

The War at Home:  
Representing the Iraq War in Ali Smith's *The Accidental*

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In interviews, Ali Smith has contended that her 2005 novel, *The Accidental*, is about the Iraq war. In a May 2005 interview with *The Guardian*, she said, “although people won’t think this immediately, I think it’s a war novel. We lived through a war as though we were not at war in this country. We saw it on television but we saw a very different version of it which would be unrecognizable to people from elsewhere” (France 2). The majority of the novel takes place during the summer of 2003, and at several points the text alludes to the war’s events: the disappearance of David Kelly, British UN weapons inspector, and the recovery of his body (27); America’s reception of Tony Blair (27); televised photographs of Saddam Hussein’s dead sons (243); speculation on the imminent victory of Allied forces’ and the war’s support from the British middle class (243); the capture of Baghdad (246); ex-BBC Reporter Andrew Gilligan’s report that the Kelly dossier had been “sexed up” (246); and Abu Ghraib prison and the public fall-out (294).

As the novel suggests, public debate surrounding the Iraq war during the summer of 2003 lacked a common signifier: proof of the weapons of mass destruction that would have given Great Britain a valid reason to join the American-led invasion of Iraq. In May, Gilligan reported that the dossier had been changed; in June, Tony Blair’s press secretary claimed that this was “a lie” and demanded an apology; in July, Kelly was found dead; and the rest of the summer was devoted to an independent inquiry into the whole scandal (*Telegraph*). In the face of questions about the actual presence of these weapons and the scandal around Kelly’s alleged “sexed up” dossier, public consensus dissolved—if it had even existed in the first place—and the public began to realize that Britain may have

falsely entered into a war that would not be over too soon (Young).

In this essay, I will argue that Smith grapples with the Iraq war in the novel's very form. Less interested in the mimetic relating of events, she focuses instead on the way that people struggle to understand a traumatic event from which they are so far removed. The war unfolded episodically on a public screen, transcribing Kelly's private life into the public domain, but Smith transposes this public debate back onto personal grounds. Her formal emphasis on interiority asks the same questions about interpretation and representation at a personal level that reporters debated on television and in print: whose version of events can we trust? Smith's characters do not externally respond to the war other than when, to her editor's mortification, Eve briefly toys with the idea of writing about a soon-to-be deceased British soldier (Smith 198). Rather, Smith's characterizations lead to questions about identity and how it is formulated and represented; these questions in turn graft onto questions about the war and its representation in the novel. This correspondence emerges most strongly in Smith's insistence on perception and variable reference points, how people record details to construct different versions of the same events, and fragmented subjectivity.

*The Accidental* tracks the extended holiday of a bourgeois London family in Norfolk. Set during the summer of 2003, the novel only subtly glances at the events that pervaded the public domain. Instead, the plot depicts four self-reflexive individuals at various threshold moments who see and interact with the world in vastly different ways. The mother, Eve Smart, writes fictional biographies of World War II victims as if they had lived on, while her husband (her children's stepfather), Dr. Michael Smart, teaches English Literature at a London university, where he has developed a habit of sleeping with undergraduate students. Previously a model pupil, their son Magnus has entered into a deep depression after becoming

involved with a classmate's suicide, and his troubled younger sister Astrid speculates about about her biological father as she struggles through adolescence without friends. When a young woman named Amber mysteriously arrives one day, she shakes the Smart family members out of their isolation. They each ascribe different meaning and motivations to her, but she proves them all wrong by robbing them blind and, just as mysteriously as she arrives, vanishes, leaving the Smarts to gather the pieces of their shattered assumptions.

Smith employs three key formal techniques to engage these questions of interpretation and identity. First, each character uses a distinct rhetorical register or personal vocabulary that allows them to make sense of reality; second, extreme focalization allows readers access to characters' emotional and intellectual interior as they construct meaning; and third, Smith's breakdown of generic form in her characters' narratives demonstrates how meaning can be made outside of the traditional methods of fiction. In this essay, I will focus on Magnus's use of math as a way to interpret reality, Astrid's growth through Smith's use of focalization, and the formulaic representation of Michael's fragmented subjectivity. These devices stress how differently shared experiences can be represented and interpreted individually, and thus mirror the public's struggle to understand the British involvement in the Iraq war.

