

How to Be Both Study Guide

How to Be Both by Ali Smith

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Plot Summary

Note: Due to the structure of this novel, this study guide is divided into sections according to page numbers. This study guide specifically refers to the October 2015 First Anchor Books Edition paperback.

“How to Be Both” is a contemporary and historical novel by Ali Smith which recounts the efforts of 16-year-old Georgie to deal with her mother’s recent death, and the spirit of Italian Renaissance artist Francesco del Coossa returning to Earth from Heaven to consider Georgie’s situation in relation to his own life. Ali Smith’s novel is divided into two halves: Georgie’s story, and Francesco’s recounting of his own life. The reader should note that the editions of the novel published vary: some feature Francesco’s story first, while others feature Georgie’s story first. This study guide will deal with Georgie’s story first.

When the novel begins, it is New Year’s Eve. Georgie is reflecting on the death of her mother the previous September, and thinks back to the last major trip she and her mother took, to Italy. There, her mother wanted to visit the Ferraro Palazzo in order to see the frescoes painted by Fifteenth Century Renaissance artist, Francesco del Cossa. Georgie could care less about art, history, or anything else at the time, but her recollections of the trip awaken a sense of interest in art and history. Georgie considers things that her mother had told her, about how important history is, and how history is never truly gone.

Georgie finds it difficult to believe that something can be both gone, and not gone. She also finds it difficult that her mother could both have lived, and now not be living. She begins to wonder about death in general, and whether or not people who die keep their memories. Everyone but Georgie’s friend Helena tells her that people do not keep their memories. Georgie begins researching Cossa, seeking to learn more about him and his artwork, which has come to fascinate her like it did her mother. Things in Cossa’s paintings – such as stone transforming into water – are what fascinate Georgie so much. It is the idea that something can be both things at once.

It is then that Francesco’s half of the novel begins. He is called down from Heaven to exist in modern London, drawing near Georgie. At first, Francesco considers that he has been sent to Purgatory for having once painted Christ as older than His 33 years of age, but realizes soon this is not the case. He recognizes that there is something important about Georgie that he has been meant to understand. As he seeks to understand her, his own memories come alive.

Francesco’s artistic talent was fostered by his father and his mother. His mother, especially, charged Francesco with seeing the world beyond its surface. Francesco grows to understand not only things, but their essences – their true natures. Something has both an appearance, and a true nature – things which both exist at once. Because he puts such emotion and understanding into his art, Francesco’s career thrives. His

greatest moment is when he is called upon to paint a fresco in the Ferraro Palazzo for the Duke Borse.

Francesco cannot remember certain things, such as how he died. But over time he slowly comes to recognize that Georgie is very similar to himself through his memories. She has come to be able to sense the world in a far deeper way than she did before because of her mother. She has become something of a photographer, taking up the mantle of art. And she recognizes that things can both be and not be. Francesco is then recalled to Heaven.



Section 1: Pages 1 – 65

Summary

One (security camera)

Georgia “George” Martineau, a teenaged girl, and her mother, Carol, are in Italy in May. Her mother asks George to imagine a moral conundrum. She has George pretend she is an artist working on a project with other artists, but that she believes she deserves more money than the others, so she writes to the patron asking for a better salary. George asks her mother questions – whether it is something real, something that happened in the past, if she as an artist that is good enough to deserve more money, and so on. Her mother says the moral question is about walls, and that things cannot both happen at once.

George’s mother dies in September. January comes on and George reflects on how this will be the first year her mother is not around, a thought which seems both stupid and terrible at once. George’s father has gone out, while her younger brother, Henry, is asleep. She remembers the conversation with her mother about the artist as if it were currently happening, but she knows it is January in England and not Italy in May. George lays in bed in her attic bedroom, wondering if people keep their memories after they die. Her father says no, while Mrs. Rock the school guidance counselor says memories are not needed after death. George cannot imagine a world in which dancing bananas sexually sell teabags on television, while her mother is not alive. It makes George think of watching shooting stars with her mother in August.

George thinks about her parents. Her father was ten years younger than her mother, with her mother a noted intellectual who wrote extensively, especially on economics. She also thinks about her mother dancing every morning to music on her phone, doing the same dance she did with her own mother years before. There is a 48-second digitized clip of film showing George’s mother and grandmother dancing, which George keeps and watches often. She also thinks of how her mother would give everyone paper to write down and burn the things that hurt them in the previous year. They would also write down and keep their hopes and wishes for the New Year. The tradition has not been carried out in the current year.

George takes to watching porn on her iPad, and comes across one video of a barely legal girl having sex with a man in his forties. The girl looks drugged and unhappy, so George commits to watching the video daily so as not to forget horrible things happen in the world. George’s father explains that that is not how real sex is. George says she knows.

George recalls visiting Ferrara Palazzo fresco with her mother while in Italy, which between four wall frescoes depicts the four seasons. She remembers how it serves as the basis for her mother’s question about an artist seeking more money, which actually



occurred. It is only because of the artist's letter that anything is known at all about the artists who painted the frescoes, with the frescoes themselves having been lost behind a remodel using whitewash, she remembers her mother explaining. Her mother also reveals she does not know if the artist ever got the extra money.

George has difficulty accepting her mother is dead, wondering how someone can simply vanish. She reflects on how she believed her mother was being spied on, for Carol was suspected of being part of a ring of Subverts, responsible for random pop-up ads containing important information or documents. She explains this to Mrs. Rock. Mrs. Rock says originally, mysteries were things not meant to be disclosed. Mysteries were things unlike those one finds in crime novels or films in the present day. A knock comes at the door to George's house. It is Helena Fisker, a girl from school.

Analysis

"How to Be Both" is a contemporary and historical novel by Ali Smith which recounts the efforts of 16-year-old Georgie to deal with her mother's recent death, and the spirit of Italian Renaissance artist Francesco del Cossa returning to Earth from Heaven to consider George's situation in relation to his own life. From the very start of the novel, the theme of duality – that things can be both - is present in many different ways. First, all past experiences – especially with George's mother – are at first being recalled on New Year's Eve by George, but are written as though they are happening at the same time as they are being recalled. These are both memories, and current events. The novel itself dips into the past and returns to the present, often without warning, creating a sense of timelessness and uncertainty about whether past or present events are being dealt with – and are thus both. Memory itself emerges as an important theme as a result.

Most of George's memories have to do with her family, but especially with her mother. Family therein becomes an important theme in the novel as George struggles with the death of her mother, and comes to a better understanding of the world through memories of her mother. Though George and her mother did not see eye-to-eye on everything, George's mother was her world. It was through her mother and time spent with her mother that George came to be exposed to art and truth, both of which also become strong themes in the novel.

Art's appearance in the novel is clear. George accompanied her mother on a trip to Italy to study a specific fresco (a massive, wall-sized painting in which paint is applied to wet plaster on the wall itself so that both may dry together) at the Ferrara Palazzo. The artist and his works are not named at first, but art reinforces the theme of duality. A painting of something both is and is not the subject. The subject exists in painting, but it is not actually the subject itself. Likewise, the fresco Carol seeks had long been hidden behind a layer of whitewash – so the painting itself did and did not exist.

