

LIKE A BOSS

Tracy K. Smith's Work Diary: The 'Nonstop Rush' of a Poet Laureate

What, you thought it was all iambic pentameter and chamomile tea?

As told to [Alexandra Alter](#)

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Poets, in the popular imagination, are solitary figures who spend long quiet hours in isolation, waiting for inspiration to strike. In reality, they're more likely rushing to faculty meetings, digging out from under unanswered emails and maybe — if they're lucky — squeezing in an hour of reading or writing.

Tracy K. Smith, one of the most successful, celebrated and productive writers in her field today, is intimately familiar with the daily struggle between creativity and the administrative work of an in-demand poet.

Ms. Smith, who is serving her second term as the United States poet laureate, has traveled the country as an evangelist for her medium, holding readings and workshops in small towns, schools and juvenile detention centers. She has published four volumes of poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Life on Mars," as well as a memoir. Ms. Smith has also written two opera librettos: for "A Marvelous Order," about the city planner Robert Moses and the urban activist Jane Jacobs, and "Castor and Patience," about a Southern family dispute over land rights, which was commissioned by the Cincinnati Opera and is set to open in 2020.

As part of Ms. Smith's mission to make poetry feel more accessible to a broad audience, she started a weekday podcast, "The Slowdown," featuring poems that speak to contemporary issues.

"It's been really beautiful to think in these meditative terms about how poems are useful in our everyday life," Ms. Smith told me.

She's also a professor of creative writing at Princeton and is raising three children — Naomi, 9, and her 5-year-old twin boys, Sterling and Atticus — with her husband, the literary scholar Raphael (Raf) Allison.

All this leaves little time for her main job: creating poems. When we connected in November, Ms. Smith said she was taking a break from writing her new collection because she couldn't find long enough stretches to devote to it.

"I need more time and space for that kind of writing," she said.

Monday

6:45 a.m. I get up, shower quickly and throw on some workout clothes, even though I'm just going to get the kids ready for school. Otherwise, I'll be covered in peanut butter or porridge or end up with kids' toothpaste someplace by the time they leave the house.

9:15 a.m. Get to Lewis Library on campus, where the broadcast center is. In a couple of hours, I'm scheduled to record a brief interview for an "On the Media" segment about my libretto for "A Marvelous Order."

9:45 a.m. I get a text from Raf saying he almost forgot Sterling's class performance of "The Big Pumpkin" but made it in time. It was on my calendar, too, but I forgot to look. I'm crushed, but Raf sends some pictures of a very proud and happy-looking Sterling on stage.

This snafu causes me to realize I've double-booked my 11 a.m. time slot. In addition to the interview, I'm supposed to have a phone call with Emory about transferring some materials to the archive there.

9:50 a.m. Lucky coincidence: I find an email sent earlier this morning saying my contact at Emory will be out sick today. And then another strange coincidence: I find an email from an hour ago saying the radio host also needs to reschedule.

10:07 a.m. Turn my attention to reviewing fellowship applications. It's an exciting but also stressful process to narrow the pool down to just one or two finalists per award per genre.

2 p.m. Thesis student conference with Cody, a senior who is writing an original, book-length poetry manuscript. This project is unlike any I've advised before, with a huge cast of personae acting out a family drama. There are figures from classical mythology alongside a Tokyo film noir-style detective and a fictional rapper. This is the time of year when I'm offering prompts for new poems, and giving detailed line-by-line input on each week's new writing.

3:30 p.m. I dash home quickly to say hello to kids. And deal with feelings of guilt that I'll miss dinner and bedtime tonight.

4 p.m. Drive into New York with Raf for a benefit reading with the poet Billy Collins at the Frick Collection and a working dinner afterward.

Tuesday

7 a.m. The boys come into our room to wake us up.

10 a.m. I head to the Arts Complex on campus to prep for my 11 a.m. directors' meeting. We're discussing fellowship finalists. It's a short meeting, but afterward I get into a conversation with my colleague Michael Cadden, the chair of the Lewis Center for the Arts. I'll be stepping into his position next year and am trying to get my head around all that he does and how he does it.

Yesterday was such a nonstop rush that I can feel myself slowing down today, recuperating a little.

1 p.m. I'm back in my office. My papers are going to Emory University, and I spend the afternoon going through boxes. I read through some old notebooks and journals, and poems and papers from college. I rediscover correspondence from high school friends I've long since lost track of. I find a handwritten poem, which eventually became the poem "Song" in "Life on Mars."