Characters in Smith's novel use their own distinct personal vocabularies to interpret reality and individually create meaning, heightening fiction's emphasis on the variability of interpretation. Astrid repeats descriptors such as "typical" and "ironic" or "sub-standard," and uses Latin phrases like "id est" and "etc." to explain herself (227). Michael, however, repeatedly references figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, and cliché; he also refers to himself as Dr. Michael Smart as he relates his experiences via literary figures and situations (76, 57). Eve, on the other hand, refines

her ideas internally through formal question and answer interviews (79), which inspire what she calls her “autobiotruefictionviews” novel series (81). Smith also portrays some of Eve’s interactions as dialogue—Michael’s capacity for such dialogue being one of the reasons that Eve marries him in the first place (290).

I will focus here primarily on Magnus, who applies the novel’s most compelling rhetorical register: mathematics. Before his classmate Catherine Masson’s suicide, Magnus grounded himself in the factual certainty of mathematical equations through which he negotiated his reality. In “The beginning” section of the book, Magnus grapples with the meaning of Masson’s suicide, how it happened, and what part he played in it. As he says, “the beginning of this = the end of everything,” “this” meaning the suicide (36). As a result, Magnus has lost the ability to function in the outside world or to interact with those around him; additionally, he can no longer see a future beyond this event. For him, the initial doctored photograph represents the prime variable in what added up to her death. He sets the events up as a linear equation: “they took her head. They fixed it on the other body. Then they sent it round everybody’s email. Then she killed herself” (36). He repeats a slightly different version on the next page, which still leads to the same answer, “then she killed herself” (37). He also toys with alternative results by trying negative variables like “if they hadn’t” (45). These varying statements represent his mathematical attempts to determine what exactly led to this answer. He did not know Masson, but her suicide affects him so heavily because “he was part of the equation,” and this statement makes his complicity more clear than the vague pronoun “they” (36). If she were still alive, Magnus would not be at “the end of everything,” and so it is her suicide specifically that leads to his crisis and withdrawal from society, not the doctored photograph and bullying. Before Masson died, Magnus believed that “maths = find-

ing the simple in the complex, the finite in the infinite” (44); now he sees all information as “a joke” or “meaningless” (48). Since her death, “it doesn’t matter what numbers add up to anymore.... This is all it adds up to. He did it. They did it. She got the message. She killed herself” (51). He thus places himself at the beginning of this chain and ultimately blames himself for her death. In his obsession with his responsibility as the final answer, he cannot see a way to keep living, and so he uses an equation to see if the shower curtain rod will hold when he tries to hang himself (55).

Yet, when Amber arrives as an unknown variable, Magnus again employs mathematics to interpret her motivations and determine what she means for him. He initially tries to decode their sexual encounters with theories: “Amber = what? / The Jordan Curve Theorem.” He sees her breasts as bell curves, and “inside her is curved space” (140). He describes her nakedness as the mathematically unsolvable “parallel postulate” and “incalculable x”; in the act of sex, “Amber adds herself to him” (141). This is Magnus’ first sexual encounter, and so he uses this mathematical register to give meaning to sexual activities as well as to Amber as a person. However, Magnus values her for more than her sexual services and thus creates other equations to give her additional meaning. The way she gains access to the church makes her equivalent to “genius ... genius squared ... genius to the power of three,” an exponentially large sum (143). More than that, he sees her as “an axis” that holds his fragile family together, and this ability means for Magnus that “Amber = true. / Amber = everything he didn’t know he imagined possible for himself” (153). Amber thus enables Magnus to imagine the infinite other possibilities beyond his role in Masson’s death.

In the final section, Magnus feels insufficiently judged for his crime and again turns to math to understand how the school authorities arrived at what he sees as an incorrect answer. However,

at this point, his need for meaning exceeds that register's capacity to express an emotional response that will suffice for him: "the end result = he is supposed to be relieved ... simple as abc, 123" (238). But Magnus feels no relief. He needs judgment to feel absolved and the lack of such judgment leads him to believe the school officials made a mistake in their method. He asks if there exists some form of reasoning that could help him find a more satisfactory answer: "is there a calculus that lets you understand why and how you reached a wrong answer? The letter had come. It was the end result. Something was wrong with it" (241). No matter how many different ways he tries logically to dissect the situation, he still comes up with this same wrong answer that seems meaningless to him. Finally he understands that the mistake lies not in his mathematical equations, but in his attempt to apply their objectivity to this personal and subjective experience. In this epiphanic moment, he reaches outside himself to Astrid "and tells her as much as he knows and as much as he can, beginning at the beginning" (257). The meaningful connection he forges as he shares this experience gives him a way forward—one built on open communication and common understanding.

