

# Word of Mouth

News from People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos

## Poet Tracy Smith: everyday details, existential quests

For Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Tracy K. Smith, a poem might originate with a news report about Somalian pirates, a question about the expansion of the universe or a David Bowie lyric. From there, she writes down thoughts and fragments, tacking between the realm of ideas and the world of sounds and images to “see what the poem is urging me to do or say.”

What results are poems like those in *Life on Mars*, Smith’s 2011 collection: poems that explore both the everyday—therapy sessions, marriage, childbirth—and the mysteries of space, time and death. They ask big questions: “Is God being or pure force? The wind/Or what commands it?” They elude easy answers: “Who understands the world, and when/Will he make it make sense? Or she?” she writes in the book’s title poem.

Smith, who teaches poetry at Princeton University, will be the featured reader at this year’s People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos benefit, on Friday, April 12 at the Nassau Club in Princeton, New Jersey.

As the youngest of five siblings, Smith remembers being read to by a cadre of adults and older kids. Later, influenced by the work of writers including Seamus Heaney and Elizabeth Bishop, Smith decided to pursue literature seriously. She loved the way a poem could isolate one small detail, examining it until it bloomed into something larger.

Smith’s parents had always encouraged her to read and write. “But when I told them I wanted to be a poet, there was a gasp of fear. Later, their fear was replaced by pride about what I do.”

In addition to *Life on Mars*, Smith has written two prize-winning collections, *Duende* and *The Body’s Question*. While

her poems have a wide reach, dealing with topics both existential and scientific, she said a singular question percolates under much of her work.

“I think that I am fundamentally obsessed with the ways we treat one another as people, as citizens. A lot of my poems are trying to ask why we do what we do, and what it feels like on either end.”

When writing the poems that comprise *Life on Mars*, “I also was grieving the death of my father. Space and that kind of mystery seemed very relevant to me when I was trying to imagine where he was.”

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**“The poem asks us to pay attention, to move beyond easy assumptions...”**

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Smith often uses formal poetic structures—a villanelle, for instance, with its precise rhyme scheme and repeating phrases—but tweaks them with staccato line-breaks and startlingly fresh images. In longer poems, she imagines a piece of music in several movements, each one having its own cadence and emotional tone.

In her poetry workshops at Princeton, Smith begins with “an indoctrination into the image. I believe the image is the DNA of a poem.” Her students will spend half their time reading and discussing published poems and half the time workshoping poems they’ve written while “borrowing” techniques from those established writers.

She urges students to let their poems explore big questions. While many poems plumb the interior lives of their creators, Smith says, they are also “really marvelous tools for thinking about the kinds of dialogue that happen in other fields—in social sciences and politics. The poem asks us to pay attention, to move beyond easy assumptions. Those things are incredibly important in public and private life.” Poetry, she says, “makes us more capable of participating in the world.”

## Forging family over 20 years of Gente y Cuentos

by Anndee Hochman

David Schraeger and Roberto Vargas read the same phrase and pictured two different men. That evening, the Gente y Cuentos group led by Angélica Mariani was reading “Todos Cansados,” a story by Mexican writer Angeles Mastretta; the husband in the story was described as a man of “paz y guerra,” peace and war.

To Schraeger, those words meant that the husband was a military man given to excessive use of force. “He might have had his good moments, but he beat his wife,” he recalled. For Vargas, “paz y guerra” was a laudatory phrase; the wife, he said, was putting her husband on a pedestal.

It was a classic Gente y Cuentos moment. In this group, which has been meeting at the Princeton public library for twenty years, people of varied cultures, ages, class backgrounds and life experiences all have seats at the table. What unites them, participants say, is their love of Spanish language, literature and one another.

Veterans of the group—and there are some who have participated since the beginning—call each other “primos y primas” (cousins) and refer to “la familia de Gente y Cuentos.”

“You get to know people—how they are, what they think. They tell about their own experiences, and you learn from them,” said Yolanda Sanchez, a Mexican native who has been in the group for fifteen years.

