20-MINUTE READ SUMMARY

Dead and Alive

Zadie Smith · Essays · Penguin Press, 2025



The Book in 60 Seconds

Dead and Alive is Zadie Smith's fourth collection of essays: thirty pieces written between 2016 and 2025, gathered into five sections with wonderfully plain names — Eyeballing, Considering, Reconsidering, Mourning, and Confessing. It is not a novel, and it is not a memoir, although it contains the pleasures of both. It is a book about paying attention: to paintings, to films, to dead writers, to political slogans, to your own life. Smith compares an essay collection to a guided tour through a museum, and she plays both parts — the guest who walks in curious and the host who turns to you and says, come and look at this. Named one of the best books of 2025 by *The New Yorker*, *TIME*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Kirkus Reviews*, and one of Barack Obama's favorite books of 2025, it is the rare work of criticism that reads like a companion.

The Central Argument

Smith's deepest conviction in this book is that attention is a moral act. To look carefully — at a painting, at a film, at a political slogan, at another person — is to resist being herded by slogans, algorithms, and easy answers. The book's five sections trace a small education in how to be a person: first you look, then you think, then you change your mind, then you grieve, then you admit things about yourself. The subject changes from essay to essay. The method never does.

That conviction is why the book feels unified despite wandering across art, technology, politics, football, and grief. In a culture that rewards hot takes and tribal passwords, Smith makes the case for slowness, for doubt, for changing your mind in public. She borrows from the philosopher Jacques Derrida the idea of unconditional hospitality — welcoming the unknown other without demanding anything in return — and treats it as a model for reading, for looking at art, and for living with people you disagree with.

Eyeballing: Learning to Look

The opening section is the most joyful in the book. These are essays about visual art, and Smith approaches each work the way a novelist would: she asks who the people in the picture are, what they are hiding, and what it costs them to be looked at.

She writes about the painter Toyin Ojih Odutola and her exhibition *A Countervailing Theory*, treating a painting not as decoration but as a philosophical argument about power — about who gets to be seen and how. She writes about Kara Walker, whose enormous black-paper silhouettes turn the history of slavery into something you cannot look away from. And she writes about Celia Paul, the painter known for her self-portraits, including *Reclining Painter*, fascinated by the way Paul paints herself looking back at the viewer, refusing to be merely an object.

What makes these essays work is that Smith never pretends to be a neutral expert. She is a novelist looking at paintings, and she says so. She brings a storyteller's eye and a storyteller's questions, and she describes what is on the canvas so vividly — the composition, the color, the strange detail — that you can follow her even if you have never seen the work. Then she tells you what it made her feel, and why that feeling might matter. Close looking plus honest reaction: that combination is the engine of the whole book.

The Instrumentalist: Generations and the End of the World

The most celebrated essay in the collection is "The Instrumentalist," Smith's reading of the 2022 film *Tár*, starring Cate Blanchett as the conductor Lydia Tár — a brilliant, monstrous figure brought down by her own abuses of power. The essay was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and it earns the honor by using a film review to say something much larger about generations.

Smith's argument is that every generation mistakes its own view for the whole world. Lydia Tár belongs to Generation X, the generation that came of age believing it had won the culture war — that its values were simply the way things are. Then a younger generation arrives with different rules, different language, and different ideas about power and accountability, and the older generation experiences that not as a disagreement but as the end of time itself. Smith calls it the confusion of your own cultural obsolescence with the end of the world.

Once you hear that line, you start seeing it everywhere: in politics, in offices, in families. The older person who says the world has gone mad, when what has really happened is that the world has moved on without asking permission. Smith is fair about it, which is characteristic of her. She does not simply side with the young against the old. She is interested in the tragedy of it — the way a person can be genuinely brilliant and genuinely unable to hear the new world. Tár is a monster in the film, but she is also a person who built her whole identity on rules that changed underneath her. Smith holds both truths at once.

The essay also demonstrates Smith's signature move: she asks moral questions but rarely answers them. What do we do with great art made by people who did terrible things? What do we do when the rules for judging that change faster than we can keep up? She does not resolve it. She leaves you holding the question, which is more honest than a tidy answer would be.

Some Notes on Mediated Time: The Technology Essay

Several reviewers singled out "Some Notes on Mediated Time" as one of the high points of the book. It is Smith's essay on how technology has distorted our experience of time, and it is personal in a way that makes it land hard. She tells us that as a child she watched up to nine hours of television a day — not bragging, confessing — and argues that her generation's archetypal film is *The Truman Show*, in which a man's whole life turns out to be a television program he does not know he is in. That is the unreality she is describing: a life lived at one remove, watched and watching at the same time.

