

FT Magazine **Life & Arts**

Q&A with poet Tracy K Smith

'It's such a luxury to earn my living by thinking'



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Hester Lacey 4 HOURS AGO

Tracy K Smith, 46, professor of creative writing at Princeton University, was named **United States Poet Laureate** in June 2017. Her most recent book, *Wade in the Water*,

was published this year.

What was your childhood or earliest ambition?

From the time I started reading I thought it would be really exciting to be a writer.

Private school or state school? University or straight into work?

Fairfield High School, northern California, the public [state] high school in my town, then Harvard. I didn't go directly into graduate school at Columbia. I took one year off: my mother had been diagnosed with cancer and part of that year was being with her, saying goodbye.

Who was or still is your mentor?

The poet Lucie Brock-Broido. I worked with her at Harvard, then again at Columbia. I also worked with [Seamus Heaney](#) when I was an undergraduate. I had an official mentor for a period in my thirties — the German poet and critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

How physically fit are you?

I used to be a very gym kind of person and I lament the fact that I am no longer. I had a dream not so long ago that I had been restored to my thirtysomething body — then I looked in the mirror and I had the word vanity tattooed across my chest in big gothic letters. I have to start running again, but I have three kids.

Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?

I see talent as essential, but ambition gets you to read what you haven't yet read, learn what you haven't yet learnt. And resilience: you have to be in it for the long haul.

How politically committed are you?

Very. I'm asking over and over again: what are we doing to each other, what is the fallout from that? Sometimes it's overtly political, sometimes more subtle — the politics of the private.

What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?

A writing sanctuary.

What's your biggest extravagance?

It's such a luxury to earn my living by thinking.

In what place are you happiest?

When I am close to nature: trees, light, birds, animals. I feel that is a version of the sacred that we get to witness every day.

What ambitions do you still have?

I want to find my own vocabulary for writing about womanhood, about middle age, about all of the different, beautiful lessons and losses and rewards that come from having children.

What drives you on?

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At heart I'm still this nine-year-old kid. I feel connected to childhood curiosity, that willingness to make a fool of myself, to feel joy and surprise. That childlike eagerness makes everything else bearable.

What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?

I feel grateful every time I write a book.

What do you find most irritating in other people?

An overly confident sense that they know all the answers.

If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would she think?

When I was 20, there was this big question about writing poetry: can I do this? I think she would feel safe knowing I was still doing it.

Which object that you've lost do you wish you still had?

I don't have a copy of the poems I produced as a graduate student. I remember thinking, "I have to go back and fix these." Gradually I lost track of them.

What is the greatest challenge of our time?

Love. Maybe a better word is compassion. In particular, we have to learn a new way of looking at the people we fear; people we have socially acceptable ways of dismissing or condemning for their own misery or misfortune.

Do you believe in an afterlife?

Yes, and I spend great portions of every day thinking about it. A lot of my imaginative life is spent trying to gather even a fleeting idea of this large mystery that we belong to.

If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?

I give all the people in my life and what they bring to it a 10. I give myself maybe eight and a half — they're teaching me things and I am trying to learn, but I still have work to do.

Tracy K Smith's 'Wade in the Water' is shortlisted for the Forward Prizes for Poetry 2018; forwardartsfoundation.org

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