



BREARLEY'S CLASS OF 1968 AT THE BOAT POND IN CENTRAL PARK.

## brearley revisited

They were the best and the brightest. In *Reunion: The Girls We Used to Be, The Women We Became* (Random House), Elizabeth Fishel revisits the class of '68.

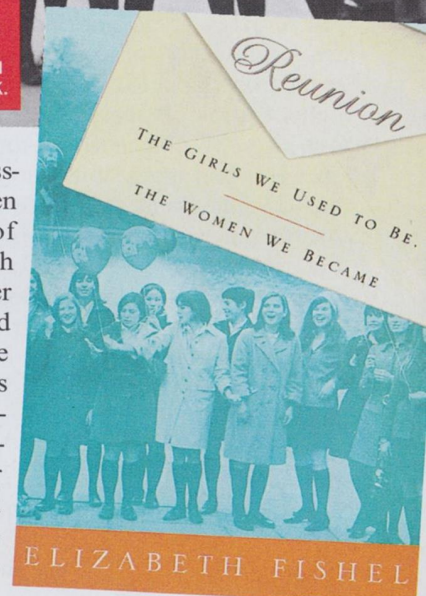
**W**hen the invitation for my twenty-fifth high school reunion arrives, I question whether it's a gift or a mail bomb. I spent thirteen years at New York City's Brearley School, one of the nation's oldest and most renowned girls' schools. From kindergarten innocence to senior-year pseudosophistication, I came of age with a tight-knit, almost incestuous group of 25 girls. Now, I wonder, what have 25 years of history written on the class of '68 and how have my classmates written their own histories? Who would look well, have worked or played well, married well, made a mark or a ripple? How would I fit in and measure up?

There are three stages in a woman's life, some wag once remarked: childhood, adulthood, and "you haven't changed a bit," which is where we no-longer-dewy-skinned boomers are now heading. So when my curiosity finally overcomes my self-consciousness and I fly in from California for the reunion dinner, I'm greeted with

a shriek by a classmate I haven't seen for a quarter of a century. "Sixth grade!" she screams, throwing her arms around me. And another old friend flicks my long necklace through her manicured fingers and whoops, "Love beads!" Despite my valiant attempts to appear a sophisticated New Yorker for the evening (a pricey Madison Avenue haircut, a snazzy new outfit, and my mother's Italian cloisonné beads), my friends' laser eyes see through my disguise, first to the schoolgirl and then to the California hippie I once was. And I, too, see my classmates as little girls walking around in adult-size bodies, crumpled kneesocks and failed spelling tests poking out beneath their designer clothes and gloss of worldly wisdom.

We were a bright, privileged, famously situated group, the daughters of Rockefellers and Rothschilds, Roosevelts and Kennedys. (The Nixon girls went around the corner to Brearley's rival, Chapin. They were not missed.) We were the rich and the nouveau riche, but mostly the old rich, many so moneyed we never realized our nannies, our East Side brownstones, and our second homes in Amagansett and Bar Harbor were anything out of the ordinary. But privilege, if an early insulator, would not protect my classmates or me from the shock waves massing beyond the school's walls. Our classical education—Latin, French, and Shakespeare; Brontë, Woolf, and the Book of Job—was educating us for a world that was fast becoming obsolete.

So the camaraderie is instant, but a trifle wary, when 21 of us gather for dinner in Simone's showplace Park Avenue *books* ▶ 290



apartment. One of the class's handful of late-to-the-altar brides, Simone has just recently married a man who has inherited this apartment. Everything is done in peaches-and-cream, with so many plump pillows on the couches that there is no room to sit down. We eat sitting on the floor, balancing plates on laps, as if back at someone's third-grade birthday party. Along with the peaches-and-cream apartment, Simone's in-laws have also bequeathed the couple with a stunning art collection, so we nibble our catered cold salmon, radicchio salad, and white chocolate cake surrounded by Calder and Nevelson and Niki de Saint Phalle (coincidentally, Brearley class of '49). There's a feeling of "let's pretend" to it, as if we are sneaking this party in while our parents are away for the weekend. At any minute they could surprise us, ambush us, catch us faking it as adults, dressed in their clothes, eating cavalierly off their best china.

After all these years, there are, of course, a few surprises, some more inevitable than others. Jo's bright cotton sweater, demure enough in the front, is cut to a deep V in the back, the better to show off her swirling tattoo of an exotic bird. "I've had it since I turned 40," she answers when asked. "But I just had it worked on." (Did she ask the tattoo artist for "the twenty-fifth-reunion upgrade"? I wonder.) Life has not been easy on Jo, and the tattoo seems to be her way of thumbing her nose at fate. She lost her husband in a drunk-driving accident when her kids were tiny and has raised them single-handedly ever since, while working as a rural roadwork inspector. Her challenges have been tougher than most—but so, apparently, is her resilience.