Then she takes the argument somewhere darker and more specific. The internet, she says, was captured by monopolies that learned to monetize human attention, and algorithmic mediation harms girls in particular, because girls are socialized around relationships and comparison, and the algorithm takes exactly those instincts and weaponizes them.

Readers of Jonathan Haidt's work on phones and childhood will recognize some of the same territory, but Smith comes at it as a novelist and a mother and a person who grew up on television, not as a social scientist. She is less interested in statistics than in texture — what it feels like to live inside a system that profits from your insecurity, the feeling of time slipping, of attention fragmenting, of living a life always being performed for an invisible audience. And she connects it to her own childhood television habit, which is brave: she is not standing outside the problem pointing at young people. She is saying, I was formed by this too, and here is what it did to me. That confession gives the criticism its force. She is not a scold. She is a witness.

Reconsidering: Changing Your Mind in Public

The middle section is where the tone changes and the book gets harder — and more interesting. It includes two essays about Palestine that have drawn the most argument, and a reconsideration of Flannery O'Connor that shows Smith's method at its best.

"Shibboleth" was written during the student protests of 2024 against the war in Gaza. Smith defends the ethical foundations of the protests and calls for a ceasefire, and at the same time insists that dismissing the felt unsafety of Jewish students is a failure. Her argument is that political movements should strive for moral consistency, because it is not always easy to identify who is powerless in a given situation. A shibboleth, in her use of the word, is a phrase or slogan that marks who belongs and who does not — a password that sorts people into tribes. Once a movement starts using shibboleths instead of arguments, it stops thinking and starts policing.

She says this in a tone she herself describes as defiant and exhausted, at one point listing the labels people might want to stick on her — misguided socialist, toothless humanist, naive novelist, useful idiot — and answering, in effect, put me wherever you want. *The Guardian* criticized her for being too noncommittal on Gaza; she apparently amended the essay slightly for this collection, but the core stance did not change. She refuses to force a firm belief out of a situation she finds genuinely complicated. Her defenders say forcing a firm belief would defeat the point. Her critics say that in a moment of devastation, ambiguity is a luxury. It is a real disagreement, and the book is better for containing it honestly rather than smoothing it over.

The companion essay, "Trump Gaza Number One," is about an AI-generated video posted by Donald Trump imagining postwar Gaza as a beachfront resort of golden towers and cocktails. Smith reads it through the work of Frantz Fanon, the philosopher of decolonization, arguing that the video reduces Palestinians to backdrop figures — desensitized extras in someone else's dream of profit. The people who actually live there simply disappear from the picture. She connects that to language itself: when a leader describes people who cannot leave a war zone as terrorists simply because he says so, language is being used as a weapon. The word does not make it true.

That gap — between what is said and what is real — runs through the whole collection. The resort video says paradise; the reality is rubble. The slogan says safety; the reality is that someone else feels unsafe. Smith is asking us to notice that gap and refuse to let pretty words cover ugly facts. That is not a political program. It is a habit of attention.

Her essay on Flannery O'Connor shows the same habit applied to literature. Smith asks us to take another look at O'Connor, whose stories are full of violence and grace and grotesque comedy, and whose personal letters contain views about race that are, by any modern standard, ugly. How do you hold both facts at once? Smith does not pretend there is a clean answer. She reads the stories closely, quotes the letters honestly, and lets the discomfort sit there. That is the reconsidering move, and it is the opposite of both the canceling move and the excusing move. She is not saying forget the letters, the stories are great. She is not saying burn the stories, the letters are damning. She is saying: here is a writer who saw something true about human beings and also failed, badly, to see something true about her neighbors, and a serious reader has to live with both.

Mourning: Elegies as Criticism

The fourth section gives the book half its title. These are elegies for writers Smith admired and, in some cases, knew: Joan Didion, Martin Amis, Hilary Mantel, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison. Five enormous figures, and Smith writes about each with a mix of grief and clear-eyed assessment. She loved these writers, and she is not afraid to say where they fell short.

The Didion piece contains the book's most startling observation: that writers are secret bullies, imposing their words and thoughts on others. It is a strange, almost mischievous thing to say in a memorial, but it is also true, and it is a very Smith thing to say. She admires Didion enormously, and she also sees the power move inside the admiration. Didion's sentences do not just describe the world; they tell you how to see it. Smith is honest enough to admit that she loves that power and is wary of it at the same time.

