



NEWS FROM OFFICE FOR THE ARTS AT HARVARD and  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY BOARD OF OVERSEERS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: January 30, 2019

CONTACT: Alicia Anstead, 617.495.1924, [anstead@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:anstead@fas.harvard.edu)

## Poet Tracy K. Smith '94 to Be Honored at Harvard University

POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES WILL RECEIVE HARVARD ARTS MEDAL AT MAY 2 CEREMONY,  
LAUNCHING HARVARD'S 27th ANNUAL ARTS FIRST FESTIVAL.

(Cambridge, MA)—The Office for the Arts at Harvard announces that U.S. Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize-winner Tracy K. Smith '94 is the recipient of the 2019 Harvard Arts Medal, which will be awarded by Harvard University President Lawrence Bacow at a public ceremony 4 p.m. Thursday, May 2, 2019, at Agassiz Theatre, 5 James St., Cambridge. The ceremony, presented by the Office for the Arts at Harvard and the Harvard University Board of Overseers, will include a discussion with Smith moderated by poet Jorie Graham, Boylston Professor of Oratory and Rhetoric at Harvard, and hosted by actor John Lithgow '67 ArD '05. The medal ceremony is the official opening event for ARTS FIRST, Harvard University's annual community festival showcasing and celebrating student, faculty and staff creativity in the arts May 2-5.

"I am so pleased that the first Arts Medal I bestow as president will recognize the tremendous talents of Tracy Smith," said Harvard President Lawrence Bacow. "When she was named U.S. Poet Laureate, she spoke about the potential of poetry not only to cross divides, but also to mend them. The world needs that kind of wisdom, and hers is a powerful voice for the possibility of sympathy and empathy, especially where there seems to be little common ground."

Established in 1995, the [Harvard Arts Medal](#) honors a distinguished Harvard or Radcliffe graduate or faculty member who has achieved excellence in the arts and has made a contribution through the arts to education or the public good. Among the medal's previous [26 recipients](#), two have been poets – Maxine Kumin '46 and John Ashbery '49 (in 2005 and 2009 respectively).

"The poetry tradition at Harvard is long and esteemed, and we are delighted to invoke that tradition by awarding the Harvard Arts Medal to Tracy K. Smith, whose work as a writer of poetry and generator of the American poetic voice is powerful, profound and necessary," said Jack Megan, Director of the Office for the Arts at Harvard. "We honor her because of her astonishing poetry, and for the example of her artistry, which is an inspiration to so many of our students at Harvard today."

Tracy K. Smith was born in Falmouth, Massachusetts, and raised in Fairfield, California. She studied English and American Literature at Harvard. While an undergraduate, she joined the [Dark Room Collective](#), a reading series and community for writers of color in the Cambridge and Boston area. She went on to receive her MFA from Columbia University in 1997.

Smith is the author of four poetry collections, including *Wade in the Water* (2018), which was shortlisted for the 2018 [T. S. Eliot Prize](#). Her debut collection, *The Body's Question* (2003), won the [Cave Canem Poetry Prize](#) in 2002. Her second book, *Duende* (2007), won the 2006 [James Laughlin Award](#) and the 2008 [Essence Literary Award](#). Her collection *Life on Mars* (2011) won the 2012 [Pulitzer Prize for Poetry](#). She is the author of the memoir *Ordinary Light* (2015), a finalist for the [2015 National Book Award in Nonfiction](#), and editor for the anthology *American Journal: Fifty Poems for Our Time* (2018).

“With the Harvard Arts Medal, the brilliant Tracy K. Smith brings her unique voice to the tradition of poetry at Harvard which stretches more than three centuries—from Thoreau and Emerson, to Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery among so many others—carrying and transforming the brave medium which is poetry through this fraught present to an as yet unimaginable future,” said poet Jorie Graham, Boylston Professor of Oratory and Rhetoric at Harvard.

A starred review of Smith's *Duende* in *Publishers Weekly* noted that Smith's “lyric brilliance and political impulses never falter under the considerable weight of her subject matter,” and poetry critic Dan Chiasson Phd '01, reviewing *Life on Mars* in the *New Yorker*, wrote that the book's “alternating cosmic breadth and intimate focus derives from the shared situation of poets and astronomers, squinting to glimpse immensity: ‘bowing before the oracle-eye, hungry for what it would find.’”

In 2017, Smith was appointed the 22nd Poet Laureate of the United States. Her other awards and honors include a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, a 2004 Rona Jaffe Writers Award, a grant from the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation, a fellowship from the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, a 2005 Whiting Award and a 2014 Academy of Poetry Fellowship. She lives in New Jersey and is director of Princeton University's creative writing program. She is also the host of [The Slowdown](#), a weekday podcast in which she delivers a way to see the world through poetry.

**Admission to the medal ceremony is free but tickets are required, available in person at the Harvard Box Office at Smith Campus Center, 1350 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, by calling 617.496.2222 or visiting [www.boxoffice.harvard.edu](http://www.boxoffice.harvard.edu). (Phone and online ticket orders are subject to service fees.) Ticket distribution for Harvard affiliates (two per person, with valid ID) begins Wednesday, April 17; ticket**

**distribution for the public (two per person) begins Friday, April 19. Some remaining tickets may be available at the door one hour prior to event start time.**

Harvard University's annual ARTS FIRST festival, showcasing student and faculty creativity, will take place Thursday-Sunday, May 2-5, 2019 throughout the Harvard campus. Sponsored by Harvard's Board of Overseers and produced by the Office for the Arts at Harvard with partners across the University, the event showcases more than 1,500 students in all genres performing at indoor and outdoor venues. All events are open to the public, and most are free and family friendly. All are welcome. For more information, contact the Office for the Arts at Harvard at 617.495.8676, or visit [ofa.fas.harvard.edu/arts](http://ofa.fas.harvard.edu/arts).

###

The Office for the Arts at Harvard (OFA) supports student engagement in the arts and integrates the arts into University life. Through its programs and services, the OFA teaches and mentors, fosters student art making, connects students to accomplished artists, commissions new work, and partners with local, national, and international constituencies. By supporting the development of students as artists and cultural stewards, the OFA works to enrich society and shape communities in which the arts are a vital part of life. Information: 617.495.8676, [ofa@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:ofa@fas.harvard.edu), [ofa.fas.harvard.edu](http://ofa.fas.harvard.edu).