While Spanish is the common tongue, group members hail from Peru and Cuba, Colombia and Guatemala, Brazil and the Dominican Republic. Others have come from Egypt, Romania, France, Spain and the United States. Some spoke Spanish as children. Others learned as adults.

“We have people struggling with two jobs, and we have people in the group with Ph.D.s,” said Maribel Viloría, who learned about the group fifteen years ago from her son’s high school Spanish teacher. “When we’re together, it doesn’t matter. No one feels intimidated to say anything they want to express.”

Pamela Scheinman is one of the newest members; she is a photographer and researcher who often visits Mexico and “learned Spanish on the streets.” The group was “much more than I ever expected. It’s very literary. I love the reading aloud.”

A recent story concerned Santería, the practice of “black magic.” Some group members knew people who had experience with such practices; others shared magical beliefs specific to their home countries and cultures. “That was fascinating for me,” Scheinman said.

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### “Veterans of the group...refer to ‘la familia’ of Gente y Cuentos.”

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The group has read humorous stories, like “El DeSoto de Rita Hayworth,” by José Martí, and serious ones, such as “Dos Palabras,” by Isabel Allende. While Mariani is constantly on the hunt for new pieces—when she finds one, she tells the group, “Tengo una estrella ahora!” (I have a gem here!)—she has also repeated stories, knowing the group will find fresh insights in them every time.

“They have learned about the shadows, the contrasts,” Mariani said. She reminds them to carefully scrutinize the first paragraph for hints of what is to come. Sometimes, the title itself opens doors. “Triangulo Isocoles,” by Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti, “is about a love triangle that only involves two people. I thought: Wow, that’s really poetic!” said Schraeger.

The group’s longstanding bonds extend beyond the library. When one member was going through a rough period in her personal life, Gente y Cuentos became her support system. When Viloría’s husband was dying, in 2008, he insisted that she host the group’s Christmas party anyway.

That annual gathering captures the group’s essence: Sanchez’s chicken mole, Viloría’s arroz blanco and ropa vieja, Marita Martinez’s tamales, Vargas’s empanadas. Food and laughter, talk and affection flow freely. “Todas las opiniones, todas las personalidades,” Vargas said. “It’s like a drink, like a fountain.”

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***“Art is a way to mourn, art is a way to know, art is a way to be in the world, art is a way to remain human.”***

—Toni Morrison

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## Lifelong reader “broadened” by sharing stories

### Talking with Liz Fernandez

Liz Fernandez felt her mind and heart being cranked open when she attended an Argentine funeral.

Fernandez, a native Canadian, raised Protestant, who had married a man from Argentina and lived in the country for several years, was at first aghast at the culture’s very different approach to death.

A Canadian funeral would typically consist of a church service, followed by a dinner for mourners. “In Argentina, you’d rent an apartment where the body would lie for a couple of days; the appropriate people would send huge wreaths. [There was] a huge cemetery in Buenos Aires, with niches; you shove the coffin into a niche.”

And life-cycle occasions weren’t the only source of contrast. “Humor. Use of color. Everything was different. My exposure prior to that was rather narrow, and my opinions were also narrow. I remember being broadened dramatically by different cultures, different attitudes.”

Fernandez, who joined the People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos board two years ago after supporting the organization as a donor, recalls the same feeling of “broadening” when she attended her first story discussion at the Bo Robinson Assessment and Treatment Center as a Crossing Borders volunteer.

“I would never have gotten to know a group of African American men, nor would they have gotten to know us. They’re very, very bright. They wrote poetry. They could talk about any of the stories. They saw things that I didn’t see.”

She was also impressed by the mutual respect between the two groups: black men in prison and older, white women from more comfortable circumstances. “The genuine respect they had for us and our opinions was astounding. These men were all brought up by mothers; I guess we were mother-figures. I thought that was really interesting. I learned as much or more than they did.”

Fernandez also attended a Gente y Cuentos group at the Children’s Home Society in Trenton. “That was entirely different. [Participants] were laborers, gardeners, extraordinarily hard-working. Some of them couldn’t read. But they understood the story. You could see their eyes flash.”