The Martin Amis memorial is warmer and more personal, because Amis was a friend and a kind of mentor. Smith was often compared to Amis early in her career, and she writes about what it meant to be a young writer measured against a famous older one, and what it meant to watch him die. The Hilary Mantel piece is about *Wolf Hall* and Mantel's ability to make the past feel immediate — to put you inside a mind from five hundred years ago. The pieces on Roth and Morrison are shorter, more like salutes, acknowledging debts that cannot really be repaid.

What makes this section remarkable is that mourning, for Smith, is not just sadness. It is a form of criticism. To mourn a writer properly, you have to say what they actually did, what they got right and what they got wrong, and what the world looks like now that they are gone. A tribute flatters; mourning tells the truth. Running underneath these essays is a quiet argument: that we live in a time when serious criticism is dying, when the space for careful, honest judgment is shrinking, and that losing these writers means losing some of the people who kept that space alive.

Confessing: The Lens Turns Inward

The final section is the most personal and, for many readers, the most charming. Here Smith writes about herself, and she is disarmingly honest. There is an essay about football fandom — the collective hysteria of being a soccer fan, which she participates in fully while also comparing it, with a deliberately provocative flourish, to something much darker. She catches herself cheering for England in the World Cup and wonders what life would be like if all emotions were so straightforward. Why is it so easy to feel belonging in a stadium and so hard everywhere else?

She writes about walking down Kilburn High Road in her beloved northwest London, about the spontaneous moments that connect strangers in a city — a glance, a joke, a shared complaint about the bus. She writes about the bemused detachment she felt as an adolescent toward adult guidance, and how she can still recognize that teenager in herself while also seeing her from the other side, as a parent now. And she writes about multiculturalism, not as an abstraction but as something lived — messy, unfinished, full of contradictions she refuses to tidy up.

There is also a joyful essay about Stormzy's headline set at Glastonbury in 2019 — the second-youngest solo headliner in the festival's history, and the first Black British solo artist to top the bill. Smith reads the performance as Shakespearean history, the arrival of a king, and she means that in the old sense: not celebrity hype, but a moment when a culture recognizes itself in a new figure. She writes about tens of thousands of people singing along to every word of a Black London rapper, and asks what that means — what has changed and what has not.

And there is a piece about her research for *The Fraud*, her novel about the Tichborne trial — the strange nineteenth-century case in which a butcher from Australia claimed to be a missing English aristocrat. Smith invites us to her desk while she is researching, and you get to see how a novelist thinks, how a historical footnote becomes a whole world. It is a reminder that the essays and the novels come from the same mind and the same curiosity: who was this person, really, and how do we know?

After all that looking and considering and reconsidering and mourning, Smith turns the lens on herself. She admits to the television habit, to the football hysteria, to the teenage detachment, to the contradictions of her own multiculturalism. It is a way of saying: I have been judging all these paintings and films and writers, and now it is my turn. That humility is what earns her the right to judge everything else. She is not standing above the material. She is inside it, with us.

Key Ideas in Plain Language

Attention is a skill, not a talent. Smith treats looking as something you practice. The art essays show what happens when you actually stop in front of a painting instead of glancing and moving on: the work starts talking back. The same discipline applies to films, to political language, to people. Most of our worst judgments come from looking too fast.

Every generation thinks it is the world. The *Tár* essay's central insight generalizes far beyond film. Each generation mistakes its own norms for universal truth, and experiences the arrival of new norms as catastrophe rather than change. Recognizing that pattern in yourself is the beginning of wisdom — and the hardest kind of self-knowledge to practice.

Language can hide reality or reveal it. From Trump's resort video to the slogans of campus protest, Smith keeps showing how words can be used to cover ugly facts with pretty pictures. The defense is precision: say what you actually see, name what is actually there, and refuse to let a slogan do your thinking for you.

Mourning is a form of truth-telling. The elegies work because Smith refuses to flatter the dead. Loving a writer means saying what they got right and what they got wrong. That honesty is also a defense of criticism itself — the idea that careful, public judgment is worth preserving.

Confession earns the right to judge. Smith ends the book by turning the lens on herself — her television habit, her football hysteria, her contradictions. A critic who admits her own blind spots is more trustworthy, not less. Humility is not the opposite of judgment; it is what makes judgment credible.

Smith's Style: Thinking in Real Time

Part of the pleasure of this book is simply spending time inside Smith's sentences. She writes the way a very smart friend talks: long, looping sentences full of qualifications and asides and second thoughts, and then suddenly a short, sharp sentence that stops you cold. She uses footnotes the way David Foster Wallace used to — little conversational detours at the bottom of the page, as if she cannot resist adding one more thought.

