

# From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 1

## Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith

### Introduction

Anne Holmes: Welcome to From the Catbird Seat, a poetry podcast from the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I'm Anne Holmes, the Center's digital content manager.

This is the inaugural episode of our inaugural podcast series from the Poetry and Literature Center. It's April, National Poetry Month, and I'm sitting in the Recording Studio in the Library's Thomas Jefferson Building, which is just steps away from the historic Recording Laboratory where poets like Gwendolyn Brooks and Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Frost once sat to record their poems. This studio is only a few floors down from the Poetry Room, now part of the Poetry and Literature Center, where, for the past 80 years, poets like Brooks and Bishop and Frost have sat in residence as Poet Laureate Consultants in Poetry.

In a few minutes, in fact, you'll hear from our current Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, Tracy K. Smith, who just recently made that short trek from her office in the attic down to this studio. She joined the head of the Poetry and Literature Center, Rob Casper, in a conversation about her first term in the Catbird Seat.

Tracy is the 22nd Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, a position established by an act of Congress in 1985. In the preceding five decades, the poet in this post served as Consultant in Poetry. The term "Catbird Seat" that you keep hearing reference to comes from a comment made by former consultant Reed Whittemore. Of this position as the nation's official poet, he said, "The job is such a rare and special one in the library world and the federal bureaucracy, as well as within the world of poetry, that it is a job of opportunity, a catbird seat." Hence the name of this podcast, that term stuck—and it fits not only as a descriptor of the laureateship, but also describes the physical location of the Poetry and Literature Center, perched in the attic of the Thomas Jefferson Building.

We could spend an entire podcast series, or two, or three, just on the history of the Poetry and Literature Center and the evolution of the laureateship, but we'll put that on hold for now. You can read about the first 50 years of the position in a book titled *Poetry's Catbird Seat*, chronicled by author William McGuire and published in 1988.

For our purposes right now, it's important to know that alongside the 80-year history of the Poet Laureate position, the Poetry and Literature Center has also hosted literary event seasons at the Library of Congress. Many of these events, often curated by Poets Laureate, have been recorded and archived on the Library's website. With these thousands of audio and video recordings at our fingertips, we thought: why not start a podcast?

Each week here on From the Catbird Seat, we'll pull from these archived recordings to listen to celebrated poets reading and discussing their work here at the Library. For this first season, we're revisiting the more recent past to highlight some of our signature events from the last five years. We'll

also host some special guests who can take us behind the scenes a bit. All of the event recordings you'll hear this season are available as video webcasts on the Library's website.

Today, on this inaugural episode, it seems fitting to celebrate another historic inaugural occasion—the Poet Laureate Opening Reading. As part of the official duties of the Laureate, the poet traditionally gives a reading to open the Library's literary season, and a lecture to conclude the season. On September 13, 2017, Tracy K. Smith took the stage of the Library's Coolidge Auditorium to mark the beginning of her term as the 22nd Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry.

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, we recently caught up with Tracy, who just finished her first term, and has been appointed to serve a second term by Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden. On April 19, she celebrated with an event titled "Staying Human: Poetry in the Age of Technology." If you missed it, don't worry—you can catch the full livestream from the Library's website.

Before you do that, though, let's go behind the scenes with Tracy as she reflects on her first full year as Poet Laureate and looks ahead to her second. Then, we'll listen to some clips from her opening reading in September.

Here she is in conversation with Rob Casper.

### Interview between Rob Casper and Tracy K. Smith

Rob Casper: Well thank you, Tracy, for coming back to the Library and joining us in this historic recording studio. We're excited to talk about your opening reading as part of our podcast. You are our 22nd Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, appointed in June of last year, and of course your opening event took place on Wednesday, September 13th, just a few weeks into the beginning of your first term. I wonder if you could talk about what that experience of giving your opening reading was like. Did it change your views on the position, or affect any of the readings that you've done throughout your first term?

