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Life on mars tracy k smith

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Smith, Tracy K. *Life on Mars*. Graywolf Press, 2011.*Life on Mars* begins with a series of poems in section one that focus on visions of the future and meditations on outer space and the universe. The poem “Sci-Fi” describes the poet’s predictions for the future while “My God, It’s Full of Stars” and “The Universe is a House Party” explore the expansiveness and chaos of space and time. “The Museum of Obsolescence” and “At Some Point, They’ll Want to Know What It Was Like” focus on how people living in what used to be considered the future will look back on and attempt to understand or explain the past. “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?” is the second long form piece in the book, tackling issues of loss and alienation while simultaneously paying tribute to David Bowie. Section two of the book focuses solely on the poet’s experiences following the death of her father. “The Speed of Belief,” the first and longer poem of the two poems in the section, is a seven part piece that examines the complexity and nuances of grief, from denial and depression to anger and bargaining. The following poem, “It’s Not,” sees the speaker accepting their father’s death as a transition into a deeper unknown unbound by the strictures of life. Section three of the book takes on a more political and societal focus. The first poem, “Life on Mars,” is a collage of stories, thoughts, and conversations that all work to highlight the ways in which life on our own planet can often feel strange or alienating. “Solstice” and “No-Fly Zone” take on similar themes, addressing the issues with popular media and communication as well as modern family life. “Ransom” examines alienation by expressing the rarely heard narrative of the societal other in the form of environmentally radical pirates. The final poem of this section, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected,” is a six part poem that centers on the root causes and impacts of hatred, first meditating on the emotion itself and later bringing to light and memorializing the stories of black victims of hate crimes. In the fourth and final section of the book, the poems take on a more personal tone, much like in the second section, however covering a wider range of topics. “Everything That Ever Was” and “The Good Life” look at the ways in which the past and our yearning for it can influence our lives in the present, while “Aubade,” “Field Guide,” and “Eggs Norwegian” examine the way we account for ourselves as we navigate through our relationships. “Willed in Autumn” and “Song” celebrate physical and emotional intimacy, which transitions into the poems “Sacrament” and “When Your Small Form Tumbled into Me,” which describes the experiences of childbirth and conception, respectively. The final poem of the collection, “Us & Co.” is one of the shortest in the book, highlighting the brevity of human life and experience, but also the resilience of life in general. © 1996-2014, Amazon.com, Inc. or its affiliates Tracy K Smith’s work manages to toe the line perfectly between a commonplace modernism and a fanciful classicism. The poems in her collection *Life on Mars* are intrinsically current, referencing a bunch of cultural icons, including Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, a range of David Bowie songs, current affairs and news items. Bowie is particularly prevalent, not only in the title poem which comes from the Hunky Dory song of the same title, but also lines from the albums *Low* and *The Man Who Sold t* Tracy K Smith’s work manages to toe the line perfectly between a commonplace modernism and a fanciful classicism. The poems in her collection *Life on Mars* are intrinsically current, referencing a bunch of cultural icons, including Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, a range of David Bowie songs, current affairs and news items. Bowie is particularly prevalent, not only in the title poem which comes from the Hunky Dory song of the same title, but also lines from the albums *Low* and *The Man Who Sold the World*. Despite these links, *Life on Mars* is no easy pop song, even when it presents its lightest form, as in the Villanelle “Solstice”. “Solstice” takes a series of modern happenings including the gassing of geese outside of JFK airport, Iranian bloodshed, and the shrinking of newspapers. While the lines are simple – almost a recount, the effect is explosive, forcing us to think about the sound-bite nature of our reporting and the matter of fact way we absorb, accept, and acclimatise ourselves to horror:We’ve learned to back away from all we sayAnd, more or less, agree with what we shouldWhole Flocks are being gassed near JFK. (43)The book is divided into four parts. Though an astronomical theme flows through and unites all the poems, the first section is the most rooted in space travel, sci fi, with just a touch of ice-edged kitsch. In “Sci-Fi”, the future we imagine in our limited fantasies is a bleak one, with the word ‘sun’ reassigned to “a Standard Uranium-Neutralizing device”, and our lives, sterilised, sexless and safe. It’s a similar story with “My God, It’s Full of Stars”, the Kubrick-inspired ode to alien-life, with space:choc-full of traffic,Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feelNor see, flush against