

## Life, death and the universe in poetry

October 01, 2014 8:45 AM Jamie Logan  
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Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Tracy K. Smith speaks as the 2014 Newcomb College Institute Florie Gale Arons Poet in the Woldenberg Art Center on Monday (Sept. 29). (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

In her bold poetry collection *Life on Mars*, Tracy K. Smith skillfully weaves themes of life, death and the vast, unfathomable universe to create a piece that has the power to move readers to both joy and pain.

On Monday (Sept. 29) on the Tulane University uptown campus, Smith, who received the Pulitzer Prize in 2012 for *Life on Mars*, addressed an avid audience.

*Life on Mars* began with a single poem inspired by 1970s" science-fiction flicks and a sense of nostalgia for days past. Smith described her original motivation: "I thought,

"Wouldn't it be fun to create this artificial sense of distance and examine the world we live in as though I was thinking about it in the distant future?"

Soon after she began to write, however, Smith suffered the sudden, unexpected loss of her father.

"I was out there in space, and I realized that that backdrop was a pretty accurate depiction of what I was feeling inside, thinking about the unanswerable question of where we go after this life," she said.

With a careful control of language and metaphor, Smith channels the raw scrawl of grief into a form that will leave readers with a very vivid image of what it means to be alive.

Prior to *Life on Mars*, Smith published two separate volumes of poetry. *The Body's Question* (2003) was the winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and *Duende* (2007) merited an Essence Literary Award and the James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets.

Smith appeared on campus as the 2014 Newcomb College Institute [Florie Gale Arons Poet](#), an honor established in 1999 by the daughters of Florie Gale Arons, a 1950 Newcomb alumna.

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