Tracy K. Smith: I think that the weight and the drama, in a way, of that event surprised me. I knew I had been looking forward to it, and I knew it was a ceremonial landmark, in a way, in terms of this position. But the feeling of that hit me on that night, and that was really powerful – starting with hearing the youth poet laureate, Amanda Gorman, present her poem. I really felt myself drawn into a sense of this art form and the spirit that rides upon it. And that was a really kind of beautiful, grounding event to start the year. What felt different was being able to move through my body of work, and kind of like, in a way, touch base with these different stages of my own career – maybe in a way introduce myself to the audience in a way that felt, like, "oh, I am introducing myself to this country," in a way. And then, to proceed to spend much of the year that followed reading the work of other poets, and talking about it in different parts of the country. There's something that's been really enlarging about that fact of the laureateship – the fact that my voice as a writer comes into what I do – but then there's also the sense of being a participant in this tradition and talking about that as a reader with other people.

RC: I'm happy you brought up Amanda. She is the country's first ever national youth poet laureate, and it was the first time we had joined another laureate to the opening ceremony. Can you tell me about what it meant to include her, for you?

TKS: That was the first time that Amanda and I had ever met, but it felt like a family affair, in a way. Or I felt like I got to listen to and be spoken to by another generation like a younger generation of American poet, and I think I felt invigorated by her energy, and her belief in poetry, and what she can do through poetry. I think I felt my age that night, in a really nice way—like, “okay, I trust that this will continue,” you know? That there’s another generation that’s invested and adamant.

RC: Yeah, I mean, you are an established poet at this point in time. And as such you, as you described earlier, went through poems from throughout the course of your career and you’ve had four books now (with *Wade in the Water*). I wondered if you could talk about the experience of having *Wade in the Water*, which is coming out this month, National Poetry Month 2018—talk about the experience of that book and those poems coming out as part of your laureateship, what that’s meant.

TKS: It’s a really interesting coincidence, that I find that those are such American poems. They’re so invested in American history, and so invested in thinking communally—even as I see it, the poems that are rooted in the present tense and that are coming out of my private experience are struggling to think in communal terms about what I belong to as a member of the 21st century, as a citizen of this large culture. It’s great to go to places where some of the history that the poems that are thinking toward—particularly, you know, there’s a sequence of Civil War poems, to travel in the South, where there are markers of these battles and where people have a strong sense of how their home is connected to this large history. And so the conversations that have come up around simply the topics of the poems, or the voices that the poems make space for, it’s been really exciting, you know? It’s been a way of talking about the past and a way of hearing how close it is to the present and listening differently, and listening together, which I think maybe was a hope that I had for the poem.

RC: We’ve done a lot together, and you’ve done a lot with the Library since that opening reading, but it hasn’t been here. It’s been throughout the country in these pilot project trips to New Mexico, South Carolina, and Kentucky throughout this past spring. I wonder if you could talk about just how that evolved, and again, with those poems that you read for that opening reading in mind and the ways in which they were connecting to a community that then you went out to find, to speak to?

TKS: Well, I wanted to sort of step off the path of the circuit. I wanted to feel the difference between doing what I normally do which is reading poems as part of a reading series or festivals—communities of writers—and reading poems in places where there are probably aspiring poets and lovers of poetry and then people who aren’t as connected to the art form who might come out of curiosity. I wanted to see if it’s true that the feelings that poems alert us to transcend different divisions of place, of, you know, almost everything, geography being one of them (and, of course, there are lots of things that geography is a container for as well). So I wanted to see what it would feel like to, kind of, cross different divides, and it’s been exciting.

The first place we visited was Canon Air Force base in Clovis, New Mexico, and we spent an afternoon having lunch with servicemen and their spouses and talking about just life, talking about what it feels like to move around within this country, to move overseas and come back. Some of them struggling with changes in like, you know, scale—living in a really small town. For many it’s familiar, and I grew up in an

Air Force family, so talking about what struck me as interesting. I'm older than my father was when he retired from the service, so being on that base and seeing everyone is so young was really fascinating to me. And then that evening there was a reading where I went through a group of poems that seemed interesting in different ways for what questions they raised, formally and thematically, different areas or walks of life that they spoke to. So talking about them with this group of people who are, for the most part, not habitual readers of poetry was really exciting. And, you know, their experience of place, of coming-of-age, of being away from home, came to be of use in how they responded to those poems. Every single place we've been I've found that the poems I've shared, even my own, have kind of gotten enlarged by the observations that people have had. It's just been a real affirmation that we have something to say to each other—even if it's, you know, a little bit artificial, there's something that we can dig into.