us, living, dying, deciding,Setting solid feet down on planets everywhere, (10)The cute kitsch continues until the television-inspired picture of the universe is replaced with images from Hubble, showing us it’s vastness: “So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back.”Throughout the section, and indeed throughout the book, humour and pathos mingle easily, as “The Universe is a House Party”, where we welcome our alien neighbours generously with open arms, until the chilling denouement shows us how small we really are; how limited. Throughout the section, fathers, aliens, heroes, God or gods are all simultaneously present and absent, forming a nexus of sound and vision that both lifts us up into a grander perspective of ourselves while reminding us how tiny we are in the face of the universe. Throughout the flamboyance, the work retains a rich beauty—even at its bleakest, most ironic: The dark we’ve only ever imagined now audible, thrumming,Marbled with static like gristly meat. A chorus of engines chirms.Silence taunts, a dare. Everything that disappears,Disappears as if returning somewhere. (24) The second section is primarily an lengthy elegy sequence titled “The Speed of Belief”, written for Smith’s father. Each page of the elegy has a slightly different structure, charting life and death with co-mingled grief, longing, exhilaration, and questioning. In this intense, beautiful sequence, Smith converts her personal experience to a universal one—reminding us of what we’ve all lost, where we all sit, and what’s around each corner. The final poem, “It’s Not”, forms a perfect conclusion – a kind of acceptance mingled with philosophy – life and death forming an natural progression or changing of form:Legs slicing away at the waves, gliding Further into what life itself denies?He is only gone so far as we can tell. ThoughWhen I try, I see the white cloud of his hairIn the distance like an eternity. (34)The third section is inspired by anger, full of humanities great failings: the wrongs we’ve done to one another, the damage we’re doing to the Earth, the flaws we can’t seem to move beyond. Smith doesn’t flinch from these, though she uses the astronomical to gain perspective, and perhaps even a kind of healing, though the kind of evil that drives this section can’t be undone. The title poem uses the concept of dark matter to explore the darkness in humanity, including the 2009 case of Josef Fritzl, who kept his daughter locked in a basement for 24 years, human rights abuses at Guantanamo Bay, rape, torture, war, and the destruction of the planet: “How else could we get things so wrong,/Like a story hacked to bits and told in reverse?--“Other poems in this section chart small-mindedness, hypocrisy, prejudice, and hatred. The most intense of these is “They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected”. The poem opens with anger, the distilled hatred of white supremacy. The poem could continue to grow the anger–there’s plenty to inspire it, but Smith controls the work beautifully, moving from the general: “Hate spreads itself over thin and skims the surface,” to particular killings conducted by white supremacists in 2009. Smith moves the work away from that anger though, presenting compassion instead. In a masterful twist, Smith allows the dead to speak, and forgive, allowing those that destroyed with their hatred, a tiny crumb of love.The final section of the book comes back to domesticity: noisy neighbours – shrieking through the floorboards (“Screaming like the Dawn of Man, as if something/They have no name for has begun to insist/Upon being born”), a relationship in stasis, walking the dog, earning a living, coming to grips with romantic love, and above all, the art of creativity, as in “Alternate Take”, the wonderful poem for Levon Helm:Six lines were bothered by skitters off like water in hot grease. Come in, Levon, with your lips stretched tight and that pig-eyed grin,Bass mallet socking it to the drum. Lay it down like you know (67)Even at its most bleak, the work is shot through with humour and compassion. Even at its most obscure, the poems are rooted in the present tense; grounded by the everyday experience of observation. At the heart of Smith’s everyday experience is an expansiveness that calls to mind the universal. *Life on Mars* is an extraordinary collection that will no doubt draw new readers, intrigued by what poetry is able to achieve. *Life on Mars’* rich tapestry traverses a broad spectrum of modern experience, linking pop-culture to science and the geography of human pain, forgiveness and transcendence.Article first published as Book Review: *Life on Mars* by Tracy K Smith on Blogcritics. ...more Continue reading the main storyI won’t blame you for not believing this: The photograph on the cover of Tracy K. Smith’s “Life on Mars” is the same one I see every day on my computer desktop. It’s a dramatic and vivid picture from the Hubble Space Telescope, with colors I imagine J. M. W. Turner would have admired, of the Cone Nebula, a pillar of dust and gas some 2,500 light-years from Earth. Scientists say it’s an incubator for baby stars. I’ve long used the image as an efficient and emphatic corrective for solipsism. I look at it when I find myself fretting about, say, book review deadlines or my spotty gym attendance. You can’t simultaneously contemplate the vastness of the universe and take such problems seriously.At