Truth also emerges more subtly than the other themes. George at first believes that her mother is being followed or spied upon, and so she wants to get to the truth behind this.



Likewise, she has difficulty accepting the truth that her mother is dead, for her mother was once alive and has simply vanished. Her mother is both dead and alive to her – both things at once. But which is truly true is unknown to George. George also wants to know if memories exist after death – not as it relates to whether or not God exists (George believes in both) – but as to whether or not the dead person herself will have memories in the afterlife. This is something else which she will be seeking the truth for – and that readers should remember.

Discussion Question 1

Why does George find it so difficult to accept her mother's death? Why is her mother's death so confusing for her?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe George is so preoccupied with whether or not the dead can keep their memories? What does she hope the answer will be? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why do so many of George's memories have to do with her mother? How do these memories affect George's life in the present? Why?

Vocabulary

conundrum, pedantic, inelegant, runnel, metaphysical, excruciating, sardonic, alacrity



Section 2: Pages 66 – 130

Summary

George remembers how at school, some mean girls used to record other girls urinating in the bathroom. Helena encountered girls doing this to George one day, so she took the smartphone they were using and threatened to drop it in unless the video was deleted. The girls called Helena an ethnic cow, leading her to smash the phone and threaten to report their comments as racist. George later thanked Helena for her help. George welcomes Helena into her house. Henry asks if Helena has brought him a gift, since everyone who has visited since the death of his mother has. Helena says she has brought a cabbage. George speaks of how the roof leaks, and eventually may cave in. Helena says this means nothing will be between George and the stars.

When Helena next visits, she brings a printed-out picture of two stars for George based on George's interest in the 1960s. There are two girls in the picture, walking down a road. They are French singers, and one looks like George, Helena explains. She reveals her mother is French. George and Helena go to the multi-storey carpark for a view of their city. Over the next few weeks, George and Helena become good friends. George asks Helena if she thinks people keep memories when they die. Helena says she doesn't know.

George brings Helena into her mother's study, full of books, pictures, documents, and papers. George reveals that her mother took her all the way to Italy to see a fresco of a man with a blue background in the Ferrara Palazzo. George explains to Helena that she thought her mother was being monitored, but Helena doesn't think such a thing would happen in a modern democracy for something as simple as a subvert. The girls end up holding hands, with Helena asking if she is moving too fast. George doesn't quite know what to make of it, but her father interrupts them, telling them he doesn't want anyone in the study. Helena is invited to stay for dinner, but Helena says she has to head home.

George reflects on a conversation she had with her mother in Italy about history, in which George said that the only good thing about history was that it was done and over with. George's mother contended that things never truly stop existing, even though they stop existing in front of someone's eyes. George's mother went on to say that history directly affects the present. George remembers how she changed the subject by asking about women artists, to which her mother responding that there were several women artists working in the Renaissance. Carol went on to talk about Saint Catherine, a woman who devoted herself to God and to art. She also talked about the fresco at the Palazzo, wherein gender identities were made to be confusing.

George remembers how the hotel in which she and her mother stayed while in Italy had a giant eye painted onto the ceiling by a contemporary artist. George remembers how her mother befriended an artist named Lisa Goliard, who handmade books of art as pieces of art. George remembers her mother telling her that she nearly had an affair



with Lisa (which her mother told her father about), and that she learned Lisa Goliard's supposed studio actually belonged to someone else, that nothing about Lisa could be found online, and that Lisa herself seemed to have vanished, though she actually existed. She remembers her mother finding it all exciting, but George herself was annoyed by it.

In the present, George thinks of Helena. After school, Helena reveals that her family will be moving to Denmark for her father's work. George is stunned by this. The two girls are assigned to work on a school project together, to illustrate empathy and sympathy. They consider how they should go about it, such as putting a person from the past in the present, or finding a way to make the past itself come alive, and therein being able to describe sympathy and empathy. They wonder how much of their historical project will be fact and fiction. The two girls study paintings by the same artist who did the frescoes at Ferrara. One such painting includes many representations of God in the world of the painting. Another interesting painting includes a woman holding a plant with two eyes for flowers. They also notice a painting which features rock formations that resemble a penis and a vagina.

The girls decide to use a modern example instead of having to do research. One will pretend to be on drugs while the other either pretends to be on drugs, or pretends to be worried about the one on drugs. George and Helena talk about their families while on break from working on the project. George is unhappy learn Helena's move will occur the first week of March.

Analysis

Helena's arrival signals some important changes for George. First, the theme of duality is again explored through the friendship between George and Helena. They are both friends, and represent two sides to the same coin. Both girls are bright, both girls are sensitive, and both girls are family-oriented, but while Helena is adventurous and outgoing, George is shy and reserved. George's mother contends that history is both the past and the present at once, that history has a tremendous bearing on the present. George is only now coming to realize this, as the influence her mother has on her had its seeds in the past.

Duality, thematically, is also seen in George considering her own sexual nature. It seems that George is neither straight, nor gay, but both, as a romantic attraction of some kind comes to exist between her and Helena. George is thus sexually both at once. This kind of duality is also reflected in some Renaissance paintings, where gender identities are seemingly confused. It is also reflected in George's name. Although her full name is Georgia, she goes by George – which, as a name for a girl, is confusing like the paintings. Her name reflects her bisexuality – she is both at once.

George's memories continue to perforate the novel, confusing the past and the present in many situations. This bleeding together of the past and the present is especially important where art is concerned. Because of the memories, love, and respect George



has for her mother, she invests herself in the studying of art. To this end, even Helena helps George to research the artwork that Carol had herself been researching mere months before. Through their study of art, the girls are exposed to beauty and to truth (how subjects are rendered in paintings), and therein discover numerous examples of duality. For example, some of the paintings they discover feature a plant with eyes instead of flowers – being both plant and human at once – and rock formations which appear to resemble a penis and a vagina – being both human and geologically natural at once. Things can be both at once.

When it comes to memories after death, with both the living and the dead having memories, Helena tells George that she is honestly not sure whether memories are preserved after death. George is still determined to get to the bottom of this mystery, to learn the truth about it. Truth also returns front and center as George attempts to track down Lisa, the woman with whom her mother almost had an affair, and whom pretended to be something other than what she was. The memories of these things also highlight the theme of duality: George's mother potentially being bisexual, and Lisa pretending to be something she is not.

Discussion Question 1

How do George's memories of her mother continue to affect her in this section of the novel, especially when it comes to art? Why is George so moved by this art-related memories of her mother?

Discussion Question 2

Why is George so determined to get to the bottom of who Lisa is? What does she seem to hope this will do?

Discussion Question 3

How does the entry of Helena into George's life change George's life? What effect does Helena have on George in relation to art and truth? Why?