Magnus's mathematical view of the world serves as an example of how Smith uses intense focalization and a level of free indirect discourse that leaves little room for outside evaluation. This device allows readers to witness each character's emotional and intellectual growth, and the manner in which they construct meaning over time. Readers thus watch Magnus muse on his life's worth in the face of Masson's suicide, while witnessing the concerns of other characters: Michael suffers through an existential crisis when his sexual conquests of students no longer satisfy him (69), Amber rejects him (177), and he loses his job (259). In turn, readers witness Eve the reporter interviewing herself as she comes up against the truth behind her hollow, scripted life and finally runs away.

Smith's focalization of twelve-year-old Astrid provides the novel's best example of character growth, while her use of media to negotiate reality relates back to the British media's representation of the Iraq war. Astrid's journey can be viewed most dramatically through her camera, a device that allows her to undergo a transformation from dependence to emancipation. Initially, the camera and its evidential footage provide her with comfort and reassurance. Twice she dreams about things that cause her anxiety, and in both dreams she lacks her camera and thus the ability to film and understand the dreams' contents. In "The beginning" section, she dreams about how her classmates exclude her and thinks "if she can get this on film she will be able to show someone everything that's happening. But she can't lift the camera. It's too heavy. Her arm won't work" (14). Her inability to work the camera at a crucial moment worsens the nightmare: the camera makes up part of her self-worth and she feels lost and unable to make sense of her surroundings without it. At this point in the novel she lacks the agency to deal with these girls on her own and requires objective proof of their behaviour in order to understand it.

In "The middle" section, Astrid sees her camera as a meaningful link between herself and Amber, believing that Amber finds the camera as important as she does. Astrid claims that they go out to "[film] important things on [her] camera" and takes her documentarian role seriously (111). However, when Amber throws her camera off a pedestrian walkway, Astrid experiences an existential crisis: she can no longer prove things happen and thus feels that her experiences are meaningless. Astrid wonders what use she will be "now that she can't record anything important" (119). The intense anxiety this causes in her shows up in the dream she has later that night:

Astrid dreams of a horse in a field. The field is full of dead grass, all yellowed and the ribs are showing on the horse. Behind the horse an oil well or a heap of horses or cars is burning. The sky is full of black smoke.... All over the field at Astrid's feet people are lying on the yellowed grass. They have bandaged arms and heads; there are drips attached to some of them. A small child holds out a hand to her that says something she can't understand. Astrid looks down at her own hand. There is no camera in it. (134–35)

These images represent some of the things Astrid encounters in her reality through media or otherwise, and her desire for her camera reveals her dependence upon it to understand what she perceives. Once she no longer has it, she needs to find new ways to create meaning.

By the final section, Astrid begins to develop new ways to negotiate her reality without relying on her camera and its evidence. She abandons her films at the shop and tells the shop boy that she is “finished with them” (225). She then conducts a meaningful and constructive exchange with him that would not have been possible were she behind a lens or engrossed in her footage. She claims that this exchange makes her loss of the footage less disappointing and decides that “she can remember quite a lot of things without having them on a tape” (226). The proof of Astrid's growth is that she no longer needs to prove things; she now realizes that both her self and her experiences have validity without the physical evidence of a video recording. This development emerges most strongly at the end of the novel, when she says, “her responsibility is different. It is about actually seeing, being there” (227). With the loss of her camera, she gains new agency. Her actions in “The end” section also



demonstrate her growing ability to make meaning out of her surroundings by interacting more directly with them. This relates back to the war in complicated ways, as the British public had to rely on the media for information; however, Astrid's growth encourages readers to remain skeptical of those representations and engage with their immediate reality as they try to interpret meaning.

The heavy focalization and free indirect discourse in *The Accidental* also highlight how freely Smith experiments with form, even as she places the narrative within a traditional three-part, beginning-to-end structure with a straightforward plot. She plays with grammar, leaving sentence fragments within, as well as between, different sections, and even uses enjambment to display her characters' fragmented thoughts. Characters' narratives also break down formally when they experience stress (Eve on 85 and Magnus on 43). Her most fascinating formal innovation, however, occurs in Michael's sonnet sequence.