**b**ut there is still one surprise that no one could have anticipated. Alexa has come from California on a special mission. Once she was best friends with the class's most troubled soul, a twin named Lily. As a young girl, Lily had been eccentric and artistically gifted; while others chuckled over *Peanuts*, she idolized the sinister and sophisticated New York cartoonist Edward Gorey. Classmates would huddle around her chair while, almost shaman-like, she drew horses, unicorns, scary but mesmerizing creatures. Her twin sister, Alice, was not as flamboyantly gifted but also not as shaky, the designated coper in their uneasy symbiosis.

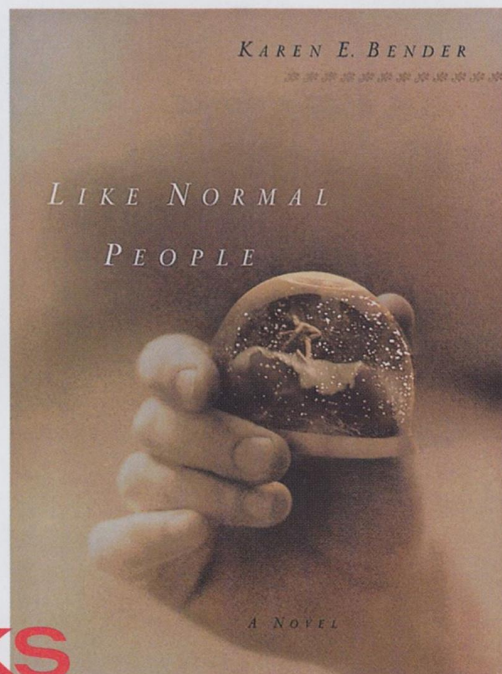
Now, almost three decades since Alexa last saw her friend, she opens a nondescript folder, unfurls a sheaf of drawings, and spreads them out across the plush carpet. They were done by Lily, and Alexa has saved them since 1960, the year when they were ten. They are elaborately detailed, divinely inspired drawings—of animals, of armor, minutely rendered geometric patterns and shapes. They would be impressive by an artist of any age. From a ten-year-old, they are extraordinary.

Alexa cries softly as she shows them first to Alice, then to the rest of the group, and Alice weeps, too, for she has not seen her sister's artwork in 25 years. Lily burned every other trace

## wives and daughters

“I think I had a kind of sex,” twelve-year-old Shelley says—innocently and inaccurately—to her retarded aunt Lena. “I don’t know what kind, but definitely sex.” What sex is and what sex means are consistently at issue in Karen E. Bender’s first novel, *Like Normal People* (Houghton Mifflin), which interweaves the narratives of three women from the 1940s through the late nineties: Ella, the aging matriarch; Lena, her childlike daughter with a penchant for pyromania; and Shelley, Ella’s granddaughter on the verge of adolescence (and obsessive compulsion). Although the novel wobbles dangerously close to sentimentality at moments (e.g., “Shelley’s heart opened and opened like a rose”), Bender’s irreverent and affectionate humor pervades situations from dating lessons to lipstick application. When it comes to Bender’s own career, she blushes: At nineteen she published her first fiction in *Playgirl*. “My mom sped to the supermarket and bought a million copies.” At 36, Bender—whose work has now appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Granta* (she’s also won a Pushcart Prize)—lives in New York City with her

husband, novelist Robert Anthony Siegel, and her son. Of her characters’ peculiarities, she says, tongue firmly in cheek, “All children have faults—except mine.” —ELIZA GRISWOLD



## books

of it before she committed suicide at eighteen.

The room falls silent as all eyes pore over the pictures, and Lily's presence fills the room. The ghost of all that unfulfilled promise, all that talent gone awry hangs heavy, like a shroud.

But it is not just Lily's ghost that haunts the gathering that evening. The room is dense with other unfulfilled promises, other expectations never met. The entire group quakes a little while staring at the gap between schoolgirl dreams, passionate but undefined, and midlife realities. Everyone blushes to survey the distance between what she has accomplished and what her parents had imagined for her—parents' expectations all the more inflated by their postwar fervor, their memories of Depression deprivations, and, for mothers especially, their own frustrations, talents unexpressed, potential unexplored. And the group also wonders, perhaps more privately than together, whether this class has disappointed its school.

