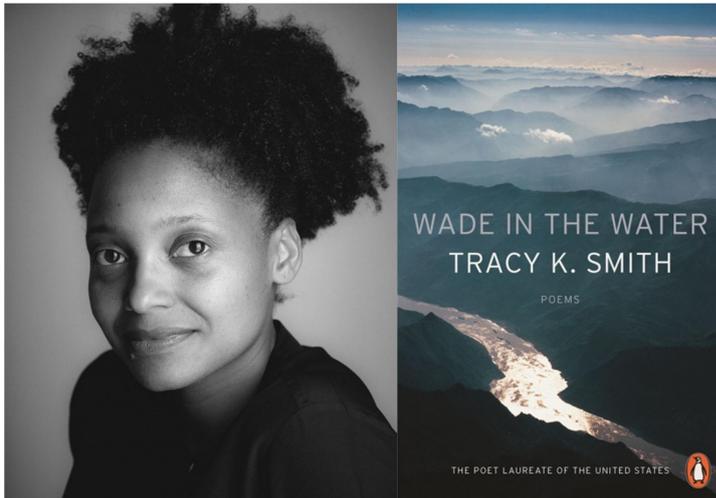


Wade in the Water

by Tracey K Smith

(Penguin)



Tracey K. Smith was born in Massachusetts and raised in northern California. She earned a BA from Harvard University and an MFA in creative writing from Columbia University. Her four poetry collections are *The Body's Question* (2003), *Duende* (2007), *Life on Mars* (2011) and *Wade in the Water* (Penguin 2018). She won the Pulitzer Prize for *Life on Mars*. She is also the author of a memoir, *Ordinary Light*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. In 2017 she was named Poet Laureate of the United States. She teaches creative writing at Princeton University.

Reviews

Tracey K Smith is the poet laureate of the United States and a winner of the Pulitzer prize. *Wade in the Water* is, inexplicably, the first of her three collections to be published in the UK. The title is from a spiritual sung on the underground railroad that carried slaves to safety in the 19th century. Its centrepiece is a gathering of what are known as “erasure poems” – a strange term as what Smith is doing is the opposite of erasure. She is making visible the words of slaves and their owners, of African Americans enlisted in the civil war – these are found poems about people who were lost. Smith has pieced their correspondence together with the love of someone making a hand-stitched quilt. (*The Guardian*)

“Our country is like a really old house,” the historian and journalist Isabel Wilkerson said in an interview barely a week after the 2016 election. “Old houses need a lot of work. And the work is never done ... Whatever you’re ignoring will be there to be reckoned with until you reckon with it. And I think that that’s what we’re called upon to do where we are right now.” Tracy K. Smith, in her current role as U.S. poet laureate and in her fourth collection of poetry, *Wade in the Water*, is rolling up her sleeves and excavating the basement of this old house.

Wade, published in April, reads like a book a laureate should write; these are poems that draw on weighty subjects and hinge on ideas of belonging. From the United States’ dark chapters of slavery to present-day acts of racial violence, Smith’s pieces consistently match the largeness of their content. Hers are poems that insist on compassion and love—poems of many voices and places across America. (*The Atlantic*)

Garden of Eden

What a profound longing
I feel, just this very instant,
For the Garden of Eden
On Montague Street
Where I seldom shopped,
Usually only after therapy,
Elbow sore at the crook
From a handbasket filled
To capacity. The glossy pastries!
Pomegranate, persimmon, quince!
Once, a bag of black beluga
Lentils spilt a trail behind me
While I labored to find
A tea they refused to carry.
It was Brooklyn. My thirties.
Everyone I knew was living
The same desolate luxury,
Each ashamed of the same things:
Innocence and privacy. I’d lug
Home the paper bags, doing
Bank-balance math and counting days.
I’d squint into it, or close my eyes
And let it slam me in the face –
The known sun setting
On the dawning century.

The World is Your Beautiful Younger Sister

Seeing her as seldom as you do, it doesn't change,
The ire, the shame, the fists you must remember

To smooth flat just thinking what they did,
What they promised, then took – those men

Who offered to pay, to keep, the clan of them
Lording it over the others like high school boys

And their kids brothers. Men with interests to protect,
And mute marble wives. Men who let her

Beam into their faces, watching her shoulders rise,
Her astonishing new breasts, making her believe

It was she who gave permission.
They plundered her youth, then moved on.

Those awful, awful men. The ones
Whose wealth is a kind of filth.

Camp Nelson

Camp Nelson, Ky. November 26 1864

The morning was bitter cold.
It was freezing hard. I was
certain it would kill my sick child
to take him out in the cold. I told
the man in charge of the guard
that it would be the death of my boy.

I told him that my wife and children
had no place to go and that I
was a soldier of the United States.
He told me it did not make any difference.
He had orders to take all out of Camp.
He told my wife and family that if they

did not get up into the wagon he would
shoot the last one of them. My wife
carried her sick child in her arms.
The wind was blowing hard and cold

and having had to leave much of our clothing when we left our master, my wife

with her little one was poorly clad. I followed as far as the lines. At night I went in search. They were in an old meeting house belonging to the colored people. My wife and children could not get near the fire, because of the number of colored people huddling by the soldiers. They had not received a morsel of food during the whole day. My boy was dead. He died directly after getting down from the wagon. Next morning I walked to Nicholasville. I dug a grave and buried my child. I left

my family in the Meeting house – where they still remain.

Discussion Ideas

- What is the ‘desolate luxury’ referred to in ‘Garden of Eden’? ‘Everyone I know’ was living it. Do you identify with the condition, or do you resist it? When and why did the items necessary for a luxurious life switch from cars, furs and jewels to fruit, pulses and small cakes?
- Garden of Eden is a high-end US supermarket chain – ‘a culinary Mecca for savvy shoppers’ as its website describes it. Why might a supermarket be named and described in such religious terms? Is ‘Garden of Eden’ a religious poem?
- Would ‘The World is Your Beautiful Younger Sister’ be as effective if the last line were ‘Whose money is a kind of dirt’? What is that ‘lth’ sound in ‘wealth’ and ‘filth’ expressing? Try reading the poem out loud to each other.
- Is ‘The World is Your Beautiful Younger Sister’ a #metoo poem?
- The extract on page 24 is from a longer sequence of poems inspired by the US Civil War, [originally published here](#). What does a poet tell us that a historian can’t?

Other books by Tracy K Smith

- *The Body’s Question*. Graywolf Press. 2003.
- *Duende*. Graywolf Press. 2007.
- *Life on Mars*. Graywolf Press. 2011.
- *Ordinary Light*. Knopf. 2015.

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