RC: It's interesting, too, as you're talking and thinking about the tradition of the opening reading, and what it means to step onto that grand stage as the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry – this title bequeathed to the Library by an act of Congress – and join in that ceremonial aspect, and then to move entirely away from that tradition, to go to rural communities outside of the sort of world of the arts, the world of poetry as we think of it, and to meet with all sorts of different audiences, large and small, and not only read your poems but read poems by others, and not only read those poems, but ask people to talk about them—to give them permission to do so.

TKS: Yeah, I mean, it's great. There's one way of looking at it that I have, which is to say, "okay that opening reading created a sense of this official position and the value that, you know, is attributed to it," maybe another way of looking at it would be, "okay, in some ways perhaps the poet laureate is a representative of official verse culture," and yet the reality is every encounter that you have with real people in real time where your voices are of equal weight negates the validity of a notion of something like official verse culture, and says, "okay, these are poems, these are experiences, these are encounters, and your perspective and my perspective have something to say to each other and we don't need to weigh them in a hierarchy." I think that's really—it's good to remember that. The downside of being, you know, going along the circuit, visiting universities and festivals, is that you become acclimated to this sense that you're inside of a closed community and you have an authority that you've earned. I like the fact that real time and real space and actual—I don't know, the hospitality, maybe even a little bit of the hesitation that gets overturned, all of that sort of destroys the validity of silly things like a bubble or a track or a hierarchy, which is what we hope for when we think of poetry.

RC: All right, well I have one last question, which is that it's been almost a year since you got the call from the Librarian of Congress asking if you could step up to the role of poet laureate. I wonder, if you could go back and tell yourself what the experience would be like—if you could advise yourself on why you might want to say yes to becoming the poet laureate, what you would say?

TKS: Oh, yeah. Oh, if I could've been in that room with myself? I would say, "Don't be scared." I was scared. This is a gift, this is a way of learning about what you love and where you live and all you need is really to share what's important to you and listen. I feel so lucky that I'm getting fed by all of these different, you know, what people are willing to share of their lives. It's really moving.

## Webcast introduction

AH: We couldn't have asked for a more thoughtful segue than the one Tracy just offered, so without further ado, let's listen to some highlights from her opening reading as Poet Laureate.

Webcast clips from Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith Inaugural Reading

### Clip 1

Tracy K. Smith: Thank you, Dr. Hayden. And thank you, Amanda. I feel so much joy and hope and belief when I hear your voice, Amanda. I know the future is in good hands and that poetry will remain alive and well. So thank you. And, Dr. Hayden, it's such an honor to be selected and introduced by you. I remember when I was very young, I started but was never able to finish a poem in which I was trying to imagine the afterlife as a librarian. And I think I was on to something, because moving through these mammoth buildings, through the hallways, the beautiful halls, and then the underside of the building, all the tunnels, I realize there's something magnificent and divine that's housed here. But there's also something ethereal that is born of the energy and the belief that builds places like this. So I'm extremely grateful to be here tonight. I'm excited about the year ahead and the conversation that poetry will allow me to have with my fellow Americans. So I thought I would go back to the beginning and read a few poems from each of my books and finish with some newer work that makes up my forthcoming book, *Wade in the Water*. These are poems from *The Body's Question*.

"A Hunger so Honed." [reads "A Hunger So Honed" from *The Body's Question*]

### Clip 2

TKS: In some ways, although I didn't realize it when I was writing these poems, *Life on Mars* is a book that's seeking to answer that question from my first book, what do you believe in?. And there are so many different directions that the poems go in an effort to bring something coherent and consoling together for me. This is a poem called *The Weather in Space*.