Vocabulary

stave, redeeming, appalled, ad infinitum, ostentatiously, formulate, negligible, monstrosity, quandary, insolent, adept



Section 3: Pages 131 – 199

Summary

George discovers the painting she has been seeking of a man on a blue background is Saint Vincent Ferrer by Francesco del Cossa. Saint Vincent was a Spanish Dominican preacher. Little is said about the artist. George seeks out more of Cossa's paintings. They are all strange, unique, and beautiful, including one of a monk pointing toward Christ but looking past the viewer, as if the monk sees something happening beyond the viewer that the viewer cannot see. In another painting, a stone road seems to be turning into a waterfall. Things seem to be and not to be, and to be both at the same time. George is fascinated by these centuries-old paintings, and how they have anything to do with the real world. She views the paintings numerous times, and each time sees something new and different about them. For example, she sees how a broken road on the other side of a saint becomes whole and gentle. She finds both sides of the road to be beautiful.

While watching a movie with her dad, Georgie is surprised to see that he almost starts to cry. He says he knows George – sixteen years old – will soon be leaving him. She knows that she may leave home, but she and her dad will get closer as she gets older. She then points out she has a leak in her attic room. Her father rushes upstairs to assess the situation. George considers the paintings and the frescoes, and considers the artist who wanted more money – either because he thought he was worth more, or because he was greedy. Helena, meanwhile, looks into the history behind the question of the artist.

Helena reveals the mother's name was Fiordelisia Mastria, the father built the bell tower of the cathedral, and that the artist's request for a raise was turned down, leading the artist to leave and seek employment elsewhere. George reconsiders history. George begins to wonder how much of her own life she has actually lived, and how much she has invented. She also begins to wonder whether or not her mother is still alive, or if she is both alive and dead. She remembers her father driving around in the rain and spreading her mother's ashes in places he thought she'd like to rest.

George goes to the art gallery to look at Cossa's paintings once more. She counts the number of people who come through. The writer of the novel, Ali Smith, breaks the fourth wall and enters the novel herself, wondering about the plot and where it may turn next. The writer arranges for Lisa Goliard to enter the picture, whom George has seen once before. The writer considers that George will follow Lisa to her home in London. The writer considers who Lisa might truly be – a Renaissance painting expert, a fan of Saint Vincent, or that Lisa might have been tracking George. The writer then says this idea is unlikely. She considers that George will visit Lisa's house every day to take a picture, and will let whoever is watching her know she is watching. This will be in honor of her mother's eyes which could see things long before George.



One (plant with flowers for eyes)

In bits and pieces, the narrator – Francesco del Cossa – considers his own artwork and the artwork of others, including his teacher, Cosmo Gerolamo. Francesco recalls being a younger man where he first learned of Pellegrin “The Falcon” Prisciano, adviser, professor, and scholar working for Borse, seeking artists for painting the large room of the new palace. The Falcon interviews Cossa, for he has learned of Cossa’s work. He sets up a drawing demonstration for the Falcon.

It is revealed that Cossa is dead, speaking of his life from memory. Cossa cannot remember how he died. He remembers being a child with his mother, in which she comforted him when he lost a ring-like seed and in which she told him that the seed is part of everything around them, just like they were. He remembers his mother telling him to truly see the world around him, to see how far his eye could go, that they are inside everything they can see.

Cossa’s family is one of brickmakers, having their business in Ferrara. He recalls how his father was a practical man who could rework ruined bricks to be perfectly usable, while his mother could transform unworkable bricks into beautiful things, such as horses. It is through them that Cossa remembers learning craft and creativity. It is his mother that he remembers teaching him to draw things he can both see and not see.

Cossa remembers how, as he got older, it was his father who decided Cossa needed proper artistic training. He also remembers how his father insisted Cossa come to work with his other brothers, so that society will see Cossa is a family artist of good reputation who will be hireable in the future.

Cossa decides he will write a letter to God, wanting to know why he has been put back down on Earth, and brought back into being from Heaven. He wonders if he has been belatedly sent to purgatory for making Christ appear older than thirty-three years of age in his Saint Vincent panel. Cossa exists and does not exist, feeling part of this world and the next, and feels as if he is more feelings than anything else. He goes on to consider how being a painter is a feeling thing, for a painter must find the essence of all that he paints – its true nature, its true purpose.

Cossa realizes that it seems he has been sent down to shadow a child who is taking a picture of a house in a foreign city while sitting on a wall. Cossa considers that the object the girl seems to use is a painting tool of his future time.

Analysis

The theme of duality is strong in this section of the novel. The novel itself is split into two dual halves: George’s story, and Francesco’s story. The novel itself is also split between the world of the characters, and the real world of the readers when Ali Smith herself interrupts the narrative to address the reader, and to analytically work out the way the novel will now progress. This in turn represents the idea of truth – the truth behind the novel being that there is a writer making such things in the novel happen, and that the



world of the novel is both real (to the characters and to the writer) and not real (to the readers and to the writer).

As George's section of the novel ends, and as Francesco's section of the novel begins, memory becomes the dominant theme. The reader will note the fragmented thoughts, half-sentences, poor grammar, and incomplete writing early in Francesco's section – a style designed to symbolize a rush of memories, of the beginning of the recalling of the past. Called down from Heaven, Francesco is sent to monitor George. Why, he has no idea. However, it is clear that the truth is that the dead do indeed keep their memories after they are dead, even if it takes some effort to recall them. Indeed, Francesco's return to Earth is another example of duality: he is dead and he is not dead, and he is alive and not alive.

It also become apparent to the reader quickly that there are many parallels between the lives of George and Francesco del Cossa. Like George, family means everything to Cossa. His father taught him the importance of having a craft, while his mother taught him the finer points of art. Taken together, Cossa would go on to become an artist. The duality of mother and father – each with a distinct influence taken together in the son – can also be seen here. Cossa especially benefitted from a close relationship with his mother, just as George benefitted from a close relationship with her mother.

It is through art that Cossa is in pursuit of truth. A subject captured in paint both is and is not the subject itself. Capturing a subject in a painting is not merely an effort to reproduce the subject in paint, to portray it, but to captures its essence, its inner nature, its truth. Seeing something, explains Cossa's mother, isn't necessarily seeing something. For example, painting a portrait of a person isn't necessarily capturing just who that person truly is. Likewise, recognizing that things are not even always as they first appear is important – such as Cossa's paintings where rock transforms into water or a broken road becoming whole through the work of the Saints, who direct the viewer to Christ. Likewise, the reader should note that George herself seeks the truth behind who Lisa is – but why is something that can only later be surmised.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do George and Francesco mirror each other when it comes to things like family, truth, and art? Why do you believe this is so?

Discussion Question 2

Does Francesco have any idea about why he has been returned to Earth? Why do you believe he has been returned to Earth?



Discussion Question 3

How does Francesco approach art? In what ways does he consider art a quest for truth? How does this in turn relate to the theme of duality?

Vocabulary

maundering, bespoke, subtlety, draconian, surreptitious, edification, dignity



Section 4: Pages 200 – 264

Summary

Cossa reflects on his own youth and the time he made love to a girl in a barn, that he used to climb walls with a friend, how his father used to build walls, and how his father got him his first job painting three figures on a wall and several pillars in a nearby cathedral. He reflects on the idea that it is an omen that he has been sent to a girl sitting on a wall taking pictures.