As a fluent speaker of Spanish (she learned while living in Mexico and Argentina), the Gente y Cuentos program is close to Fernandez’s heart, and she wants to sustain it as a critical part of People & Stories’ mission. Founder Sarah Hirschman, who launched the program in Spanish in 1972 and died in 2012, “is still hovering over my head,” Fernandez said.

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**“Some of them couldn’t read. But they understood the story. You could see their eyes flash.”**

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“There’s an intellectual argument about this: why read literature in Spanish when these people are in America and should be learning English? But I think people have to be confident in their own language before they can ever be confident in another language. [Gente y Cuentos] is also how the organization started. Sarah would want it carried on.”

Fernandez is a life-long reader (her daughter once wrote an essay describing her mother as a “bookworm”) who has also written several novels of historical fiction set in Canada; she is working on another. Of her three children, two are academics; she also has seven grandchildren, and she divides her time between Princeton and her native ground just north of Montreal.

While the task of funding People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos is more difficult than ever, Fernandez believes the program’s mission is still urgent and essential. “People have to raise their consciousness. These minds that haven’t been educated can be helped to realize how intelligent they are. It gives them confidence. [People & Stories] deepens their understanding of the human condition, makes them more human. It’s a release for many of the people with whom we work. Nothing else like this exists in their lives.”

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**“A good story should make you laugh, and a moment later break your heart.”**

--Chuck Palahniuk

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# A tale of growth told by statistics: looking at 2012

by Patricia Andres

**“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.”**

--Philip Pullman

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At People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, we are attentive to stories. Participants become aware of how life experiences shape their interpretations of the literature we read. Together, we discover ways a narrator’s angle of vision illuminates the motivations and emotions of characters in the stories we discuss. Sometimes we even come to see that the narrative dimension of human experience brings the coherence of a storyline to what otherwise might be only a collection of disparate happenings accumulated over the course of a life.

Numbers tell a story, too. I didn’t realize this until several years ago when Russell Marks, then-president of our board, and I were working together with executive board members to construct the annual budget. We always start with the programs we seek to offer and work from there. As we did so, Russell pointed out the ways the numbers were telling a story about our mission, our resources and our commitment to keep overhead costs low.

As I review the 2012 numbers, asking what they tell us about our programs and our organization, the main storyline I find is growth. First, the number of people we served, 1817, grew by more than 400 since the previous year. Next, the number of programs for Spanish speakers increased by five, a 60 percent jump from 2011.

An expansion story emerges, too, when I look at the program numbers for states that sponsored our National Endowment for the Humanities grant. For example, Alabama alone hosted 23 programs. Yet, as in previous years, a focus on home is the story told when I notice that the highest number of programs in any one state took place in New Jersey, with 37. We offered a healthy number of programs in prisons, detention centers and re-entry centers in 2012 (thirteen and fourteen, respectively), while the number of offerings for seniors remained steady at eleven programs in both

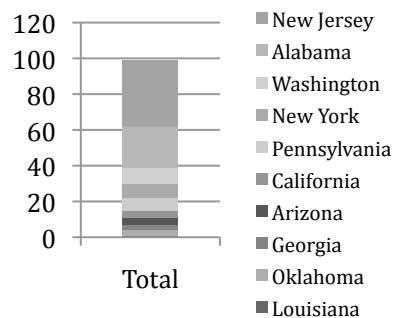
2011 and 2012.

Another story told by the 2012 numbers is how we were again able to do more with less. That is, our 2012 budget of \$397,300 enabled us to offer 99 programs at a cost per participant of \$217 for each eight-week program. We bought \$5,000 worth of books last year for distribution to our participants. The main story is changing lives through literature—one short story at a time.

## Programs by Language



## Programs by State



Participants:	1817
Sessions:	755
Programs:	99
Partner Sites:	56
Coordinators:	48
English:	85
Spanish:	14

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***"I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end."***

--Gilda Radner

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## One poetic tale unfolds anew in different settings

It's not trigonometry.