The style is the argument. A writer who thinks in qualifications and second thoughts is a writer who believes the world is more complicated than a slogan, and the sentences perform that belief on every page. That is why the book rewards slow reading. If you skim Smith, you will miss the turn — the moment where she starts out agreeing with someone and then, three sentences later, has quietly disagreed with them, or the moment where she admits she was wrong. The pleasure is in following a mind that is genuinely thinking, not performing a conclusion it reached before it started writing. Most opinion writing is a victory lap for a view already held. Smith's essays are explorations, and sometimes she arrives somewhere she did not expect.

How to Approach It

Do not read this book cover to cover. Dip in. Start with the *Tár* essay, or the technology essay, or whichever memorial catches your eye, and read one piece at a time. Each essay is self-contained. You can read one on a commute, put the book down for a week, and come back without losing the thread — because there is no thread to lose. That is the museum again: you walk to the exhibit that catches your eye.

One practical tip: look at the thing she is writing about first, if you can. Watch *Tár* before reading "The Instrumentalist." Look at a Kara Walker silhouette online before reading that essay. Listen to a few minutes of Stormzy's Glastonbury set. The essays are richer when you have seen the work, but they are generous enough to work cold — Smith describes what she is looking at so vividly that you can follow her even if you have never seen the painting.

A suggested first route through the museum: start with "The Instrumentalist" (the *Tár* essay) for the book at its most brilliant, then "Some Notes on Mediated Time" for the argument that will change how you look at your phone, then the Didion memorial in Mourning, then the Stormzy essay in Confessing for pure joy. After that, follow your curiosity — the book is designed for it.

Memorable Lines

- On her program as a writer, from an interview about this book: *"I say what I see."*
- On generations, from "The Instrumentalist": every generation mistakes its own view for the whole world — confusing its own cultural obsolescence with the end of time itself.
- On writers, from the Didion memorial: writers are secret bullies, imposing their words and thoughts on others.
- On movements, from "Shibboleth": put me wherever you want — misguided socialist, toothless humanist, naive novelist, useful idiot.

Fair Criticisms

She asks questions she will not answer. Smith's greatest strength — her ability to see all sides at once — can look like a refusal to choose. On Gaza in particular, some readers will want her to plant a flag, and she will not. If you want a writer who tells you what to think, this book will frustrate you. If you want a writer who helps you think, it will delight you. The line between those two things is thin, and Smith walks it sometimes at the cost of clarity.

The collection is uneven. Spanning ten years, not every piece is at the same level. A few shorter occasional pieces feel slight next to the big set pieces like the *Tár* essay and the technology essay. A speech written for one occasion does not always survive being lifted into a book. The peaks are very high, and the dips are short — but the dips are real.

The tone sometimes wobbles. Smith is a comic writer by temperament; she loves a paradox and a punchline. Most of the time she controls it brilliantly, but there are moments — especially in "Shibboleth" — where the cleverness and the seriousness are not quite in balance. A joke that works beautifully in an essay about football can feel off-key in an essay about a war.

It assumes a literate reader. Smith invokes Derrida and Fanon and Flannery O'Connor without much hand-holding. If you hit a reference you do not know, do not stop — the argument almost always becomes clear from context. But the book trusts its reader to keep up or to look things up.

Why It's on the List

Obama's list, and the best-of-2025 lists from *The New Yorker*, *TIME*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Kirkus Reviews*, all converged on the same book for the same reason: it is a book about how to pay attention, published in a year when attention felt like the scarcest resource we have. Every essay is an exercise in looking carefully and refusing to settle for the first easy opinion. *TIME* put it well: the collection highlights the necessity of criticism at a moment when critical thinking teeters across the West and authoritarian forces are flexing their power. Smith is arguing, essay by essay, that paying close attention — to art, to language, to other people — is how you resist being herded.

There is also something simpler: she is fun to be around. Like David Foster Wallace, she has the rare talent of interesting you in topics you never thought you cared about. You do not care about a nineteenth-century painter's self-portraits — and then you read her essay on Celia Paul, and suddenly you do. That is a gift, and it is the reason this book works as well as it does.

What to Read Next

- **Zadie Smith, *Feel Free* (2018)** — her previous essay collection, the same mix of art, politics, and personal writing.
- **Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind* (2009)** — her first collection; watch her becoming the essayist she is now.
- **Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968)** — the book that taught a generation how to write about a place and a time by paying attention to the details.
- **Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché* (2001)** — criticism as combat, funny and ferocious in equal measure.
- **Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000), *Swing Time* (2016), *The Fraud* (2023)** — the novels. This book is a wonderful doorway into all three; the essays and the novels are the same project, a writer trying to see the world clearly and to say what she sees.

Daily Book, Episode 54 · From Barack Obama's favorite books of 2025 · Summary prepared for the morning commute.