of depth to her character because there was something quite dignified about the way she discusses motherhood and knowledge from lived experience. She attempts to assert that she is more than just the stereotypical working-class woman that she is being seen to be, even within her new family. I did think her backstory was a bit overblown, that her mother was a prostitute down at the docks, that took it to extremes. But I thought the way she was set up as the representative of the working classes, with how she engaged with the Tichborne case, offered a different, deeper dimension to the story.

Kesewa John: I really enjoyed her as a character but I agree that it felt like Smith went to extremes with her, and when it's revealed that she comes from exactly the same part of England as Arthur Orton (the Tichborne Claimant), that was excessive. At the same time she has credibility, as she's the first one to say when a witness in the case is going to turn out to be a fraud. She's clearly got a certain kind of wisdom, but she's also a proudly illiterate person. So there's a tension between her being very street-smart on the one hand but not book-smart. I don't know how realistic she was as a character, though. In the nineteenth century, if a working-class woman married a high-profile figure in the literati like William Ainsworth, why would she parade her working-class origins? It cuts her off from the world that he's a part of. Why wouldn't she have taken elocution lessons when they married? It wasn't believable for the period. The energy she brought to the Ainsworths' house was 'working class and proud', but in context, a working-class woman who had married above her class would have been trying to assimilate a lot of the time, rather than pointing out her difference with the relish that the second Mrs Ainsworth does.

Eloise Moss: I agree. I thought that she worked as the comic character and then Smith restored her to a figure we were supposed to sympathise with, to make the reader recognise their own hypocrisy at having laughed at her because she was a stereotype in so many ways. Yet as a character she didn't fit in that household at all, and I couldn't figure out why she would be sat with figures like Dickens and Ainsworth.

Michael Sanders: I found the characterisation of Sarah Ainsworth offensive. It was another stereotyped portrayal of the white working-class woman who demonstrates that she's working class by being foul-mouthed, and by

refusing to abide by polite rules. It really rankled. She was the unrepentant Eliza Dolittle.

Frances Houghton: I thought she worked quite well as a disruptive character because she refused to fit into the expectations placed on her by the middle- and upper-middle-class Ainsworths and their social circle. She's shown as very clearly aware that she's not as well-read, educated or articulate as the others, but she brandishes that as a social weapon – you can take me as you find me. I thought there was a real pathos in her character, because she's obviously aware of all these conversations about politics and current affairs that she doesn't understand and that her new family know more about. But she still argues, and expresses her views, and makes sure that her voice is heard. I can see why she could be interpreted as offensive, but I also think she's shown as quite strong and assertive, and her character is clearly intended to communicate a sense of gendered working-class self-awareness and agency. Had she simply been painted as a quiet, meek, passive character sitting in the corner, as historians we'd likely have stringently queried why the voice of the main working-class female character had been ignored.

Eloise Moss: I wonder if there is a commentary on gender there, in the sense that Ainsworth marries her presumably for her attractiveness but then they're all stuck with her. That's not an untypical arrangement of that era; then her class becomes the dominant feature of her family relationship, which problematises it.

Sheena Kalayil: I enjoyed the humour that came out with the character of Sarah Ainsworth, but I think this is another example of when Smith tries to make the character very modern, and it was pushed a bit too far. It's related to that comment I made earlier that the way religion was dealt with didn't feel of its time, in the same way that Sarah Ainsworth's pride in her working-class origins and lack of attempt to disguise them in that context felt too modern and not of the time. On the one hand, I think readers will have enjoyed those parts of the novel the most because it speaks to us in our lives now, but in terms of historical fiction I would say that Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent* covered the same themes – sex, religion, class and politics – but was more believable.

Benjamin Thomas White: On the subject of Sarah, I think one of the things that's important about her is the fact that she's ended up as the second Mrs Ainsworth is a mark of Ainsworth's decline. His books are losing popularity, precipitating a steady decline in their social and economic status because they don't sell anymore. Then, they're forced to leave London. If they were in London, then Ainsworth's flirtation with one of the domestic servants wouldn't have ended in the same way. There are hints in the novel that

similar things have happened in the past, but they didn't have the same results. But I take seriously what everyone has said about the good and bad things about the way that character is depicted.

In what ways do you think the novel uses history as a commentary on the present?

Michael Sanders: I really enjoyed reading the novel. But I'm not sure I believed in any of the characters at all. It felt almost as if Zadie Smith wasn't entirely sure which novel she wanted to write. There are four novels jostling for position in *The Fraud* and as the novel progressed I felt that the analogies with present-day Britain were really interesting, but also meant that it no longer felt like it was actually a historical novel. It was more a kind of commentary on twenty-first-century Britain via a deflection through the late nineteenth century.

Where I think *The Fraud* is actually very good is in the closing 50 or 60 pages when the parallels with the present day become ever clearer, particularly the discussion around reparations and whether or not you can put a financial price on the legacy of slavery. I wasn't persuaded that those were authentic historical discussions, but they are discussions that we're now having as a society. I found that part of the novel really compelling in the way it addressed the question of 'what are you compensating?' 'How can you even begin to put a financial price on the impact of that?' And also what that means at the human level. When Eliza is invited to meet with the Black singer who is the companion of Bogle's son, Eliza reflects that she wants the girl and her choir to be (as Eliza says in her mind) 'noble Africans', but instead they look like a version of herself. They're no longer exotic. Similarly, when she is confronted with the two orphaned Black sisters at the end of the novel, who she has discovered would have been financial beneficiaries of her husband's estate had she not had a claim, her lawyer forces her to confront the limits of her tolerance by saying 'You're really not thinking about giving them the money?' Or what is more unthinkable – 'You're not really thinking about adopting them, are you?' He challenges her about whether she will recognise them as kin. And in that moment, she goes, 'no, no, no, you're absolutely right, that is completely unthinkable. I was not thinking about that. I was thinking I'll just give them the money, and then they'll go away. And that will be it'. The moment where she walks out of the solicitor's office reflecting on the extent to which she's failed her own ethical duties and obligations was a really interesting scene in the novel.

Frances Houghton: Actually, I'm really interested to hear Mike say that because I thought the novel had a sort of dissonance in respect of its use of humour, such as the satirical references to the young male literary characters singing 'heartily of what Britons never, ever, ever shall be'. This is clearly

a reference to the line about Britons never being slaves in 'Rule Britannia', which of course is something that we've seen scrutinised in the news during the last couple of years. I thought it was something that an audience would know about today, but would they know about it in 10 years' time? Would they get the joke? Or the byplay? On the other hand, I thought it was really, really clever all the way through because it evokes the current debates about how empire is taught in courses on modern British history in universities today, and how far they include material about the interactions between peoples of empire and white Britons within Britain.

Benjamin Thomas White: I think the novel focuses on Bogle's faith in his own narrative, which supports the Claimant's narrative. Is that because he genuinely believes it or is it because this is a truth which casts into doubt the self-satisfied truths of the slave-owning society?

Kesewa John: I think it's Eliza herself who says of Bogle that he could only believe in his own story.

Eloise Moss: I think the novel attempts to tell us more about the perspective of the characters and the people at the time than reaching a clear conclusion but I also like the way the novel questions the nature of class, and authenticity, and whose narrative should we believe in. In that sense, it suggests that Orton had just as much right to lay claim to that estate as any other person because the reasons that he didn't succeed were so bound up with an unequal structure and the marginalisation of Bogle's narrative, and that's still very resonant.