For by 43, everyone who turned up at the reunion had felt the frustrations of shouldering her birthright's burdens. After 25 years, each had reaped the benefits of her education, her privileged milieu, her historical moment. But each had also paid the price. The shared culture, which the group celebrated that reunion night, was marked just as surely by disappointment as by success, by regret as much as by expectations fulfilled.

“There was a feeling we had to be great—this was our destiny” was the way one classmate, Sophia, articulated the pressures we all experienced turning the corner from our “best and brightest” youth to the sobering calculus of middle age. And the early 40s, as Sophia put it, represented a “last desperate wish for the perfection and greatness we hoped to achieve.” When *books* ▶292

# People are Talking about

greatness did not come—at least not on the scale or in the shape the girls had fantasized—“it was a tremendous shock.”

Sophia, who had once imagined herself a CEO, had become, instead, an interior decorator; married at 36, she was thrilled to have two babies before she hit 40, who were turning into terrific kids. Many others who dreamed of having it all were now coming to terms with having “two out of three”—love and work but no kids; marriage and children but no career.

So the classmate who taught part-time—so she could raise three children and support her husband when his job assignments bumped them from state to state—worries that her interrupted career seems inconsequential. The women who “just” stayed home with their kids, satisfied as they might be in private, wonder if others scorn them for underemploying their brains. And the many who don’t have kids at all peek surreptitiously at the ones showing off family photos and worry that they have missed out on one of life’s sweetest pleasures.

“There’s a lot of sadness in this room,” Alice murmurs to a friend.

## books

Partly she is whispering about herself, dressed head to toe in black. She is just back from years of self-

imposed exile in France, one marriage behind her and now beginning a new period in her life. But many others seem rudderless and disappointed, too. When one friend asks another, “What do you do when you wake up in the morning?” (meaning, “What gives direction to your life? What work do you do?”), her response is chillingly literal. “I drink a cup of coffee,” she answers. “I eat a bagel. I smoke a cigarette. I make a list of what I hope to accomplish that day.” Does she go anywhere or do anything? She doesn’t say. Like the jaded heroines of the Françoise Sagan novels she loved as a brilliant, curious adolescent, she seems world-weary. Along with several others, she seems to be drifting through her life, not shaping it.

Leaving the party for the soft spring night, I ponder the class of ’68’s gap between expectation and reality. Daughters of the staid, unquestioning fifties, my classmates and I were also inheritors of the anything-goes sixties. Many of us got trapped between the double messages braided between these contradictory decades—achieve and drop out, be good and act up, keep secrets and speak out. Was our fate to be caught between two worlds, not comfortable embracing either one? Entering adulthood in the choice-heavy seventies and eighties, were we overwhelmed by too many choices and not able to put passion behind any particular one? *books* ▶ 294

## zadie smith’s dazzling debut

LONDON—When you see teenage girls on the bus deep in a new hardcover novel without much sex or romance, when you see that same novel has been praised by every English critic and has popped up on the best-seller list its first week out, you know something is happening. And when that novel is by a 24-year-old black woman, when its time span is twice as long as hers, and when her characters, of several ethnic groups and all ages, never strike a false note, what can one say? Except maybe, to use the title of a popular Asian TV show here, Goodness gracious me.

The biggest surprise for American readers, though, will be the genial tone of this portrait of multicultural London, a melting pot (a term coined by an Englishman) that bubbles but never boils over. Asians, whites, blacks, and half-breeds really can coexist—with far less of the resentment and fear that poison race relations in the United States. Among the reasons, as *White Teeth* (which Random House will publish next month) shows, is one of the unexpectedly benign effects of the class system: Arrivals from Jamaica, Ireland, and India unite, with poor whites, against the upper class and the government.

Parents, of course, share their horror and despair at rebellious teenagers, a species that did not exist back home. When Magid Iqbal starts calling himself Mark, his worried father ships him back to Bangladesh for eight years to be brought up by relatives as a proper Muslim. When Magid returns, however, he has turned into a boy of his grandparents’ generation, worshipping the pukka sahib, making his mother, Alsana, nervous. “This is some clone, this is not an Iqbal. . . . His teeth, he brushes them six times a day. His underwear, he irons them. It is like sitting down to breakfast with David Niven.”

Magid’s brother, Millat, is another kind of problem. Speaking in a sort of black-hustler accent (real blacks laugh at him), Millat and his gang look like “trouble in stereo” in their jeans, huge trainers, and wearing more gold rings and earrings than an entire Gypsy camp. “Maybe next time you mug some poor old lady,” says a ticket seller when Millat complains about the price, “you could stop in here first *before* you

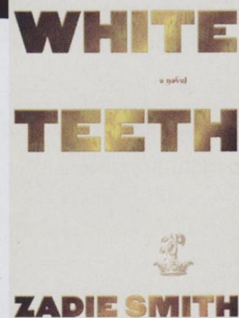
get to the jewellery store.” Millat has not read *The Satanic Verses*, “knew nothing about the writer: nothing about the book; could not identify the book if it lay in a pile of other books,” but, eager to assert his manhood and ethnic identity, joins a book-burning protest. When he gets home that night, though, he bursts into tears to see his treasured videos and posters on a bonfire. That will teach him, his mother thinks, to burn things that don’t belong to him.