4:30 p.m. I meet with a first-year student named Maya, who is interested in poetry. She hasn't yet taken a poetry workshop at Princeton, so I tell her about the workshops I usually offer. Typically, we spend about half the class looking closely at the craft-based choices operating within published poems. The second half is devoted to reading and responding to student poems.

5:20 p.m. Time to pick up Naomi and head home. Stadium lights in the distance give the overcast sky an eerie, beautiful tint.

6 p.m. Home. I missed bedtime last night, so I'm excited to get the boys to bed.

9:30 p.m. Raf builds a fire. We should be folding laundry, but I have no intention of folding laundry. Well, maybe just one basket.

Wednesday

10:30 a.m. I'm in my office. Revise an episode of "The Slowdown" on a poem by Lisa C. Krueger. Finish prepping my Emory boxes for shipping.

Noon Walk across campus to attend a talk by the university's current Hodder fellow, the artist Mario Moore. His project while at Princeton is to paint portraits of African-American blue-collar employees in facilities, dining services, etc.

2 p.m. Meet with thesis student to discuss new poems and a lyric essay.

4:30 p.m. Meet with Helena, a thesis student in literary translation. Because I don't speak the languages she's translating from (German, French and Flemish), what we mostly discuss are the choices she's made in English — areas where the language feels stiff, overly taxed or unclear. I'm urging her to bring her literal translations into a more vivid and robust English. It's a process that

requires listening to the work out loud, and deciding on subtle shifts in tone and emphasis. I'm currently co-translating a Chinese poet's work into English, and so I have a lot of investment in how this process is going for Helena.

9 p.m. Bedtime with boys. No school tomorrow, so everyone stayed up a little later than usual.

12:15 a.m. I need to pack for a trip to Yale tomorrow — I've been invited to the Yale Divinity School to read.

Thursday

5:50 a.m. Up early to catch a train to New Haven.

7:20 a.m. I find a seat on the train and send a few delinquent emails. I spend most of the ride revisiting parts of "My Bright Abyss," by Christian Wiman, who'll be my host at Yale. I mark a passage in which Wiman quotes the last words of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "I am so happy. I am so happy. I loved my life."

11:30 a.m. We attend chapel services at the Divinity School. It is mostly exquisite and moving song, but Chris speaks briefly about my visit. After a tear-inducingly powerful version of the gospel song "Wade in the Water," it is my turn to read a poem. I was planning to read something else, but I decide to read my own poem of the same title.

1:30 p.m. We head to campus for Chris's undergraduate English class on poetry and faith. The students have a great many questions about my poem and collection "Wade in the Water." They want to talk about the sense of the holy that the book seeks to conjure, and how I'm consciously drawing upon the traditional spiritual of the same title. I'm thoroughly moved and impressed by the thought they've brought to the reading of my poems.

5 p.m. We head to the English department building for my reading. I've read in this room before, several years ago. This time it is too small. Students line the aisles, and a group is clustered in the hall. Because of the shooting in California, I open with an excerpt from "They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected," a poem written in response to a series of hate crimes from the spring of 2009. The poem helped me to recognize that this is an American problem, something we must view as an extension of something alive at the center of our culture rather than something at its fringes.

Friday

7:45 a.m. Ride to Union Station and catch the 8:39 to Trenton. On the train ride, I watch "A Question of Silence," a 1982 Dutch film about three women who are strangers to one another but commit a crime together. My friend and collaborator, the composer Greg Spears, wants to discuss the film today over lunch.

11 a.m. Call from Emory with instructions for shipping my old laptops to the archive.

12:15 p.m. Get to my office. I have to write two more episodes of “The Slowdown,” which we’ll be recording on Monday.

1 p.m. Greg arrives, and we start discussing some upcoming projects. I wrote the libretto for “A Marvelous Order” several years ago. I never thought I would continue in the form, but Greg approached me about a piece having to do with race and real estate in the United States, and I love him and his work so much, and his really beautiful moral vision, that I said yes.

3:15 p.m. I realize how extremely tired I am. If I had a couch in my office, I would just lie down and take a nap. But I still have to write the 10th “Slowdown” script and read through some notes and edits from Tracy Mumford, at Minnesota Public Radio, and Jennifer Lai, my producer.

5 p.m. Pack up, drive home. It’s dark out, and there’s warm light throughout the house.

7:45 p.m. I get the boys ready for bed and fall asleep in there with them.

Interviews are conducted by email, text and phone, then condensed and edited.

Alexandra Alter writes about publishing and the literary world. Before joining The Times in 2014, she covered books and culture for The Wall Street Journal. Prior to that, she reported on religion, and the occasional hurricane, for The Miami Herald.

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