Cossa considers the story of a small boy who wanted to see the Virgin Mother Mary so badly that he was willing to give up sight in one eye. Hoping to see the Virgin Mary once more, the boy begged the angels to make it so. As a result, he lost sight in both eyes – but had his eyes restored to him out of the kindness and goodness of the Virgin.

Cossa watches as an angry woman storms out of the house to yell at the girl on the brick wall, which Cossa notes is not well built. Cossa reflects on seeing a presentation play with family and friends, which espouses and supports the idea of Justice, and honors the new Duke, Borse. The Duke says he will do all he can as rightly and as justly as he can. Cossa recalls going to brothels not to sleep with the girls, but to sketch them. One girl, Ginerva, older than Cossa by about ten years, is especially touched by his kindness. One young, dark-haired girl gets Cossa to sleep with her as well as to draw her.

In turn, Cossa begins sleeping with, and drawing all the girls at the brothel he and his friend Barto regularly visit. However, Barto is also in love with Cossa, but knowing he can never have Cossa causes Barto to end the friendship. It causes Cossa to consider that no one knows anyone, except for their mothers, and even then, not fully. Cossa himself has only had one homosexual encounter, which was more than enough for Cossa to know where he stood sexually.

Cossa remembers how happy he was to get the job at Borse's palace. Thirty-three by that point, Cossa remembers being successful and widely-respected and admired. He remembers how instructions at the Palazzo were to ensure God and the Duke were glorified in the paintings. As Cossa works, the Falcon inspects. The Falcon warns Cossa about taking too many liberties and getting too creative with his work, putting too much sexual imagery into things.

Analysis

As the novel continues, Cossa's memories come flooding back to him. The past and the present seem to exist at once, as the narrative leaps back and forth between past and present rapidly and without warning. Memories become central to his part of the novel as he considers his own life in lieu of George's. Here, he is reliving his own life while vicariously living through George's life. The theme of duality in conjunction with memory



is especially strong here. Seeing things, but truly seeing things becomes incredibly important to Cossa through his life, and in the present time where he sees George, but doesn't truly come to see (understand) her.

Francesco, however, comes to see the prostitutes at the brothels he frequents not merely as disposable sex objects, but as human beings. It is why he draws them rather than sleeps with them – until the girls themselves come to see him as much more than just a customer. Art and passion are therein consummated dually through sex. The girls that he paints are not only not mere sexual objects, but neither are they merely painting subjects either. They are, and they are not, both. Sexuality is reflected in del Cossa's artwork, which he is warned about by the Falcon. The Falcon worries that the dual nature of things in Cossa's paintings – such as vaginal caves and penile rocks –are a duality not needed. However, they are an expression of Cossa's view of the synergy and synthesis of art and sex.

At the same time, while much of the lives of Cossa and George appear similar, they do differentiate in some ways. While George may indeed be bisexual, a single homosexual encounter for Cossa is enough for him to realize he is not. His best friend, Barto, who is himself bisexual, cannot take Cossa sleeping with women, and cannot take the fact that Cossa is both straight and gay – so he ends even his friendship with Cossa. This contrasts with George's friendship with Helena, which appears may end not due to sexuality, but to mere distance as Helena's family is set to move in March.

Discussion Question 1

This section of the novel deals with sexuality. Are George and Cossa more or less sexually similar than when it comes to things like art and truth? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Cossa seek to draw prostitutes at first rather than simply having sex with them? Why does he end up sleeping with them? Does this defeat or enhance his original intent? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrative here seem to leap between the past and present so frequently and so quickly? What is gained by this as it relates to the lives of Cossa and George?

Vocabulary

omen, dessins, furore, frieze, bemused, remuneration, assiduous, misconstruing, tenable, disheveled, auspices



Section 5: Pages 265 – 315

Summary

Cossa's assistant, who feels he and the other assistants are not being paid enough, reveals he has forged his signature on a petition requesting more money from the Duke. Cossa says the Duke is fair, and makes a bet with the assistant. If the Duke gives Cossa a raise, he will give the assistant a bonus. If not, the assistant must pay him a bonus. The Duke refuses Cossa, so Cossa must pay the assistant a bonus.

Cossa continues to return to the girl, the wall, and the house. The girl continues to take pictures, print them out, and arrange them in the shape of a star on the wall in her bedroom. The woman who George has been watching finally stops yelling at her, and actually ends up sitting beside her.

Cossa remembers having bad memories about his father's death. Cossa recalls that when he and Barto were still friends, Barto insisted he take a drink of water from a glass which combined the Water of Remembering with the Water of Forgetting. Cossa remembers not being able to understand how they could be both, and imagines they may be the same thing in the end. Barto explains that after the drink, memories will come without fear and discomfort, and only what is needed to be remembered will be remembered. These memories, by the ancient Greek Rite of Mnemosyne, are to be told to the eggs and honey on the table. After this, the memories can't hurt Cossa anymore.

Cossa in turn remembers how his father showed him something Cossa had written as a child, only to be forgotten by Cossa as he grew into adulthood. The paper is given to Cossa as a mark of him becoming his own man. It is the last thing from Cossa's childhood that his father has. Giving it to Cossa means giving Cossa his own life wholly and completely.

Cossa realizes that the girl to whom he has been sent must have also experienced a loss of some kind in her life. He recognizes that she is trying to remember and to forget something. Cossa remembers encountering an old, diseased man in the brush while walking down a country road one day, and seeing as though the plants themselves had eyes, seeing and blind. The man urges Cossa to go away. Years after the Ferrara fresco, Cossa remembers receiving a visit from his now-older assistant, who says the fresco draws many visitors. Cossa remembers being interested to learn that his mural has only been retouched to change the Duke's face, but not his eyes.

Cossa watches as his life flashes by him, from childhood through his teenage years through his adulthood, including how annoyed Cossa was to learn that Cosmo pretended to have greater influence on Cossa than he actually had. Cossa ultimately forgives Cosmo. Cossa watches how George and Helena turn the picture wall into a fake wall, and enjoy knocking it apart. It makes Cossa happy. He remembers painting a portrait of Barto, who looks past him, wondering about a story surrounding a myth about



a man who wins a store of gold from three maidens, into which he fashions a ring of power. But such power means the man cannot have love. Barto can't understand why a man that good could not have both.

Cossa is returned to Heaven. As he leaves Earth, he sees a girl and woman painting eyes on a wall. He considers how seeing isn't always seeing, that the tiny and many variations of color cannot be understood unless seen up close.

Analysis

Memories and duality continue to remain dominant themes. Cossa's horrible nightmares and memories relating to the death of his father are done away with, in some respect, by the ancient Greek ceremony that Barto conducts with Cossa. Here, the past and the present become blurred as Cossa speaks about a memory with Barto as though it were currently occurring, even though it happened further in the past, and long before Barto ended their friendship. Memories can be remembered and forgotten as Cossa wills them to be remembered or forgotten. It is clear that in modern England, Cossa is recalling things as he wills to recall them.

Such a memory is the famous letter. The truth behind Cossa's letter to the Duke is revealed during this section of the novel. The request for more pay is not a question of Cossa thinking he is a better artist or that he simply deserves more, but a simple wager with his young and rash assistant. The search for truth behind the letter is also contrasted with George's own search for truth with relation to Lisa.