[reads "The Weather in Space" from *Life on Mars*]

### Clip 3

TKS: I'm going to read some newer poems. I might go backwards. But I have a new book of poems that will be coming out this spring. And a lot of the themes that I've always been interested in, I continue to be interested in. I think primarily they have to do with how we treat each other. Whether that means intimate relationships or, you know, the people we never ever meet but upon whom our lives have an effect. And it's a book that's seeking to explore that question by looking backward toward history in some moments and also looking at us now, as we are. And one of the things that I find myself really thinking about or maybe willfully meditating upon is this notion of compassion. As an act or a mode that we can choose to operate in. And often we fail to do that. So I'll read you from around this book in which you'll hear different versions of that, that consideration.

I think the other little thing I'd say about this book is that, whereas *Life on Mars* is trying to imagine this universe, the vast thing that we know like a tiny little pinprick size amount of information about with certainty, what I'm also interested in is what that system belongs to or what continuum it is a part of.

And so I imagine that the history of eternity is something that I'm also trying to will my brain to imagine. Because we're a part of it, right. And what we do is imprinting that in ways that we may not even recognize. So this is a small poem that kind of dips its toe in that question. It's called "Garden of Eden."

[reads "Garden of Eden" from Life on Mars]

About five months ago, I visited coastal Georgia to Geechee and Gullah communities that make up the Sea Islands. And I had the privilege to attend a ring shout, which is a tradition that brings spiritual into just this really beautiful living rhythmic space that reminds us of the deep connection between African-American tradition and Africa. When I went to this performance, I had been—so I had been in the South for a number of days going to a lot of sites of a very painful history. Some of which were marked, many of which were not. And then I walked into this space feeling, you know, like a storm inside, just about like, you know, who we are, what we come from, what we are able to acknowledge and what we're not. And a woman who was one of the performers just walked up to me. I'd never seen her before in my life. And she said, "I love you," and she gave me a hug. And I just lost it. I felt like, that's exactly what my soul needed to hear. And I couldn't stop thinking about her. And so this is the poem that came from that. I've since met her again, and her name is Bertha McKnight, and she's a member of the Geechee Gullah ring shouters. And so this poem is dedicated to them. "Wade in The Water."

[reads "Wade in the Water" from Wade in the Water]

TKS: So that poem leads into a Civil War poem that—DC is just like such a wonderful—I'm realizing now, this Civil War poem was commissioned by the Smithsonian for an exhibit of Civil War portraits a number of years ago. So, wow, thank you. It's a history that, of course, I learned about but I never felt that I had a footing within it. And so being asked to think about it was a real gift. Because I had to say, well, what perspective am I curious about? And I wanted to know about recorded testimonies or experiences from black soldiers of that war and their families. And so I found a number of sources that included letters that many of soldiers or their widows or their families wrote to President Abraham Lincoln, asking for help in some way, either getting their son paid or finding out if they were free yet. And I also found a number of testimonies from depositions that veterans and their families gave after the war, sometimes for, you know, decades and decades after the war, in an attempt to claim pension. Slavery made it very difficult for blacks to do that because there were not birth certificates or marriage certificates that people had. And so it was very difficult for them to prove that they had served. So reading these documents, I felt like all I wanted to do was make a space for them to exist together as a chorus. And so I'm going to read you two sections from a found poem called "I Will Tell You The Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It." And these two sections are written really as choruses that every few lines is a different speaker, but I feel like they're telling pieces of the same story.

[reads excerpts from "I Will Tell You The Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It" from Wade in the Water]

#### Clip 4

TKS: Before I close with one last poem, I want to reiterate my thanks to everyone here tonight, many of whom are family members, teachers, friends, mentors, colleagues in this world of poetry. And of course

to Dr. Hayden and Rob Casper and the Library staff who have just been so wonderful in making this feel like it's not just a dream, this is real, this is really happening. So thank you. And of course, Amanda—I'm excited to follow your voice. "An Old Story."

[reads "An Old Story" from Wade in the Water]

### Episode conclusion

AH: Thank you for joining us on "From the Catbird Seat." To learn more about poetry past, present, and future at the Library of Congress, visit us at [loc.gov/poetry](http://loc.gov/poetry). You can watch or listen to the full events featured on today's episode by going to [loc.gov/discover](http://loc.gov/discover), and clicking on "Video Webcasts." We'll be back next week for another episode. Stay tuned.