



Introduction: the narrative ethics of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*

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The editors Agnes Andeweg and Jesse van Amelsvoort introduce the special issue on the narrative ethics of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*. They briefly contextualise Smith's four novels—*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020)—and their reception, and outline how this special issue originated at the MLA International Symposium which was themed Being Hospitable: Languages and Cultures Across Borders (Glasgow, 2022). They introduce the contributions, which are bookended by two interviews with Ali Smith conducted by email in October 2023 and in person in June 2022. Andeweg and Van Amelsvoort argue that rather than a prescriptive or universal norm, hospitality in the *Seasonal Quartet* results from attention and appreciation in specific situations, as an aesthetic practice.



Few contemporary writers, either Anglophone or otherwise, engage so much and so directly with current affairs in their work, with what is happening now, as Ali Smith (Inverness, 1962). Her recent quartet of novels, titled after the seasons in a seemingly generic and timeless way—*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020)—deal with issues highly topical in Great Britain and beyond, such as Brexit, immigration policy, and the renewed rise of nationalism. Also, the narrative joy and playfulness with which her novels tackle a variety of pressing social and political issues seems similarly unmatched. These fusions of the playful and the serious, of the generic and the time-specific, of story and myth, poem and pamphlet, all within the covers of a novel are characteristic of Smith's oeuvre in general, and of the novels that have come to be known as the *Seasonal Quartet* in particular.

How to live together in the present: this is what we would identify as the animating question in the *Seasonal Quartet*. This is a question for characters and readers alike, as the present of the *Quartet's* storyworld, at the moment(s) of publication, was as close to its readers as possible. In what we would call an innovative twist on Samuel Richardson's 'writing to the moment' style which lent immediacy to characters' experiences, as if the narrative were written in real time, Smith sped up the publication process considerably, with her publisher's help, and thus managed to map readers' and characters' present closely onto each other. Re-reading these four novels now, a few years after publication, offers a wonderful opening to reflect on the connections between the art of narrative and the politics of the present.

The reverberations the *Seasonal Quartet* has had, and still has, are quite extraordinary. To give just one example: at the time of writing this introduction, the Dutch theatre company Het Nationale Theater, directed by Eric de Vroedt is staging the first of a series of four performances based on the *Quartet*. Besides taking on the challenge to adapt these experimental novels for the stage, director and actors use a production process that resembles Smith's way of working: they work in brief stints of rehearsals, leaving room for improvisation and last-minute changes. It is a marked change from De Vroedt's common way of working, but, as he phrases it, though he finds it scary he wants to make space for the unexpected, just like the novels do (Morskate 2024).

The publication and commercial success of *Autumn* and its sequels have not only cemented Ali Smith's place in the British and European literary landscapes, leading as it did to a slew of translations, readings, and performances throughout the continent, it also led to an increase in academic attention. Smith, who debuted in 1995 with *Free Love and Other Stories*, has been the subject of research before, of which *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (Germanà and Horton 2013) is an early critical appraisal. Authors such as Sara Upstone (2016) and Alice Bennett (2018) included discussions of Smith's

earlier novels in their monographs, but critical attention really exploded as the *Seasonal Quartet* made its way to readers everywhere—the number of publications devoted to Smith’s work roughly doubled since 2020. Clearly, the way Smith’s novels combine formal and narrative experimentation with highly topical issues resonates with many critical preoccupations, including our own. It is impossible to review all this scholarly work in the limited space of this introduction, though the contributions in this issue are in conversation with some of this previous research. Yet, the papers collected in the cluster ‘Ali Smith Now,’ edited by Debra Rae Cohen and Cara Lewis and published in May 2022 at *Post45 Contemporaries*, may exemplify the central place Smith has come to occupy since the publication of *Autumn*.

This special issue of *C21 Literature* adds to the growing body of scholarship on Smith’s work by taking all four novels of the *Quartet* as its central point of focus. During a session at the MLA International Symposium in Glasgow in June 2022, which was themed ‘Being Hospitable,’ some of the contributors to this special issue first investigated how Smith’s seasonal novels address, among other things, what Appadurai (2019) called the inability of modern nation states to incorporate migrant stories into their narrative, the ethics of translation, and linguistic and narrative hospitality to future generations. From this meeting grew this special issue of *C21 Literature*, in which authors make sense of the *Seasonal Quartet*’s narrative ethics from a variety of viewpoints. Hospitality is a key issue in these four works: hospitality across borders, across languages, and across generations. In what can be considered an attempt to reshape the genre of the novel, Smith explores, reflects on, and enacts her narrative ethics of how to be hospitable, perhaps comparable to what Derrida (1997) called the ‘art and poetics of hospitality.’ But rather than representing hospitality as a moral obligation, we would argue that in the *Seasonal Quartet* hospitality is a feat of curiosity, the outcome of a practice: of practicing an openness to the unknown. So rather than a prescriptive or universal norm, hospitality comes about as a value that results from attention and appreciation in specific situations, as an aesthetic practice.¹

We are not the first to approach Ali Smith’s work from the perspective of hospitality. Authors such as Alice Bennett (2018), Matthew Hart (2022), and Andrei Popa (2021) have already pointed to what the latter calls ‘Smith’s encryption of hospitality into futurity’ (31). Similarly, in her recent monograph Erin Elizabeth Greer, one of the authors in this special issue as well, shows how the digital and the analogue are intertwined in Smith’s work in thinking about hospitality and belonging (Greer 2024). Our aim has been to