The reader will remember how George had been taking pictures of Lisa's house, and of Lisa coming and going. This, as the reader will also recall, is a search for truth. But it is not merely that. The search for the truth behind Lisa is an attempt by George to hold onto some of the last visible remnants of her mother on Earth. But the truth behind Lisa is never revealed to the reader. As Mrs. Rock said early in the novel, some mysteries are meant to remain mysteries. Whether or not George herself ever learns the truth is also left a mystery. But whatever the case may be, Cossa's own purpose seems to have been fulfilled, and he returns to Heaven.

Interestingly enough, the theme of duality ultimately seems countered by the Greek story of a man who, upon discovering a cache of gold and fashioning it into a ring, could have unlimited power in the world – but could not have, and had to renounce, love. Barto cannot understand why one could not have both power and love. But the love of power and the power to love are two very distinct things that reveals the ultimate truth of the novel. While some things can indeed be both, not everything can be. Sooner or later, choices and decisions must be made, and the truth of something ultimately accepted. The truth behind the construction of the novel is also left unclear: is Francesco's section of the novel something that truly happened, or is it merely the wonderings and writing of George herself?



Discussion Question 1

Do you believe Francesco's section of the novel was a true event, or the imagining of George? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

What do you believe Cossa's purpose in being returned to Earth was? Explain using evidence from the novel.

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe that it is possible to have both power and love? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

rite, insolence, illustrious, tutelage, irregularities, imperturbable, placate, renounce



Characters

George

Georgia “George” Martineau is an intelligent, pretty, 16-year-old girl who is struggling with the death of her mother, Carol. George was closer to her mother than her brother, Henry, or her father, so the death of Carol is especially hard to bear. George recalls memories of her mother throughout her half of the novel, wherein the past and the present bleed together and become confused. George, through the influence of her mother, comes to fall in love with art, and seeks to understand the world in much deeper ways than she did before. George becomes obsessed with finding the truth – behind art, life, and more mundane mysteries, such as who Lisa Goliard truly is. At the same time, George becomes good friends with Helena, and George begins to question her own sexuality as she develops some kind of romantic attraction to Helena.

Francesco

Francesco del Cossa is a Fifteenth-Century Italian Renaissance painter who serves as the narrator of the second half of the novel. Francesco was raised by two parents who thoroughly encouraged his artistic study and success as an artist. It was through his mother, especially, that Francesco came to see the truth of the subjects that he painted. His greatest work came through working in the Ferrara Palazzo on fresco panels of the spring months. These frescoes later come to serve as the reason that Carol and George visit Italy. Francesco is recalled from Heaven in the novel, where he descends upon modern London to shadow George. While it is never known exactly why this occurs, what is known is that his own life unfolds as a parallel to George’s own life as Cossa recalls his own memories.

Carol

Carol Martineau is the mother of George and Henry. Described as immensely kind and overly politically-correct, Carol has a very close relationship with George. Ten years older than her husband, Carol is a professor of art history, and journeys with George to Italy to see the works of Francesco del Cossa a few months before she dies. Carol is recalled in memories throughout the novel as being the greatest influence in George’s life, getting her to think more deeply about art and the world around her.

Henry

Henry Martineau is the younger brother of George. Henry is a precocious child, very interested about the world around him, but also very sad about the death of his mother. He has a close relationship with George, who comes to take care of him in a motherly



way. The siblings grow closer as a result of their family getting smaller. Henry comes to weather the crisis of his mother's death well only through the love and care of George.

Helena

Helena Fisker is the closest friend of, and almost romantic partner of, George. Described as dark-skinned and half-French, Helena is outgoing, confident, and courageous. She helps George look into the life of Cossa, and is dismayed to learn that her family will be relocating to Denmark for her father's job. Helena is not overly saddened by this, however, as family is the most important thing to her.

Lisa Goliard

Lisa Goliard is a mysterious woman who Carol meets at Kings Cross Station one day. Lisa passes herself off as an artist, but the studio she claims as hers is occupied by someone else entirely. Likewise, no information about Lisa can be found online. Nevertheless, she and Carol very nearly have an affair. After Carol's death, Lisa happens to be in the same museum as George, which compels George to follow her. George begins waiting outside of Lisa's house, taking pictures, and earning at first anger and then kindness from Lisa. The truth behind Lisa, or why George shadows her, is never known. It is probable, however, that George merely wants to hold onto some piece of her mother longer through Lisa.

Barto

Bartolommeo "Barto" Garganelli is the best friend of Francesco. Barto helps to secure work for Francesco, and comes out as bisexual, having both a wife and being in love with Francesco. Barto is annoyed to learn that Francesco has been sleeping with so many female prostitutes, and is angered that Francesco does not return his feelings. This causes Barto to end their friendship.

The Falcon

Pellegrin "The Falcon" Prisciano is a scholar and adviser to Duke Borse. The Falcon has earned his nickname due to his first name, and is an incredibly intelligent and thoughtful man. It is the Falcon who scouts out talent for the seasonal frescoes to be painted at the Palazzo, and it is the Falcon who hires Francesco. It is later the Falcon who cautions Francesco about too many liberties and sexual imagery in his artwork.

The Duke

The Duke Borse is the new governing administrator of Ferrara and its surrounding environs. He is a man known for justice and fairness, and he is well-loved and admired

by the people. It is to Borse that Francesco writes for a greater salary, but Borse justly responds that Francesco must be satisfied with what has already been agreed upon.

Ali Smith

Ali Smith is both the writer of the novel “How to be Both” and a character in the novel. Smith interrupts herself writing the narrative at the end of George’s half of the novel to analyze potential directions for the novel from thereon in. Smith thus becomes both writer and character, and comes to inhabit both her created world, and the world in which she writes.



Symbols and Symbolism

The letter

The letter written to Duke Borse by Francesco becomes the source of much discussion between George and her mother in the novel. It becomes a mystery to which George seeks an answer. The letter requests a greater salary by Francesco, a request which is rejected by Borse. As it is learned, the letter is written not as a genuine seeking of greater wages, but as part of a wager between Francesco and his assistant.

Film clip

A film clip showing Carol dancing with her mother is digitized by Carol. The clip is 48 seconds long, and is copied and kept by George. It helps George to remember her mother, and to reflect on simpler, happier times. The film clip is one of the things that George keeps to remember her mother by. The clip also shows Carol near the beginning of her life, while in the present, Carol is dead.

Eyes

Eyes feature heavily into the novel and appear in numerous places. They are symbolic not merely of seeing, but understanding, of seeing a deeper truth and nature to things in life. While in Italy, the hotel room in which Carol and George stay features an eye on the ceiling, which in turn later urges George to seek out the deeper truths in life, and behind the art of Francesco. Meanwhile, Francesco's mother urges him to see as far as he can with his eyes, not merely what he can see, but what he can't – the deeper truth to the world. These, and other examples of eyes, reinforce the idea that there is a dual nature to things – what is seen and unseen, what is apparent, and what is truly there.

