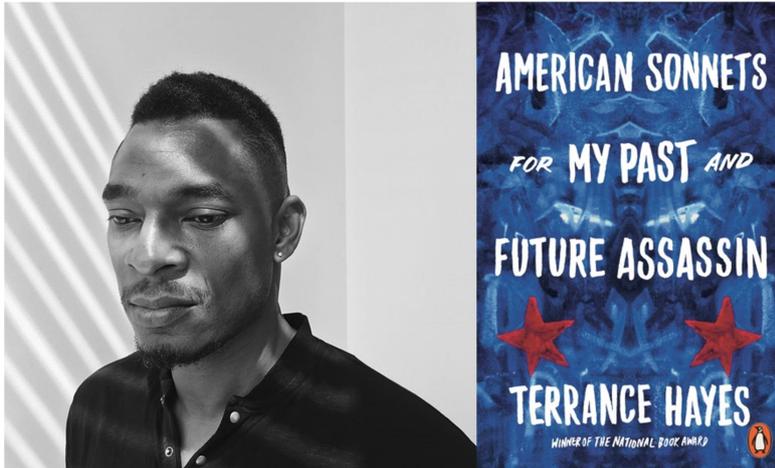


American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassins

by Terrance Hayes

(Penguin)



Terrance Hayes is the author of *Lighthead*, winner of the 2010 National Book Award and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His other books are *Wind in a Box*, *Hip Logic* and *Muscular Music*. *How To Be Drawn*, his most recent collection of poems, was a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award. *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* was published in 2018 by Penguin. He is co-director of the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics and a professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, and also poetry editor at *The New York Times Magazine*. <http://terrancehayes.com/>

Reviews

Hayes revisits lifelong obsessions: the cage of masculinity, the gulf between fathers and sons (“Christianity is a religion built around a father/Who does not rescue his son. It is the story/of a son whose father is a ghost”). There are paeans to the beauty of Jimi Hendrix and Prince. One sonnet addresses “Seven of the ten things I love in the face/of James Baldwin.” But his inquiry also deepens and turns more daring. One narrator addresses the president: “Trumpet I can’t speak for you but men like me/Who have never made love to a man will always be/Somewhere in the folds of our longing ashamed of it.” (*The New York Times*)

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin does not just condemn oppression and hatred, it also makes space for celebrating joy. It celebrates figures like James Baldwin and Maxine Waters. It celebrates the body, dancing, sex. It celebrates writing and the “poetry weirdos & worriers & warriors, / Poetry whiners & winos falling from ship bows.” And while there is an abundance of love and loving in this collection, it is never lost on the speaker that it is among a backdrop of American assassins. Even if one does find love, they “Must be willing to raise orchids / Or kids in a land of assassins.” (*The Chicago Review of Books*)

Page 10

Are you not the color of this country’s current threat
Advisory? And of pompoms at a school whose mascot
Is the clementine? Color of the quartered cantaloupe
Beside the tiers of easily bruised bananas cowering
In towers of yellow skin? And of Caligula’s copper-toned
Jabber-jaw jammed with grapes shaped like the eyeballs
Of blind people? Light as a featherweight monarch,
Viceroy, goldfish. Pomp & pumpkin pompadour,
Are you not a flame of hollow *Hellos & Hell Nos*,
A wild, tattered spirit versus what? Enemy to Foe of
Those Opposed to Upholding the Laws Against What?
I know your shade. You are the colour of a sucker punch,
The mix of flag blood & surprise blurring the eyes, a flare
Of confusion, a contusion before it swells & darkens.

Page 15

Even the most kindhearted white woman,
Dragging herself through traffic with her nails
On the wheel & her head in a chamber of black
Modern American music may begin, almost
Carelessly, to breathe *n*-words. Yes, even the most
Bespectacled hallucination cruising the lanes
Of America may find her tongue curled inward,
Entangling her windpipe, her vents, toes & pedals
When she drives alone. Even the most made up
Layers of persona in a two- or four-door vehicle
Sealed in a fountain of bass & black boys
Chanting *n*-words may begin to chant inwardly
Softly before she can catch herself. Of course,
After that, what is inward, is absorbed.

Page 77

In a parallel world where all Dr. Who's
Are black, I'm the doctor who knows no god
Is more powerful than Time. In a parallel world
Where all the doctors who are black see cops
Box black boys in cop cars & caskets, I'm
The doctor who blacks out whenever he sees
A police box. In a parallel world where doctors
Who box cops in caskets cry doing their jobs,
I disappear inside a skull that's larger on the inside.
Question: if, in a parallel world where every Dr.
Who was black, you were the complex Time Lord,
When & where would you explore? My answer is,
A brother has to know how to time travel & doctor
Himself when a knee or shoe stalls against his neck.

Discussion Ideas

- Page 10 sonnet: Who is asking all these questions? To whom are they addressed? Who is answering? Are the answers satisfactory? What does the poem teach you about political rhetoric?
- Page 15 sonnet: how does the description of the white woman develop through the first three sentences of the poem? What is happening to her?
- Page 77 sonnet: nearly nine million people in the UK watched the first episode of the first series of *Dr Who* to feature a female Doctor; more than a thousand people commented on the online *Guardian* review of it. Why is this kids' tv character so important to us, to you, to Terrance Hayes?
- Since the 1960s, many Presidential inauguration ceremonies have featured poetry readings. In what combination do you like your poetry and politics mixed?
- Wikipedia's page on the sonnet mentions Italian, French, English, German, Dutch, Indian, Russian, Polish, Czech and Slovenian versions. What is an American sonnet?

Other books by Terrance Hayes

- (1999) *Muscular music* (Tia Chucha Press)
- (2002) *Hip Logic* (Penguin Books US)
- (2006) *Muscular Music* (Carnegie Mellon University Press)
- (2006) *Wind in a Box* (Penguin Books US)

- (2010) *Lighthouse* (Penguin Books US)
- (2015) *How to Be Drawn* (Penguin Books US)

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