When participants come to the table for People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, they are not seeking correct answers, because there are none. Instead, there are stories with multiple shades of meaning, texts splayed open for interpretation. One group or individual may plumb a poetic phrase; another may seize on the “big questions” raised by the story. The same piece may yield utterly different conversations in different settings.

“The Man Who Found You in the Woods,” a story by Catherine Ryan Hyde, tracks the fate of two people brought together by accident (or fate, depending on one's point of view); a middle-aged man named Nathan finds an abandoned infant in the woods and vows to remain part of his life, even after the boy's grandmother is awarded custody.

Fifteen years later, the boy—named Nat, after the man who found him—shows up on Nathan's doorstep, accompanied by his exasperated grandmother. Nathan fulfills his promise to “never wash his hands” of the boy, even when Nat's behavior tests the boundaries of loyalty and perseverance.

Three People & Stories coordinators recently used “The Man Who Found You in the Woods”—with a group of teen boys in residential drug treatment; with men in Trenton's Operation Fatherhood program; and with seniors in a day center in south Jersey. Their reflections confirm that stories are never “fixed” on the page; they shift and bend as their readers— young or older, male or female, people of varied life experiences— seek to understand.

**Manos House, a residential drug treatment facility for teenage males**

*by Scott Feifer*

Reuben thought that Nathan wanted to adopt the boy because he felt that finding him was important and he felt like it meant something. But only a few hands went up when asked if they would take on the

responsibility of raising a child if they had rescued him.

We debated whether blood is thicker than water. Dakota and Cody were firm that family is more loyal, but many hands waved when I asked if they had people who were loving and loyal to them who were not biological family.

Luis felt that Mrs. Bates [the boy's grandmother] may have been an addict because of her nervousness when talking to Nathan. He said, “Maybe the mom is just like the daughter [who abandoned the infant].” And this led us to talk about whether we wanted our parents to be judged by the choices we have made. Many said they were raised in ways that were more positive than their actions reflect.

Luis felt that Nat tests Nathan because “he doesn't trust him and he has grown used to being abandoned.” He said he probably would have done the same thing; he would have felt so angry that he wouldn't care.

I asked the guys to call out the names or relations of those who would never give up on them. They called out “Mom... grandmom...my sisters...myself.”

Then we wrote about the people who will never wash their hands of us, or an item we have kept from childhood, or a time we felt something was meant-to-be. Colin wrote about a cousin whose death inspired him to live with more appreciation and gratitude. Dakota wrote about his grandpa never washing his hands of him; when the man died, Dakota felt a piece of him died as well. Charles wrote about his grandma and his first baby's mom being loyal and loving, and how they put up with him over and over again. Dominick wrote emotionally about his sister's dedication to him; he wants to get organized and be the best brother to his siblings so they don't have to think he is away at school. Reuben wrote about his feeling that coming to rehab was meant-to-be.

**Operation Fatherhood, a program for homeless and/or unemployed men**

*by Suzy Dwyer*

I've used this story many times; it's always a good one. When they brought up the missing father [of the infant], I thought:

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**“There's always room for a story that can transport you to another place.”**

--J.K. Rowling

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Oh, God, I've never thought of that. It was Kevin who said that maybe the father left them both—the mother and the baby. They said the mother had probably just *had* the baby in the woods.

They were still very critical of the abandonment and of the mother. They were just appalled. They said, "If your mother abandons you, you're in trouble." We focused on the phrase "a speck in the middle of an ocean," which Paul read as illustrating just "how alone this baby was in the world." I tried to help them see how a young mother without family support could make such a terrible and horrific decision, because of fear.

We talked a lot about parenting, how it's the hardest job of all. They said that being a parent is a privilege; having a child is a privilege. They said you just have to be there for your child.

They admired Nathan in taking on that challenge [of raising Nat], especially with a teenager. But they thought it wasn't entirely selfless; it had to be giving Nathan some meaning to his life. They felt he had a void somewhere, an emptiness. Taking on the challenge of raising a teenager gives his life meaning, while also potentially saving Nat's life.