Photos of Lisa's house

Photos of Lisa and her house are taken on a daily basis by George. George uses the photos to at first create a star on her wall, and then to create a fake wall which she and Helena enjoy knocking down. The photos are George's way of trying to keep a piece of her mother with her by photographing the mysterious woman in her mother's life. However, the insistence on living in the past forms a wall which prevents George from living in the future. The wall of photos is knocked down and symbolically demonstrates that George is beginning to move on.



Cossa paintings

Paintings by Francesco del Cossa are studied and reflected upon by George at the museum. These paintings include “Saint Lucy”, “Saint Vincent”, and others. The paintings are full of curious symbols and images. In the portrait of Saint Vincent, for example, Saint Vincent looks beyond the viewer while pointing up toward Heaven and Christ. Below, rocky roads become smooth through Saint Vincent, who in turn directs the viewer to Christ. This demonstrates not only the theme of duality – rough and smooth roads existing in one painting – but also the deeper truth of things – this is not merely a portrait of Saint Vincent, but a case that life is made whole through Christ the way the rough roads are transformed to smooth and complete roads.

Cossa's Seasonal Frescoes

The seasonal frescoes of Francesco del Cossa at the Ferrara Palazzo are allegorical and symbolic portrayals of the months of March, April, and May. These frescoes are visited by George and her mother when they journey to Italy. Indeed, Carol’s primary purpose in Italy is to visit the frescoes, all of which had previously been hidden behind whitewash. In addition to glorifying God and praising the Duke, the frescoes contain sexual imagery and symbols, revealing duality. For example, rock formations are, and are not rock formations - they appear to be penises and vaginas as well.

Portrayal of Christ

Francesco’s portrayal of Jesus Christ in his portrait of Saint Vincent shows the Son of God as being older than his thirty-three years, weighted down but victorious against the sins of the world and triumphant over death. Francesco’s portrayal of Christ was not much met with enthusiasm due to Christ looking older than He was. When Francesco is returned to Earth, he considers for a while that he has belatedly been sent to Purgatory for incorrectly portraying Christ.

Sketches of prostitutes

Sketches of prostitutes are done routinely by Francesco during his section of the novel. These demonstrate that Francesco sees the prostitutes at the brothels he visits not merely as sex objects, but as human beings. It is why he draws them rather than sleeps with them at first. The girls themselves ultimately come to see him as much more than just a customer. Art and passion are therein consummated dually through the singular act of sex. The girls that he paints are not only not mere sexual objects, but neither are they merely painting subjects either. They are, and they are not, both.



The golden ring

The golden ring is part of an ancient Greek parable relating to love and power. The man who finds a special cache of gold guarded by three maidens may fashion the gold into a ring, which will give him unlimited power. However, to gain this power, the man will not be able to love, and must renounce love. This baffles Barto, who cannot understand why a man cannot have both love and power. But the love of power and the power to love are two very distinct things that reveals the ultimate truth of the novel. While some things can indeed be both, not everything can be. Sooner or later, choices and decisions must be made, and the truth of something ultimately accepted.

Bricks

Bricks are produced by Francesco's father and brothers as a family business. The bricks are used in design and construction, and are both crafted and built with by Francesco's family. Bricks form the synthesis between hard craft and art, and teach Francesco the value of both. Francesco's father reforms a ruined brick into a usable state, while his mother forms the unusable remaining part into a horse. This demonstrates that a thing can be more than one thing. In this case, a brick can be a matter of hard construction and the working trades, while it can also be an implement of beauty and art.



Settings

Cambridge

Cambridge is city suburb of London, England. Cambridge is home to George and her family, and to Helena and her family. Much of the novel occurs in Cambridge, especially on New Year's Eve. George spends the night at home, reflecting on the past and recalling memories of her mother with such detail and clarity that it is difficult for her to discern the past from the present. Cambridge is where George and Helena attend school, is where Carol's ashes are scattered, and is where George and Helena go to visit the carpark.

London

London is the capital of England, and is the city to which Cambridge serves as a suburb. London is a beautiful, culturally-renowned city, famous for its art museums among other things. George visits these art museums on a regular basis in order to see paintings by Francesco del Cossa. It is also the city in which George tracks down Lisa to her house, and begins taking pictures of the house every day. London is also the city to which Francesco is called down from Heaven to shadow George.

Italy

Italy is a nation in Southern Europe, and was the setting for the birth of the Renaissance. Italy is where the town of Ferrara and its Palazzo are located, and is also the home country of Francesco del Cossa. Francesco spends his life in Italy, traveling throughout the country to paint panels, pictures, and frescoes. Italy is described in the novel as a green, lush, vibrant country with colorful people and strong culture.

Ferrara Palazzo

Ferrara Palazzo is located in Ferrara, Italy, and is the new home of Duke Borse. The Palazzo is described as a beautiful and magnificent building containing numerous rooms and halls. The halls are dedicated to frescoes painted to fit themes. Francesco is hired and assigned to work in the Hall of the Months, where he paints allegories of March, April, and May. The Palazzo is visited by Carol and George in May, and is the last place Carol visits before she dies.

Cambridge carpark

The carpark is located in Cambridge, not far from where George and Helena live. The carpark is noted as having numerous levels, and offering a view of the city. George has



never been up to the top of the carpark before, so her trip up with Helena is her first. From there, George sees the city in a whole new way, from above – something she has never seen before. This helps her to begin to realize that things are and are not as they appear, and that seeing something one way is not necessarily seeing something all ways.



Themes and Motifs

Duality

Duality is an important theme in the novel “How to Be Both” by Ali Smith. Duality is the idea that something can both be, and not be. It is the idea that something can represent more than one thing, and it is the idea that something is both what it appears to be, and what it truly is.

Duality in its most physical form is reflected in the construction of the novel. The novel is divided into two halves, each entitled “One” which make up the number two. Each half of the novel bears the story of either George or Francesco, and taken together, form a whole story and a whole novel. The novel is both the stories of George and Francesco, and it is one story altogether. It is both one novel, and it is not one novel. The novel itself is also split between the world of the characters, and the real world of the readers when Ali Smith herself interrupts the narrative to address the reader, and to analytically work out the way the novel will now progress. This in turn represents the idea of truth – the truth behind the novel being that there is a writer making such things in the novel happen, and that the world of the novel is both real (to the characters and to the writer) and not real (to the readers and to the writer).

In the novel itself, the mothers of George and Francesco encourage them to see the world as they have never seen it before, to see past appearances, and to truly understand the nature of things. The past and the present form one timeless continuum for George and Francesco, as they both remember the past and live in events of the present at random moments. George lives both in memories and in the present; Francesco is both alive and not alive, and is both dead and not dead, having descended back to Earth from Heaven for an unknown task in shadowing George. Because of the love of art that the parents of George and Francesco instill in them, Francesco is more able to deeply understand his subjects and thus paint them with greater clarity, truth, and beauty, and George is able to recognize and understand this.

