Zadie Smith sets her new novel in the poor, dingy section of northwest London, where she was born in 1975. You would be wrong to dismiss it, one of her characters insists, “because actually it’s very interesting, very ‘diverse.’”

The four main characters in “NW” were born and raised in Caldwell, a housing project, with tower blocks named for great English philosophers: Adam Smith, Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, John Locke and Bertrand Russell. And for many residents, life in the neighborhood was, indeed, nasty, brutish, and short.

Befitting the locale, Smith’s thirty-something protagonists are a diverse lot. Leah Hanwell, an Irish redhead, the only White in the quartet, is married to Michel, a half Algerian, half Guadloupian hairdresser (“he can do cain row, he can do extensions”).

Other characters
Keisha (renamed Natalie) Blake, Leah’s best friend (and rival), a lawyer married to an Italian-Trinidadian banker, has done better than just about anyone else from Caldwell.

Felix Cooper, an aspiring filmmaker, who has worked in catering, retail, trucking, and T-shirt-making, as a mailman and a car mechanic, is “more about the day-to-day.” And Nathan Bogle is still a boy in the ‘hood, “looking at myself asking myself Nathan why you still here.”

Not always clear
With plots that sometimes intersect, sudden shifts in narrative styles and in the story itself, “NW” is not always easy to follow. Nor is it all that clear what Smith is trying to tell us.

At its best, however, “NW” is a powerful and poignant description of social class in contemporary London, where people like Felix Cooper can “spend their whole lives just dwelling” – or dwelling “on some of the shit that has happened to them.”

And where people like Leah Hanwell and Natalie Blake, who “move up in the game” and “grasp the metaphor,” find it hard to figure out when – or whether – to declare the game over.

‘Ruthless competition’
Smith conveys, quite vividly, the ways in which Western culture – and capitalism – render “ruthless competition” as the core component of human relationships. How Caldwell kids “did not have the luxury of mediocrity.” And what they were up against.

Her classmate, Michelle Holland, Natalie recalls, was a math prodigy. With her father in jail, Michelle lived with her grandmother in high-rises, which “had nothing to recommend them.” She was “sensitive and sincere, awkward, defensive, and lonely.”

Natalie was not surprised, however, to learn that she dropped out halfway through her final year at the university: “No drink or drugs or bad behavior. She just stopped. Stopped going to lectures, studying, eating. She had been asked to pass the entirety of her through a hole that would accept only part.”

‘A bright list’
Careful to identify these perceptions as Natalie’s, Smith also enters into – but not to endorse – Natalie’s sense that “because of a long process of neglect” she had “lost the generative power to muster an alternative future for herself.” Alas, Smith writes, Natalie could only envision “suburban shame, choking everything. She thought to the left and thought to the right but there was no exit.”

Although Smith’s thinking surely lists decidedly to the left, she tries to have it both ways.

Natalie’s closing sermon to Leah (undercut as “automatic and self-referential”) features a “bright list” that
“people generally get what they deserve,” and concludes that if you’ve got a job, a husband who loves you, friends, and family “you’re doing all right.”

Does Zadie Smith intend for us to read her conventional ending – and look at ourselves asking ourselves if we believe it?

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