

Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

2015 WINNER

HOW TO BE BOTH BY ALI SMITH

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ali Smith was born in Inverness in 1962. She is the author of many novels, including most recently *Autumn, Winter and Spring* in the 'Seasonal' quartet. Her 2014 novel *How to be Both* won the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, the Goldsmiths Prize and the Costa Novel of the Year Award. She has also been shortlisted once for the Orwell Prize, twice for the Orange Prize and four times for the Man Booker Prize, among many other prizes. Ali Smith lives in Cambridge.

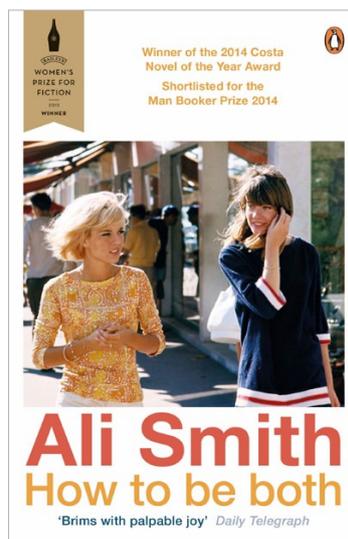
PLOT SUMMARY

16-year-old Georgia (or George) is dealing with her mother's recent death. As she stands looking at a painting in an art gallery, the spirit of Italian Renaissance artist Francesco del Cossa returns to Earth from Heaven to consider George's situation in relation to his own life. Two tales of love and injustice twist into a singular yarn where time gets timeless, knowing gets mysterious, fiction gets real – and all life's givens get given a second chance.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

How to be Both contains a dual narrative – one story told by the Italian renaissance artist Francesco del Cossa in the 1400s and one by George, a teenage girl

in the present day – that, depending on the copy of the book you have, either comes first or second in reading order. The plot isn't hampered by whichever way you read the novel, but the ordering of the novel in this way questions 'what comes first' in any creative process.



When George's mother takes her to see the frescoes in the Italian palazzo, she asks her which comes first: the artist's sketches, or the painting looked at by the observer? Though George realises that the sketch is the first part to exist, she also comes to see that the sketches are also then obscured forever by the paint, which will be the only part of the finished artwork to be seen by visitors to the gallery.

In terms of other 'which came first?' questions the book asks, Del Cossa's story comes first from a historical perspective, but on the other hand, George's story comes first in terms of the reader's closeness to her in time.

Lastly, whichever way around the reader accesses the story is *their* 'first', and the order that they will thereafter remember the story, giving a 50-50 degree of personalised versioning to the process of reading the book. In this way, Smith gives some of the control, usually reserved for an all-powerful author of the novel, to the reader.

DISCUSSION POINTS

How to be Both contains a theme of gender identity in both narratives, as well as the theme of women hiding their identities in the art world. George's mother, part of a small group of Guerrilla Girls-style 'Subvert Interventionists', keeps her identity secret in order to perform and organise a number of computer hacks and activist appearances.

In Francesco's story, Francesco is in fact a girl living as a young man, which is the only way that she can be an artist. In George's story, George (preferring the androgynous form of her name Georgia) develops a romantic relationship with her female friend H. On the reveal of her identity as a young woman to her friend Barto on page 279, Francesco says:

"It was as simple as agreement, as understood and accepted and as pointless to mention as the fact that we all breathed the same air: but there are certain things that, said out loud, will change the hues of a picture like a too-bright sunlight continually hitting it will."

How does this statement relate to contemporary experiences of identity? What's changed for people now? Do people still have to 'hide' their identities in any way?

“ ANCIENT AND MODERN MEET AND SPEAK TO EACH OTHER IN THIS TENDER, BRILLIANT AND WITTY NOVEL OF GRIEF, LOVE, SEXUALITY AND SHAPE-SHIFTING IDENTITY. ”

SHAMI CHAKRABARTI,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2015

QUESTIONS

How do George and her mother relate to Francesco's experience, and he/she to theirs?

What did the 'sunlight' of government attention and being spied on by the mysterious Lisa Goliard do for George's mother?

What happens when Barto becomes aware of Francesco's secret identity?

Why do you think women artists and writers continue to produce work under male or androgynous pseudonyms?



NEXT STEPS

Describe a famous painting or sculpture, either find it online or go to a gallery or space and describe it as you see it. Be as detailed as you can, and describe what you see, rather than using any previous knowledge about the work. Note the colours, expressions, textures, smells or even tastes you associate with it.

There's no right or wrong interpretation; be as thorough as

you can in connecting with the artwork and noting what it means to you. Then, find out its given meaning or theme – either what the artist intended or the popular interpretation of the work. Does it change how you perceive it? Which interpretation do you prefer?

For something extra, experiment with observing the people around you at a gallery or space where there is artwork. Observe them looking at and talking about the art. Write about two different people's observations, or what you think their thoughts might be looking at the art. Maybe intersperse their thoughts into one descriptive piece told by two voices. Does doing this make you see the artwork differently?

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE BLAZING WORLD BY SIRI HUSTVEDT

HOW TO PAINT A DEAD MAN BY SARAH HALL