Examples of duality in the novel abound. These include the symbolism in the paintings of Francesco (such as rough roads being made smooth through the Saints who direct attention and credit to Christ, rock turning into water, and natural landscapes bearing similarity to sexual organs); the bisexuality of various characters (including Barto, George, and Helen); a wall being made of photos which is in turn knocked down, symbolizing moving on, and so on. However, duality has its limits as represented by the Greek tale of the Ring of Power where a man who, upon discovering a cache of gold and fashioning it into a ring, could have unlimited power in the world – but could not have love, and had to renounce, love. The reader will remember how in the novel Barto cannot understand why one could not have both power and love. But the love of power and the power to love are two very distinct things that reveals the ultimate truth of the novel. While some things can indeed be both, not everything can be. Sooner or later, choices and decisions must be made, and the truth of something ultimately accepted.



Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “How to Be Both” by Ali Smith. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Family can be found consistently throughout the novel, and family affects the plot of the novel in important ways, especially as it relates to George and Francesco.

Family is the most important thing in George’s life. She loves her father and brother dearly, but is especially close with her mother, Carol. George spends much of her section of the novel recalling wonderful memories of time spent together with her mother. One of these memories includes the most recent trip taken with her mother, to Italy. Then, George is a typical 16-year-old girl, less interested in art and history than in simply being able to get to go to Italy. Nevertheless, she and her mother get along well on their travels, and at home.

Family is also a very important thing for Francesco. He loves his mother, father, and brothers dearly, but it is his mother who has the most influence on him. Francesco spends much time in the brickyard of his father’s brickmaking business, where his family all work. These are happy memories that Francesco has, for he simply enjoys being the company of those that love him. Throughout his life and his remembering of his life, he will frequently refer back to his upbringing, and the love and tenderness shown to him by his mother and his father.

George and Francesco are both encouraged by their mothers to see the world in new ways, to see the things in the world and people as they appear, and as they truly are. For George, this develops her character and understanding as a human being, while for Francesco, this increases his artistic talent. Indeed, it is George’s mother’s love of art and history that lead to George’s own interest in such things, and which lead to her increased sense of awareness and tenderness. For Francesco, his father’s hard work and his mother’s creativity give him a good sense of craft and skill, which combined form his artistic talent. It is his father who ultimately paves the way for Francesco to train professionally in the arts.

Memory

Memory is an important theme in the novel “How to Be Both” by Ali Smith. Memory – essentially recollections of the past – form the vast majority of the plot of the novel. Most of George’s half of the novel, and nearly the entirety of Francesco’s half of the novel is the recollecting of the past, and the reliving of memories.

Memories are drawn from history. Carol contends that history is utterly important, that it is at once both in the past and in the present, that it influences the present, and that it is a timeless thing. George disagrees with her mother at first, merely out of a dislike of history. But the death of her mother compels her to reevaluate her thoughts on history,



as she spends much of her half of the novel recalling good memories shared with her mother. The idea of memory captivates George so much that she poses the question of whether or not memory is retained in death to everyone that she can.

It is ultimately revealed through Francesco that the dead do retain their memories, but it sometimes takes some effort to recall them. In Heaven where Francesco has been, there is no need for memories since time does not exist, and everything happens at once. The past, the present, and the future are all one, so memories truly are the present. On Earth, Francesco's memories come flooding back to him, first in bits and pieces, and then all at once in a rush. This is signified by the fragmented language and sentences Francesco uses until his memory is fully restored.

In keeping with the theme of duality (see the theme, "Duality"), the narrative is constructed in such a way as to make the past and the present blend together, at times without warning and seamlessly. This is done in order to allow the reader to recognize that the past and present can be one, and cannot be one in the same. The shifts in time give the novel itself a sense of timelessness, and because they often happen unexpectedly, evinces a sense of uncertainty that reinforces the idea that one never truly knows where the influence of the past, or the past itself, ends, and the present truly begins.

Art

Art is an important theme in the novel "How to Be Both" by Ali Smith. Art comprises many forms, but in the novel, it is fine art – specifically, painting – that is treated through the plot. Art becomes utterly essential to the plot itself, and art is explored through the novel in various ways.

When the novel begins, George recalls a trip she made with her now-dead mother to Italy the previous May. The trip was made explicitly so that Carol could see Francesco del Cossa's frescoes in the Hall of the Months at Ferrara Palazzo. George has very little interest in art, while her mother loves art and works as an art history professor. However, George's search for the truth in all things is piqued through art when her mother asks her about Cossa's letter to the Duke, and why Cossa would want – and be turned down – for a raise.

Only after George's mother dies does George take a more explicit interest in art. She becomes fascinated by the art her mother was fascinated by, wanting to see things the way her mother saw them, and wanting to see the world the way that her mother challenged her to see it – more fully, more deeply, more truly. George spends much of her time in art museums, even skipping school, all to see and study Francesco's paintings. Beyond being beautifully done, the paintings contain deeper truths, essences, and symbolism – such as rocky roads and shattered lives being made whole and smooth through the Saints who direct people on toward Christ, giving Christ the credit. It is clear that art itself has a deeper purpose beyond its principle aim of beauty – and that is truth.



Art is Francesco's life. He himself is an artist. His childhood talents were guided and inspired by his mother and his father, who called upon Francesco to better himself and to see the world in new ways. His mother charged Francesco with seeing things beyond merely seeing them, while his father practically made sure Francesco could put his talent to good use, and that he had proper training in the subject. Francesco's ability to more deeply understand things not only made his paintings even more beautiful, but his art made him a better person. For example, prostitutes were not merely sexual objects but human beings worthy of being seen as works of art.

Truth

Truth is an important theme in the novel "How to Be Both" by Ali Smith. Truth – in both its philosophical and scientific forms (determining how to find truth and what is true; and finding the answer to mysteries) becomes a driving force in the lives both of Francesco and George. Their search for the truth occurs in different ways, but the end they desire – finding truth – is the same.

When the novel begins, George's mother tasks her with determining why Cossa would ask for a pay raise from the Duke. To George, this is a mystery that can be solved scientifically through asking questions and researching answers. This is how George approaches most things in her life, seeking answers to questions that baffle her. This is also true when Lisa comes into the picture during the novel.

However, Mrs. Rock reminds George that not all mysteries have answers, nor can all mysteries be solved. Some mysteries are to be understood as mysteries relating to even greater truths that can be studied, contemplated, or argued, but not always necessarily actually solved. Lisa ends up presenting one such mystery which is never solved – at least as far as the reader is concerned. While George may have figure out the answer, it isn't related to the reader.

The task that George and Francesco are both charged with by their mothers – to see the world in a truer, deeper way, to truly understand it beyond its mere appearances – forms a deeper, philosophical quest for truth. In many ways, this search for truth forms the core of the theme of duality (see the themes "Duality" and "Art"). This is reflected in the way that Francesco paints, in which his paintings are not merely about beauty, but deeper truths, and George's ability to interpret and understand the paintings not merely for their beauty, but their deeper truths – such as the road in the portrait of Saint Vincent and the disguised sexual imagery in the frescoes at the Palazzo.