We talked a lot about what a good parent Nathan is. He shows love and support, but he also draws the line. The men felt that when Nat gets out of [juvenile detention], and Nathan is waiting for him, he has a good chance of going down the right path.

**Camden Senior Day Center, a weekday lunch-and-activities program for seniors**  
by *Anndee Hochman*

Readers loved this story and mentioned numerous parallel tales—particularly that of Moses in the bulrushes—about babies abandoned and then found. Interestingly, they had more empathy for Nat's mother than most groups with whom I've read this story; perhaps their age and life experience has left them less judgmental of people's choices.

"Maybe she was watching Nathan in the woods, and she saw him pick up the baby," Raymond suggested. "I think she didn't want the baby to die. She didn't put it in a dumpster, but just lightly covered him with leaves and had him wrapped in a sweater," Lucille pointed out.

We talked about the contrast between Nathan's purpose on that duck-hunting morning and what actually occurs: he set out planning to kill birds and ended up "saving a life," Emily said. They were not surprised that, in middle age, he had the sudden wish to adopt the baby he'd rescued.

"I think he'd never had much experience with babies, and then when he held that one, he was in love," Alberta said. "I think that baby came at just the right time in his life," Emily said. They generally agreed that Nathan's relationship with the baby was "meant-to-be" and that he had a right to ask for some involvement as the boy grew older.

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**One group or individual may plumb a poetic phrase; another may seize on the "big questions" raised by the story.**

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Not only did they feel that Nathan had a right to be involved in the boy's life, they felt Nat would have turned out differently had Nathan been present for him earlier. "Nathan would have slowly introduced him to hunting and things like that," Raymond said, and Barbara added that a male role model might have been helpful to Nat as he grew up.

We looked closely at this exchange between Nat and Nathan: "What do I have to do to make you wash your hands of me?" "There's nothing you could do. I will never wash my hands of you." Some said that must have sounded like a promise to Nat; others said he may have taken it as a threat.

We talked about whether Nathan is a hero, a description he shrugs off throughout the story, even at the end when the prison guard praises his consistency with Nat. Readers thought that Nathan's long-term commitment to Nat was what made him remarkable, not just the act of finding and saving the infant. They approved of what Mary called his "tough love" approach—that is, he does not offer to bail Nat out but instead lets him live with the consequences of his actions, becoming the one person who refuses to abandon him.

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***"Perhaps some day I'll crawl back home, beaten, defeated. But not as long as I can make stories out of my heartbreak, beauty out of sorrow."***

--Sylvia Plath

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## On the Bookshelf...

*Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words*, by Kim Rosen. New York: Hay House, Inc., 2009.  
by Patricia Andres

In Kim Rosen's *Saved by a Poem*, the overarching focus is joy—the joy born of a deeply intimate relationship with a poem. Through examples of personal crises when knowing a poem brought gifts of healing and nourishment, Rosen offers the reader stories of how poems have entered and changed her heart. She also offers techniques for developing just the kind of intimate relationship with poetry she attests is so redemptive.

Reading a poem aloud is the first strategy Rosen outlines for making the work your own. After many oral renderings, she suggests learning the piece by heart, walking it through what she calls the “four chambers of memory,” with “chambers” evoking both heart and temple.

There's a hidden dimension to this practice, though. While memorizing the poem creates a mysterious relationship that at once leads you deeper into yourself and the piece, the main thing to notice is what Rosen calls “the gift of forgetting.” That is, watch for what you forget, what slips out of mind, what slides beyond memory—for it is there you are called to expand the parameters of consciousness, voice and cultural conditioning.

The book is a treasure with many jewels: a dozen poems printed in full with Rosen's reflections and insights; an appendix of resources ranging from poetry collections to books about poetry; and meditative practices to guide the reader in transformative experiences of poetry. There is even a CD included with recordings of poems by a wide range of authors including Pablo Neruda, Rumi, Naomi Shihab Nye and Stanley Kunitz.

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