¹ This formulation is inspired by the work of Annemarie Mol about how values emerge in practices (f.e. Mol 2008, Heuts & Mol 2013) and of Jeanette Pols (2023), who argues that aesthetic values are social values.

take these discussions to the *Seasonal Quartet*, which, as an interlocking set of four novels, stretches talk of hospitality into various lesser or underexplored directions. Contributors discuss not only how hospitality operates on a narrative or dialogic level (Greer, Andeweg and Jankovic), but also touches on readers' engagement with Smith's references to art works (Wilson). Meanwhile, Van Amelsvoort explores the *Quartet* as an instance of climate fiction, while Houser connects recent discussions around (post-) critique to the *Quartet*'s companion piece, *Companion Piece* (2022). Together they form a multi-faceted engagement with the act of reading: Smith's own reading, her characters', and of the contributors who are looking to find new ways into the novels. The order of articles in this issue roughly follows the chronological arc of the *Quartet*: starting with an essay which explores connections between *Autumn*, the first book of the quartet, and an earlier of Smith's novels, it ends with an article on *Companion Piece*, which can arguably be read as a companion piece to the *Quartet*. These essays are bookended by two interviews with Ali Smith: one conducted by the editors of this special issue in writing, by email, the other held in person, in Cambridge.

Let us introduce the contributions in a bit more detail. First, Erin Greer reads *Autumn* in tandem with Smith's earlier novel *There but for the* (2011), and analyses how the relation between aesthetics and politics in these novels is not routed through empathetic exchanges or dialogue, but rather through judgement. Greer argues that Smith's work, read alongside Hannah Arendt's account of political judgment, articulates an original, political purpose for art in the contemporary era, aimed at restoring a 'common world'. In her article, Rachel Wilson discusses how the *Seasonal Quartet* prompts the question how the book as a medium can help us navigate the present. As Wilson argues, Smith's abundant use of often opaque citations plays a crucial role in her project's attempt to understand and represent the present. By emphasizing the contingency and creativity inherent in the act of reading, the novels push back against common narratives about the stability and openness of digital media. Next, Jesse van Amelsvoort reads the *Seasonal Quartet* as climate fiction, asking how Smith's central subject and poetics of metamorphosis and transition, as epitomised in the *Quartet*'s book titles, relate to the impending fading of seasonal change. Van Amelsvoort shows how the *Seasonal Quartet* registers the minute disruptions of our everyday lives due to anthropogenic climate change, rather than representing grand-scale destruction. In their contribution Agnes Andeweg and Dušan Janković analyse how hospitality emerges as a key subject in the *Seasonal Quartet*. Much more than just a recurring theme in the novels, they show how hospitality is also a linguistic act—of opening up language—, a narrative practice that allows different voices to be heard, and a responsibility bestowed on the reader. They argue that ultimately, the *Seasonal Quartet* invites readers to cultivate this

responsibility of engaging with the stories of others. In her article, Tammy Ariel Houser zooms in on the preoccupation with close reading that comes to the fore in *Companion Piece*, which she considers a response to intense debates in literary studies about post-critical methods of reading. In the novel, close reading is depicted as a catalyst for intersubjective bonding. As Houser argues, for Smith, the purposeless attentiveness of close reading becomes an act of rebellion against the market imperatives of speed and efficiency. The final contribution to this special issue is an interview Alexander Calder conducted with Ali Smith on the connections between *Companion Piece* (2022) and the *Seasonal Quartet*. In particular, Smith discusses writing fiction in relation to its own time and questions of both contemporaneity and history.

Origin stories are often more arbitrary than they seem. Arguably some of the origins of this special issue lie even further in the past than 2022: in Ali Smith's visit to University College Utrecht in 2019, well before the completion of the novel cycle. While an (albeit tiny) majority of British people had voted for Brexit, it was not yet clear then, three years after the referendum, when and how Brexit would happen exactly. Discussing the experiment of writing novels so close to the present, Smith answered to the question of whether it mattered for her planning and writing process whether Brexit would happen before *Summer*'s publication with a simple no. Her way of working allowed for the unexpected.

Now, five years after *Autumn*'s publication, there is a new British prime minister, Keir Starmer, who announced he wants to 'reset' relations with the EU (Walker a.o. 2024). It is a choice of words one cannot fail to notice after having read the *Seasonal Quartet*, with all its meditations on and enactments of transformation and cyclical change. A reset implies a deliberate return to the starting point, as when a stopwatch is put back to zero or a laptop back to default settings. It is a mechanistic metaphor which obviates or ignores any changes that have happened. By choosing the word reset, Keir Starmer suggests that the past can be undone, wiped out, and even that he could make that happen. As the *Seasonal Quartet* shows time and again, the past is always at play in the present; it transforms the present while the present in turn transforms the past, and so on. We cannot but be changed by the past, or by encounters with others. A reset denies such transformation and thus Starmer disregards the question of what Brexit has meant to the people and partners involved, of what has changed because of it. The *Seasonal Quartet* offers ways to look differently, to change the logic of thinking in binaries, of knowing what to look for, of expecting outcomes. Rather, it shows readers how to be startled, to be open to surprises, to keep muddling through instead of modelling, and to find the words for that.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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