

Duende (poems) by Tracy K. Smith

Review by Mike Amado



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At first reading of *Duende*, by Tracy K. Smith, I found her work to be uber-academic. Implying all the MFA tools at her disposal. In all truth, this collection is "deep" on an outside level if that makes sense. I stayed drawn to this book solely due to the title. I'm not certain that the concept of duende had originated with Garcia Lorca but it weaves its way through this collection in a dark undercurrent. Unfortunately, this review is not the place to pontificate on that concept.

Duende travels with an even keel through the hurt of forgetting to the vacancy of memory, fraught with the want of what is lost, then to an encompassing forgiveness that leaves the speaker and the reader intact, and still following.

All the elements are there: loss, desire, ennui, acceptance. There is basic, everyday information within Smith's work, however it's

varies into a mystic shroud, hard as a brick wall - in other words, real and apprehensible like the head-spinning conclusion to a cross-cultural whirlwind romance with a married man that ends in a bar somewhere in Portugal, where a beer thieving woman writes Macumba, (witchcraft) on the napkin of the jilted, now left to ponder how, "*Love is a momentary lapse of treason*". That's just my impression of the information. The mystery works.

This reader wonders if this is a poetry volume or a travel log at times. Some poems embody a harsher tone. In "*Letter to a Photojournalist Going-in*", Smith paints an affecting Scenario, both general and personal, of war documented by embedded cameras. Asking:

"Who can say the word love when everything - everything - pushes back with the promise to grind itself to dust?"

In "*I Killed You Because You Didn't Go to School and Had No Future*" she brings to fruition a brutal reality of extreme poverty.

In "*Slow Burn*" Smith writes:

*We tend toward the danger at the center.
Soft core teeming blue with fire. We tend
Toward what will singe and flare, but coil
Back when brought near. Sometimes we read
About people pushed there and left to recover.
They don't. Come out mangled or not at all,
Minds flayed by visions no one can fathom.*

There's no question that Tracy K. Smith possesses a strong voice and is accomplished. Duende is the winner of the James Laughlin Award of the Academy of American Poets. Aside from that, if a reader prefers works of dark elegance, Duende gets the approval stamp.

- Mike Amado