the outset of her third poetry collection, Smith too turns her eyes to the stars in search of perspective and solace, but for her the stakes are considerably higher and the images closer to home. Smith’s father was a scientist who worked on the Hubble’s development, and in her elegies mourning his death, outer space serves both as a metaphor for the unknowable zone into which her father has vanished and as a way of expressing the hope that his existence hasn’t ceased, merely changed. In “The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack” she realizes — or maybe just hopes — “Everything that disappears / Disappears as if returning somewhere.” On the first day the Hubble’s “optics jibed”, she writes, “We saw to the edge of all there is — / So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back.” It’s hard not to hear an echo of Nietzsche in those lines — “And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee” — but for Smith the abyss seems as much a space of possibility as of oblivion:Perhaps the great error is believingw’e’re alone,That the others have come and gone —a momentary blip —When all along, space might be choc-full of traffic,Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feelNor see, flush against us, living, dying, deciding,Setting solid feet down on planets everywhere.Bowing to the great stars that command, pitching stonesAt whatever are their moons. They live wonderingIf they are the only ones, knowing only the wish to know,And the great black distance they — we— flicker in.Smith is quick to suggest that the important thing is not to discover whether or not we’re alone in the universe; it’s to accept — or at least endure — the universe’s mystery. I kept noticing, early on, that Smith was using the pronoun “it” in situations where “it” had no clear antecedent. At first I thought this was a tic at best and sloppiness at worst, but when I came to the poem “It & Co.” I realized I’d been set up. Smith’s enigmatic “it” is in fact her way of teasing us for our insatiable itch for explanations:. . . WeHave gone looking for It everywhere:In Bibles and bandwidth, bloomingLike a wound from the ocean floor.Still, it resists the matter of false vs. real.Unconvinced by our zeal, It is un-Appeasable. It is like some novels:Vast and unreadable.ImageTracy K. SmithCredit..Tina ChangReligion, science, art: we turn to them for answers, but the questions persist, especially in times of grief. Smith’s pairing of the philosophically minded poems in the book’s first section with the long elegy for her father in the second is brilliant. She first shows us how tempted she is to escape into abstraction and imagination — to stare dreamily at that Cone Nebula all day — but then reminds us how necessary it is to confront the reality of our existence back here on Earth. The tension is heightened by the fact that “The Speed of Belief,” that long elegy, dispenses with the vivid diction of the poems that precede it, taking up instead a resolutely plain form of speech. Like William Carlos Williams, who in his poem “Tract” tells the mourners at a funeral that their simple “ground sense” of grief is more powerful than any that could be conjured by “a troop of artists.” Smith seems determined to shun ornamental phrases as she describes her father’s sorrow over her grandfather’s death, and then her parallel sorrow:When your own sweet father diedYou woke before first lightAnd ate half a plate of eggs and grits,And drank a glass of milk.After you’d left, I sat in your placeAnd finished the toast bits with jamAnd the cold eggs, the thick baconFlanged in fat, savoring the taste.The end of “Life on Mars” is less successful than the beginning. The poems that follow “The Speed of Belief” and the equally elegiac “It’s Not” address a jumble of horrors torn from recent headlines, including the father “who kept his daughter / Locked in a cell for decades,” the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the economic and environmental crises in East Africa that have driven its citizens to piracy, and so on. The long poem “They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected” revisits five horrible crimes, committed between May 6 and June 10, 2009, and while the coincidence of their timing is startling, the poem provides no meaningful reason they should be considered jointly. Smith’s desire to write about injustice is commendable, but her approach can be haphazard. “Life on Mars” concludes with another group of poems on miscellaneous subjects, but here the concerns are more lighthearted, personal and domestic: confronting writer’s block, walking the dog, complaining about the upstairs neighbor’s noisy children. There are certainly some fine poems here — “When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me” is a gorgeous and ecstatic sonnet — but after the intensity and focus of the opening sequences, some of these poems feel like also-rans.In “Life on Mars,” Smith shows herself to be a poet of extraordinary range and ambition. It’s not easy to be so convincing in both the grand gesture and the reverent contemplation of a humble plate of eggs, and the early successes of this collection far outweigh its later missteps. As all the best poetry does, “Life on Mars” first sends us out into the magnificent chill of the imagination and then returns us to ourselves, both changed and consoled.

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