Inside

‘Homegrown’ at the Library
The American Folklife Center’s ‘Homegrown’ concert series for some 15 years has shared music and dance from other cultures.
Page 3

Q&A: John Szwed
Author and teacher John Szwed talks about his experiences using the Music Division’s jazz collections as a visiting scholar at the Library.
Page 4

Upcoming Events
Events at the Library over the next month explore Asian-American poetry, Chinese opera theater and the mysterious planet of Venus.
Page 6

New Laureate Ready To Take Poetry on Road

By Wendi A. Maloney

Tracy K. Smith believes in the power of poetry to bridge divides. “We’re so invested in speculating about each other,” she says. “I just have this feeling that if we could sit down together and talk about something as intimate as the feelings a poem makes us aware of, we could really gather a more genuine . . . sense of who our neighbors are and what we have to say to one another.”

As the Library’s 22nd poet laureate consultant in poetry, Smith intends to test her theory by taking poetry to audiences outside places where poets typically present their work. Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden announced Smith’s year-long appointment on June 14. Smith will take up her duties in September, opening the Library’s annual literary season with a reading of her work in the Coolidge Auditorium.

Smith’s interest in reaching new audiences made her an attractive choice for Hayden, who has stated her desire to make the Library more accessible to people across the country. “The fact that Tracy wants to go into rural areas and talk about poetry is such a great idea and something that really excited me, because I think that’s the kind of thing we should be doing as an institution,” Hayden told the Washington Post in June.

POET LAUREATE, continued on page 5

She says she first suspected she wanted to be a poet when she was in grade school in Fairfield, California, where she grew up as the youngest of five children. Her father was an engineer, first with the Air Force and then for the Hubble Space Telescope program. Her mother was a former teacher and a deeply religious woman whose influence Smith explores in “Ordinary Light.” Smith’s mother died from cancer not long after Smith graduated from college.

She says her family encouraged her interest in poetry. As a child, she loved Emily Dickinson – “I still do,” Smith says – and Edgar Allan Poe, whom her father urged her to read after he learned she enjoyed poetry.

She did not seriously contemplate poetry as a career, however, until she got to college. She has a B.A. in English and American literature and Afro-American studies from Harvard University and an M.F.A. in creative writing from Columbia University.

“When I got to college, I realized that there were living poets [who] were teaching at my university and giving readings in the vicinity. I just immersed myself in contemporary poetry and took workshops and . . . just tried to study what my teachers did,” thinking “maybe that’s what writers do,” Smith recalls.

Reading Seamus Heaney clinched her decision. “Heaney was the poet who made me really know that I wanted to write poems,” she says. His was “a voice I wish I could have just swallowed.”

Smith now directs the creative writing program at Princeton University. She taught previously at the City University of New York and Columbia University.

She says she is heartened by the beautiful diversity of voices in contemporary American poetry. They speak to us, she says, across what used be uncrossable divides: culture, age or geography. Younger poets Smith admires include Erica L. Sánchez, Solmaz Sharif and Danez Smith.

Others who inspire her — among the many, she emphasizes — include her Princeton colleague James Richardson and the late Lucille Clifton, for her view of America from the perspective of an African-American woman and for her thinking “beyond America to just humanity in so many of her poems.”

The logistics of Smith’s poet laureate project are still being worked out. But she says she has received many “really wonderful emails” since the announcement of her appointment. Individuals have written, for example, “I live in a town of 2,000, and we want poetry here,” or “I live in a town where a lot of us are struggling with addiction, and we feel like poetry might be useful.”

Smith will continue to live in Princeton, New Jersey, with her family but will be happy to use her office in the Jefferson Building when she is in town.

“It’s exciting for me to have an office in the world’s largest, most extensive library, as somebody who has been sustained by libraries throughout the course of my life,” she says, adding that she looks forward to alerting people to the Library’s resources and how they can be useful, “even from a great distance.”

---

**EAP Can Help**

Change is happening all around. Want to focus on how to grow through change? The Library’s Employee Assistance Program can help. All Library employees and benefit-eligible dependents may contact the on-site counselor at 7-6389 or libr@loc.gov. Assistance is also available 24/7 by calling ESPYR at 1-800-869-0276 or www.espyr.com.