This sequence covers the sonnet's evolution from Petrarchan, to Elizabethan, and into modern and postmodern forms. As Michael works out his thoughts, the sonnets become more formally strict: the rhyme schemes become more noticeable and the first proper fourteen-line sonnet comes in the fourth poem. In the fifth poem, Michael sees—ironically—that he addresses only himself and that, like Petrarch, he will never attain his Laura. Michael states this sentiment almost exactly: “He realized that he would never fuck her. / He realized that he would never have her. / He was a very ordinary bloke. / He turned from sand to glass and then he broke” (167). Sand conjures images of Eliot's “The Waste Land,” and at this modernist reference, the form of Michael's poetry implodes and begins to lose discernable meaning. Michael mixes up the words and punctuation on lines with no sense of proper syntax or grammar. His diction fits the broken form with words such as “shattered,”

“splinters,” “smashed,” and “fragments, heart, rags, skin [sic]” (169). In the seventh poem, he moves into a postmodern style and spreads his sonnet over the whole page (171). This poem includes the same words and images as the sixth; however, within the looser form, the words have been arranged to communicate different meaning. His use of the past tense signals his effort to move past his realization, and the purposefully grouped words show his attempt to make sense of and develop this “new self” with its “new tongue” (171).

Michael’s sonnet sequence also shows a formal attack on his earlier dilemma regarding cliché. Throughout the sequence, he remains self-conscious about a poetic form that has become clichéd, as is evident when he says, “Did Shakespeare always become e.e. cummings? / Was the end always sonnetary ruin? / Did Shakespeare always turn into Don Juan?” (173). Forcing “Juan” to rhyme with “ruin” keeps with his self-conscious manner as it alludes to Byron’s poetic innovation that made “Juan” rhyme with “chew on,” allowing him to mock the original Don Juan genre. This allusion to poetic innovation does more than increase the authority of Michael’s poetic voice; it also nudges the reader to appreciate his own innovation in the sequence’s ninth and final poem. This poem, a longer narrative, presents itself as a more recognizably traditional poem that includes several different standardized stanzas with an *abababcc* rhyme scheme. These shrunken octave sonnets still sit outside standard form, constituting Michael’s poetic innovation. This restructuring of the sonnet genre demonstrates his attempt to make new and honest meaning out of a form that has been stripped by overuse. In this poem, Michael seems to possess a more analeptic view, which creates a stronger sense of implied meaning, while the narrative aspect signals his return to the traditional novel form in the final section. In his bid to understand Amber and consequently himself, Michael pushes the sonnet form as hard as possible before it explodes; the

shock of this explosion forces him to recuperate the form, but also to transfer it into something new: an authentic way of interpreting and interacting with reality. This new view allows him to communicate sincerely with others and to build a larger sense of shared meaning or consensus. Additionally, this section leads readers to examine their own place in relation to larger events, like the Iraq war.

In her epigraph, Smith includes a quotation by *Ways of Seeing* author and art critic John Berger:

Between the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narratives being offered to give a sense to that life, the empty space, the gap, is enormous. (n. pag.)

At the beginning of the novel, this gap separates characters from reality and from each other as they attempt to give sense to their lives. From a poststructuralist perspective, this gap represents the differing interpretations that create the characters' equally true yet variant realities. But the truth of these inconsistent realities cannot exist without consequence. The purposeful misinterpretation of Kelly's dossier by Blair's government on the public level helped goad England into a long, costly, and morally devastating war, while on a personal level it led to Kelly's death (Young). Smith similarly emphasizes consequence in her novel. Like Kelly, Catherine Masson sees herself misrepresented and takes her own life. As Magnus affirms, "even though it was a lie it became true. It became more her than her" (Smith 39). Amber's character similarly resembles the dossier. She exists as a tissue of signifiers for the other characters without any common signified. Each character interprets a unique meaning for Amber and she shatters their presumptions, forcing them to see themselves and each other in new ways—much as the consequences of invading Iraq forced the British public to re-evaluate itself and its role in a larger, post-imperial world. Using this quotation from

Berger as an epigraph, Smith cues readers to think about public narratives and how we translate those stories into our private lives; yet, in her formal representation of the Iraq war, Smith retains a sense of optimism. Excluding Eve, the characters of her novel overcome their crises and give new sense to the meaning of family. This novel therefore suggests that although differing interpretations can keep us apart, it is the self-conscious effort to connect with one another that provides these fleeting moments of joy and gives us the building blocks to establish a solid foundation of shared meaning.

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