Smith brings this affectionate satire and deft manipulation of stereotypes to all the characters in *White Teeth*. After five minutes’ acquaintance with seventeen-year-old black Irie Jones, white liberal Joyce Chalfen starts pushing monogamy. “I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced it—you read a lot about how Afro-Caribbeans seem to find it hard to establish long-term relationships.” Irie’s plan to do good in Africa horrifies her mother: You want to go and stare at poor black folk? she says. You can do that here. Just sit and look at me for six months.

Lively though they are, Smith’s dialogue and teasing comments can’t quite carry the burden she gives them—of supporting a long novel that is all texture and little action besides cultural collisions and children growing up. But this doesn’t spoil one’s tremendous pleasure in an astonishing debut. *White Teeth* shines in the dark.—RHODA KOENIG



LONDON'S  
HOT NEW  
AUTHOR IS 24.



Smith: RODERICK FIELD, courtesy of Random House.

# People are Talking about

**books** in myself that are important both

to me and to her," observes Cordelia, who has just quit her high school teaching job in midyear, several months after the death of her mother, a philanthropist and activist. Now Cory's puzzling out her next path, searching for something that will both link her to the political ideals she shared with her mother and assure her that the time ahead will not be wasted. For her mother's death has made her more keenly aware of how fleeting and precious that time can be. I, too, find that my mother's increasingly grave illness and impending death

make me shift and redefine my focus, cherishing family connections and the comforts of friendship more than ever.

When I first touched base with classmates for the twenty-fifth, I was still looking for large-scale accomplishments, world-

beaters, painters on a big canvas who could incorporate the tumultuous changes of the nearly three decades since graduation into something dazzling and new. But now I've come to appreciate resources previously hidden and applaud victories I might have overlooked before. Through my altered and perhaps more narrowly focused lens, I now scan the smaller-scale accomplishments that might have escaped me before. Now I value the epiphanies of the inner life as well as the successes of the wide world, the private domestic pleasures as well as the public achievements. I recognize how many of my classmates have retreated from the challenges of the wider stage for the pleasures of cultivating their own gardens. "Maybe your horizons shrink as you get older," Sophia observes, "and you think you can have power only in smaller ways—in your family and your community." Now I see how my classmates and I are all making peace with the gap between the razzle-dazzle of being special and the comforts and delights of being wonderfully ordinary. Each one of us has had to harvest her own happiness, plumb her own internal wisdom, and adapt to a changing world, both to keep pace with the demands of history and, most important, to listen to her own heart and please herself. □

**f**ast-forward five years. I have returned to New York for our thirtieth reunion. The background buzz may be quieter, but on the whole the mood has upturned considerably. This time the

heady perfume of small changes is indisputably in the air when the class of '68 reconvenes at another recently remarried classmate's knockout apartment with a staggering art collection. Tonight's hostess, glamorous in a dark velvet pantsuit and flowing blonde tresses, has recently traded in years of single motherhood after a regrettable first marriage for this promising second marriage. Her new husband is a wealthy older man who dotes on her and her children and has generously hired two butlers, who serve the sliced cold roast beef, fruit salad, and dainty sugar cookies.

The entire group quakes a little at the gap between passionate schoolgirl dreams and midlife realities

Meanwhile, conversations hum pleasantly with word of small improvements, enormous changes at the last minute. A chain-smoker from the twenty-fifth reunion now fiddles with her glass of Perrier and brags that she has given up smoking for exercise. A lost soul who did a stint as a topless dancer has now become a preschool teacher and is settling happily into a stable third marriage. A struggling artist, whose talent hasn't always been recognized, doesn't appear but writes to the group that one of her self-portraits is being featured in a prominent local show and urges classmates to see it. Two long unmarrieds are finally aflutter with romance—one is showing off her wedding ring (a first-time bride at 46!), and the other has just returned from a sailing vacation with a new boyfriend. Tanned and glowing, she looks years younger and megawatts happier than she did five years ago.

Although shaken by parents' aging and dying, this group is also shifting imperceptibly into the next life stage, to become their families' elders, and the experience seems to have brought both new energy and the hope of renewal and redefinition. "My mother dying is rebirthing those elements

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