Styles

Point of View

Ali Smith tells her novel “How to Be Both” from two points of view. The novel is divided in half, with one section of the novel being told by Ali Smith as a third-person, omniscient narrator for nearly the entire section, and in her own voice at the tail end of the first section. The other section of the novel is told in the first-person limited-omniscient reflective narrative from the point of view of Francesco Del Cossa. Francesco’s section of the novel is told in such a manner as Francesco is dead, but has been returned to Earth to shadow George. In many ways, he becomes an observer to George the way the reader is an observer to Smith’s narration in George’s section of the novel, while the reader experiences firsthand through the first-person narrative mode the life and memories of Francesco. Because Francesco is recalling memories that have happened in the past, they take on a reflective tone as they are being remembered. George’s experiences are described by Smith in real time, though the actions of her present and the actions of her past often bleed together and are sometimes indistinguishable. The two halves of the book reflect the dual nature of the novel, and the theme of duality: two stories forming one singular story, with both stories being, and not being, the whole novel.

Language and Meaning

Ali Smith tells her novel “How to Be Both” in language that differs according to the half of the book. The first half of the novel uses language that is simple, casual, and straightforward, as it is told by a modern author and is set in the modern era (the 2010s). The novel focuses around George’s efforts to move beyond her mother’s death, to deal with her mother’s death, and to come to a better understanding of the world. Given that George is very much a girl of her day, it is only fitting that the language should reflect realistically her life and times. The second half of the novel, which revolves around Francesco, is told using language that is often antiquated and traditional reflecting Fifteenth-Century Italy. This creates a sense of realism and authenticity for the second half of the novel, as the memories that Francesco recalls are from Renaissance-era Italy. Francesco’s language at first appears stunted and fragmented, nearly poetical, as he attempts to regain his memory fully. As his section of the novel gets underway, the language becomes complete – but then filters out once more into fragmentary bits and pieces as he returns to Heaven.

Structure

Ali Smith divides her novel “How to Be Both” into two halves, with each half revolving around either George or Francesco. The novel has been printed in two forms – with either George’s story, or Francesco’s story, being told first. The order does not affect the



plot. However, the division of the novel into two halves reflects the fact that two stories are being told, and are and are not one in the same novel, therein reflecting the theme of duality. The halves are both numbered “One”, with both ones making a two to complete the novel. Each half is also preceded by a drawing – of a security camera for George (symbolizing seeing in the modern age), and of flower eyes for Francesco (of seeing in the Renaissance). Each half is further divided into very long, untitled, unnumbered, chapter-like sections.



Quotes

This will be the first year her mother hasn't been alive since the year her mother was born. That is so obvious that it is stupid even to think about it and yet so terrible that you can't not think it. Both at once.

-- Narrator (Section 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: Early in the novel, it is revealed that George's mother has died. It hurts George deeply, who realizes the New Year will be the first without her mother, and the first without her mother being alive since her mother was born. It is a terrible thought, and an obvious thought to have. Yet it also underscores the dual nature of the novel—two things being both at once.

Because if things really did happen simultaneously it'd be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable. Because it's New Year not May, and it's England not Italy...

-- Narrator (Section 1 paragraph 11)

Importance: Here, George thinks about the conversation she has with her mother in May in Italy, even though it is January in England. To George, it feels as if the conversation were happening right then, even though it is in the past. Such things cannot happen, she believes, otherwise it would be like trying to read two pages of one book at once. Nothing can be both. The past cannot be the present.

Because how can someone just vanish?

-- Narrator (Section 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: George struggles through New Year's, thinking about the past, and thinking about her mother in particular. The memories that George recalls are mostly warm and happy. It is difficult for her to accept that someone who was such a constant presence in her life could simply be gone.

George is appalled by history, its only redeeming feature being that it tends to be well and truly over.

-- Narrator (Section 2 paragraph 6)

Importance: While in Italy, George and her mother have a conversation about history. George dislikes history, and says the only good thing about history is that it's over and done with. However, in the present, George realizes how much history truly stays with a person as she constantly recalls her mother memories of time spent with her mother. It is both comforting and saddening to George.

Both states are beautiful.

-- Narrator (Section 3 paragraph 7)



Importance: While studying one of Casso's paintings, Georgie sees how a broken road on the other side of a saint becomes whole and gentle. She finds both sides of the road to be beautiful, and recognizes that everything is only made whole by way of the saint through Christ. Georgie finds both sides of the road beautiful, and both sides of the road seem to lead to the saint who leads to Christ. It is another example of things being both.

I'm good at the real and the true and the beautiful and can do with some skill and with or without flattery the place where all 3 meet.

-- Francesco (Section 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, Francesco has been called for an interview with the Falcon relating to painting frescoes in the new castle. Francesco sums up his talent not merely as being able to paint well, but to actually depict truth, beauty, and reality either in a romanticized way, or in a very crude and realistic way. This demonstrates that Francesco is assured of his own talents.

Do me something you can't see with your eyes.

-- Fiordelisa (Section 3 paragraph 11)

Importance: Fiordelisa teaches her son how to draw, and fosters his artistic talent. She encourages him to draw not only what he sees, but what he doesn't see. This is not merely a summons to use his imagination, but to rely on the deeper truth of things in his art.

It is a feeling thing, to be a painter of things: cause every thing, even an imagined or gone thing or creature or person has essence...

-- Francesco (Section 3 paragraph 3)

Importance: Francesco considers the truth of being a painter - that to paint is to feel, and that to paint is to feel not only emotions but the essence of things around him. He can see what appears before him, but can also see the true nature and purpose of a thing. There is reality, and then there is truth. By incorporating all of these things into a painting, Francesco is a master painter.

I will take it as an omen.

-- Francesco (Section 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: Here, Francesco considers two things. First, he considers how he got his first job painting figures on a wall, that his father used to build walls, and Francesco used to climb walls with a friend, and second, that he now seems to have been sent to see a girl on a wall taking pictures. He considers it an omen, as if something is meant to happen by his being sent to the girl.

Cause nobody knows us: except our mothers, and they hardly do (and also tend disappointingly to die before they ought).

-- Francesco (Section 4 paragraph 7)



Importance: Francesco reflects on his life. His closest friend has stopped being friends with Francesco because Francesco is straight rather than bisexual. Francesco had never guessed that Barto could be this way, for Barto always appeared to enjoy girls at the brothels they visited. However, this compels Francesco to realize that only mothers truly know their sons, and even then, the truth is never fully known until after it is too late.

Here I am again: me and a girl and a wall.
-- Francesco (Section 5 paragraph 3)

Importance: Francesco is continually returned to Earth to be with George on the wall. He cannot understand why yet, but continues to be intrigued by George, who arranges pictures of the house in the shape of a star on her bedroom wall. The woman who George has been watching finally stops yelling at her, and actually ends up sitting beside her. This also intrigues Francesco.

eyes painted on a wall/ it's nothing/ to the tiny and the many/ variations of colours
invisible/ till the eye's so close/ it becomes the place...
-- Francesco (Section 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: As Francesco is called back up to Heaven, he makes a few final remarks on the idea of seeing. People see things, and they do not see them. Only on seeing something up close can a person get a better idea of what it is. Only up close can someone see the brushstrokes, the variations of color, the different parts that make a whole, and the true nature of something.