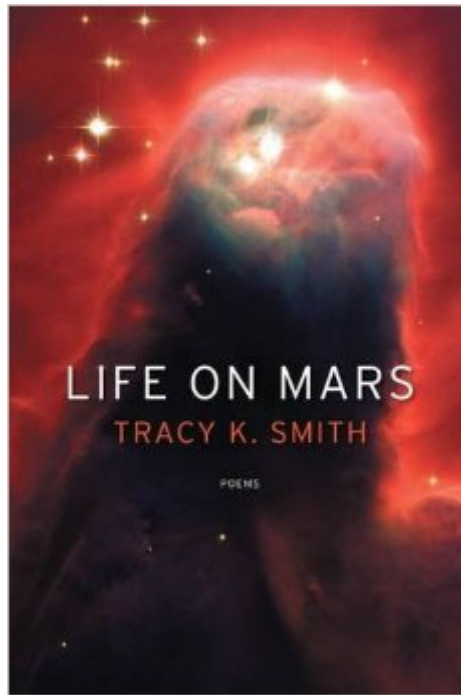


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# Life On Mars: Poems



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize\* A New York Times Notable Book of 2011 and New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice \*\* A New Yorker, Library Journal and Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year \*New poetry by the award-winning poet Tracy K. Smith, whose "lyric brilliance and political impulses never falter" (Publishers Weekly, starred review) You lie there kicking like a baby, waiting for God himself To lift you past the rungs of your crib. What Would your life say if it could talk? â •from "No Fly Zone" With allusions to David Bowie and interplanetary travel, *Life on Mars* imagines a soundtrack for the universe to accompany the discoveries, failures, and oddities of human existence. In these brilliant new poems, Tracy K. Smith envisions a sci-fi future sucked clean of any real dangers, contemplates the dark matter that keeps people both close and distant, and revisits the kitschy concepts like "love" and "illness" now relegated to the Museum of Obsolescence. These poems reveal the realities of life lived here, on the ground, where a daughter is imprisoned in the basement by her own father, where celebrities and pop stars walk among us, and where the poet herself loses her father, one of the engineers who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope. With this remarkable third collection, Smith establishes herself among the best poets of her generation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Life on Mars" is a collection of 33 poems touching on most aspects of 21st Century American hope and belief. Make no mistake about it: life on Mars is life on Earth, and readers will recognize the ironies (sometimes quite bitter) between our culture's surface appearances we so like to show others and the realities of deep scars and wounds we try to hide even from ourselves. The poem

that gives the collection its title is a beautifully crafted work that discusses the "dark matter" existing between us that we don't (won't?) recognize and that might be responsible for wreaking havoc in our personal lives. It's a chilling indictment of us all that uses actual recent events in our country to make us hope and pray that it's dark matter causing our incest, intolerance, ignorance and destruction. An earlier generation would've said "The devil made me do it," but ours tries to lay the blame on natural phenomena. The poem packs a punch - deftly though, and artistically. I swear it must have taken Smith many revisions and months to get it right, choosing just the right image, the right words, the right inflections and line meter to achieve such success. The poem "Life on Mars" is followed by a shorter gem: "Solstice." Here, Smith addresses the killing of Canada geese at JFK airport, the killing of people, and the public's dwindling interest in the news. What's remarkable is Smith chose the format of a villanelle to tell the tale - a poetic form that uses rhyme, repetition and meter to create a mystical atmosphere. In this case, the villanelle greatly heightens a feeling of helplessness and loss, and we pray that the solstice of our culture has been reached and that light will soon begin to return. The poem that provides the biggest kick in the book, however, is the monumental elegy, "The Speed of Belief." It contains some great lines and images, and walks us through a daughter's coping with the loss of her father. I say "coping" and not "grieving," because the daughter tries to imagine her father's death as part of a continuum, not an ending, and the poem builds through seven magnificently crafted sections to a powerful, wonderful conclusion that will leave the reader satisfied and saying, "Yes! Yes!" And one striking image from the poem will stay with me for a very long time, her father standing in the heavens, and "Night kneels at your feet like a gypsy glistening with jewels." This poem alone is worth the price of the book! Great lines abound in this collection. For example, take this image from "The Good Life": a poor person " . . . walking to work on payday / like a woman journeying for water / from a village without a well." These are poems that unflinchingly capture the human condition today, but they do so with great beauty . . . and a touch of solace.

I have a tendency of buying things on my wishlist when I'm intoxicated, and this just so happened to be one of those. I'm extremely pleased with this purchase. Tracy K. Smith's poems are grand, sometimes grand enough to give me chills. This is definitely a poetic endeavor that has landed among the stars.

There is a sci-fi tilt to Tracy K. Smith's book of poetry, *Life on Mars*; her father was an optical engineer who worked on the Hubble telescope. He'd "read Larry Niven at home and drink

scotch on the rocks,/ His eyes exhausted and pink." A good part of the book reflects her reactions to his death in 2008. She also takes a celestial-eye view of our foibles ("I spent two years not looking/Into the mirror at his office") horrors (the "father in the news who kept his daughter/ Locked in a cell for decades") and irrationalities ("I didn't want to believe/ What we believe in those rooms"). I hoped to find the remarkable title poem, *Life On Mars*, somewhere online, but no luck. It starts like this: "Tina says what if dark matter is like the space between people/ When what holds them together isn't exactly love, and I think/ That sounds right - how strong the pull can be, as if something/ That knows better won't let you drift apart so easily, and how/ Small and heavy you feel, stuck there spinning in place." "Life can treat us roughly and horribly." "I knew which direction to go/ From the stench of what still burned. It was funny to see my house/ Like that - as if the roof/ Had been lifted up and carried off/ By someone playing at dolls." \*\*\* Tina says we do it to one another, every day, knowing and not knowing. When it is love, what happens feels like dumb luck. When it's not, we're riddled with bullets, shot through like ducks. "Is it all due to dark matter? Or something else? It's well worth your tracking down that title poem to find out what she says. This excellent one, beautifully titled, "My God, It's Full of Stars", can be found online. [...] Here's part of it: "Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last, / Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on/ At twilight. Hearing the engines flare, the horns/ Not letting up, the frenzy of being. I want to be/ One notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial. / Wide open, so everything floods in at once. / And sealed tight, so nothing escapes. Not even time, / Which should curl in on itself and loop around like smoke." The title of the book comes from the David Bowie song, and his Ziggy Stardust persona pops up in the poems. So does the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* and other cultural artifacts. This is a poetry book that's easy to enjoy, while giving the reader lots to ponder. I love this question she raises at the end of "No-Fly Zone": "You lie there kicking like a baby, waiting for God himself/ To lift you past the rungs of your crib. What/ Would your life say if it could talk?"

This was one of the books assigned to me for a poetry class in college. It is one of maybe two assigned books that I kept after graduating. I have always loved poetry, but this collection really stood out to me. Like Tracy K. Smith and her father, my family also bonds over science and science fiction, so I found myself relating very well to her poems about her father. I think this collection does require some knowledge about science because it has so many allusions to it. Some people in the class, for instance, had trouble understanding the poem "The Challenger" because they weren't familiar with that event in scientific history. This might be why some of the lower reviews say things like "I just didn't get it". If you like science and poetry, though, this is fantastic.

The first third of this book is quite good, showing Ms. Smith as a poet with an original voice and vision. I thought the latter poems in the collection not so inventive. This could just be me, so if your a Tracy K. Smith champion, please ignore my remarks. I read a lot of contemporary poetry and much of the last half of this book seemed weaker when compared to the first grouping of poems. Still, she's a poet worth watching.

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