

An American Poet

By Zoe Schafer

SYRACUSE, N.Y., Feb. 4, 2020, – “You put your kid to bed and you sit down and write and make some ramen and then an angel comes down and kisses you on the forehead. The last part I made up. You sit down to write. You fail. You fail again. You fail better, as Samuel Beckett says...” stated Bruce Smith, dressed in his signature athleisure and black baseball cap hat. In a day and age where technology is king and the arts have taken a back seat, how does a poet find his success?

Smith is a nationally acclaimed poet who has been a Pulitzer Prize Finalist, Nation Award winner and two-time National Book Award finalist, among many other accolades. His poetry is inspired by many things, but Smith narrows it down to two pillars: the power of song and the power of wrongness.

“I lived in a neighborhood where we heard a lot of rhythm and blues,” Smith stated, “You’d have a little transistor radio that you’d listen to on the subway after school, and that felt both transgressive and enormously powerful... Jazz musicians play in a way that is odd, contrary, different. You make your own thing that is distinct and individual to you, and that is somehow wrong to the world.”

When it comes to poetry, Smith believes that wrongness and song go hand in hand. He fondly remembers the days when rock n’ roll was deemed sinful, and television programs would film Elvis from the waist up to avoid his gyrating pelvis. Growing up in Philadelphia during the 1950s and 1960s, Smith witnessed a cultural revolution, and, in that counterculture, he found inspiration.

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“I think that there’s an impulse in poetry that resists. It doesn’t go along with the mainstream speech... that friction is interesting to me,” He said.

Smith went to Bucknell University, where he played football, and, after receiving six concussions, he decided to delve into his studies and commit himself to English, in which he received both his bachelor’s and his master’s degrees. It was there that he found his spiritual connection to poetry.

Smith said, “After six concussions, I turned to something else [poetry] to give me meaning and significance.”

Smith can be found quoting poetry as one quotes scripture. He lives his life by the writing of the “greats.” He has pages of poems memorized from Emily Dickinson to Walt Whitman to Allen Ginsberg.

One of his life defining quotes is by William Carlos Williams, who said, “You can't get the news from poetry, but men and women every day die miserably for the lack of what is found there.” For him this means that purpose is found in poetry. For him, poetry is the closest he’ll get to religion.

“Poetry sustains me. I ask my students, ‘What’s in your cup?’ and for me, that’s poetry, and being a practitioner of it,” he said fondly.

Following his time at Bucknell, Smith took up a job teaching an English class at the federal state penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. It was there that he truly uncovered the spiritual connection one experiences through the arts.

“I consider it my alma mater” Smith commented, “It’s a different experience racially, politically—it’s an immersion of wrongness. Poetry and literature and music are important there, as it’s not in the mainstream culture outside the jail. After you’ve committed three crimes, then

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what? What about the soul stuff? A lot of people turn to the arts to find significance and meaning.”

Smith can now be found at Syracuse University where he teaches a poetry course. However, when he’s not teaching, he is writing, publishing and touring the country giving lectures and doing readings. He finds significance in writing and joy in teaching.

Smith stated, “I’m not just clocking into work. I get to talk out of my enthusiasm for poetry and what’s found there.”

His students have always been fond of him, even gifting him his signature accessory—a black baseball with the writing “Me/We” on it, a famous poem by Mohammad Ali. Smith can be seen wearing this hat around campus, at readings and even in photo shoots. It has become his staple. For him, the phrase represents his entire reason for dedicating his life to poetry.

Smith said, “Poetry has to get out of me and into ‘we’ for it to be significant. If it’s just me, it’s about the ego. If the poem doesn’t escape the privacy of my office and get out to you then it’s just me, but when it gets out to other people, that’s how I define success.”

For poet Bruce Smith, success in poetry and in life is determined by how private work touches the world publicly.

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Bruce spending time with a statue of one of his favorite poets, John Keats. Credit Bruce Smith.

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Bibliography

Bruce Smith- 315-657-0464

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