From the award-winning author of Hotel World and The Accidental, a dazzling, funny, and wonderfully exhilarating new novel.

At a dinner party in the posh London suburb of Greenwich, Miles Garth suddenly leaves the table midway through the meal, locks himself in an upstairs room, and refuses to leave. An eclectic group of neighbors and friends slowly gathers around the house, and Miles’s story is told from the points of view of four of them: Anna, a woman in her forties; Mark, a man in his sixties; May, a woman in her eighties; and a ten-year-old named Brooke. The thing is, none of these people knows Miles more than slightly. How much is it possible for us to know about a stranger? And what are the consequences of even the most casual, fleeting moments we share every day with one another?

Brilliantly audacious, disarmingly playful, and full of Smith’s trademark wit and puns, There but for the is a deft exploration of the human need for separation—from our pasts and from one another—and the redemptive possibilities for connections. It is a tour de force by one of our finest writers.

My Personal Review: There but for the is not an easy book for me to write about, because it is one of those rare books that one doesn’t just read but actually experiences, participates in. It’s not a book to be breezed through for the plot. You have to work at it, often backing up and rereading to make connections between events, characters, and words. But often that work surprises you by becoming infinite play, even as it leaves you with some startling
observations about human nature, language, memory, and the world we live in.

Taken separately, each of the words in the title seem nondescript; together, they seem empty without the expected conclusion—without, in other words, God or grace. And maybe that’s exactly what Smith intended: to make us ponder the place (there) of God and the location of grace in a society that is technologically advanced but individually isolating. (Think about the person with 5000 friends on Facebook.) It may be hard to find, but, ultimately, Smith concludes, grace is still there, within and between us.

The novel consists of four chapters, one for each word in the title, each focused on a different narrator. As many of the reviews below note, the basic premise is that a man attends a dinner party, walks upstairs between the main course and dessert, and locks himself into the spare bedroom, refusing to come out. But the real stories are inside the heads of the narrators. Anna (There), a fortyish single woman bored with her job, is surprised to learn that her email address has been found in the interlopers (Miless) cell phone, pushing forth long-forgotten memories of the continental tour she won as a teenager. Mark (but), a gay man in his 60s still grieving the loss of his partner more than 20 years earlier, is haunted by the lyric-singing, rhyme-spouting, often-obscene ghost of his mother, a brilliant artist who committed suicide. May (for) is a terminally ill 80-year-old falling into dementia and memories of the daughter she lost, yet still sharp enough to observe and regret the changing world around her. Finally, the delightful Brooke Bayoude (the), who is either the CLEVEREST or the CLEVERIST, a girl who delights in the sounds and multiple meanings of words and wants to pin down the facts of history, even as she comes to realize that facts, too, are mutable. Along the way, Smith deftly and subtly weaves in unexpected connections among these characters and even the novel’s secondary characters.

I’m not one who generally likes fiction that philosophizes. Here, it takes you unawares, most often playfully, but sometimes melancholically. It’s a rare book that can make you think, think about your own life, while you’re being so well entertained. And as a wordsmith/word lover, I found Smith’s puns, rhymes, jokes, allusions, double entendres, etc. thoroughly delightful. (Having vivid memories of riding in the backseat of the family car at about age nine, pondering the sounds of the word jello, drawing it out in the voice in my head, I could really relate to Brooke.)

I haven’t always been a fan of Smith’s type of literary experimentation; in fact, the last of her works that I read, a short story collection, was off-putting simply because it seemed to exist only for the purpose of experimentation, and while I liked The Accidental—another novel using multiple narrators—, I was somewhat disappointed in the ending. But for me, There but for the is about as close to perfection as it gets. Put aside your usual expectations, open your mind, and jump in. You won’t regret it.
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