

Get to Know Danez Smith

by Abby Wheeler

Welcome to the first in our monthly series, *Get to Know!* Here, we'll turn the spotlight on contemporary Black and Brown poets and writers, with the goal of amplifying under-represented voices in literature. These writers' books are currently housed in the Women Writing for (a) Change library.



Photograph by Tabia Yapp from beotis.com/danezsmith

Even if you haven't read their poetry, you may recognize their latest book: Danez Smith's *Homie* all but jumps off the shelf with its neon yellow cover and fluorescent pink and blue type. And it only takes a few page turns to see that it really couldn't be any way; Smith, a Black, Queer, Poz (person living with HIV+) writer, is unashamed and unabashed in this collection. Exploration of identity, depression and HIV+ status lives at the root of every poem, but not without a certain exuberance. The book's two

epigraphs, from Ilya Kaminsky and Lil Wayne, clearly state the complexity we can expect. Smith is a contemporary poet in every sense of the word; *Homie*—released in 2020—draws continually on pop culture. Eschewing conventions like capitalization, the first poem alone, “my president,” references Colin Kaepernick, Rihanna, Shonda Rhimes, Nate Marshall, Beyoncé and “all her kids.” In another, “self-portrait as a ‘90s R&B video,” Smith walks through their longings as we might have seen them on MTV:

*lately I've been opening doors in slow
motion
& find myself wearing loose white silks
in rooms packed with wind machines &
dusk.*

Which is to say, Smith is an approachable poet. But while the light, conversational tone is persistent, the content is unwavering. Take these excerpts from the poem, “dogs!”:

*scooby-doo was trying to tell us
something when every time that
monster mask got snatched off it
was a greedy white dude.*

•

*possible rite of passage number
37: graduating from outrunning
the block's dogs to outrunning
the block's police.*

•

i too have been called boy &

*expected
to come, kneel.*

•

*what Animorph did you want to
be? i wanted to be the boy who
turned into the bird limp in the
dog's wet mouth, holding me
toward his human saying I made
this for you.*

Reading this book leaves a lasting
impression that it is a book for “the people.”
The poem, “my president” acknowledges
and pays gratitude to the folk who populate
our daily lives, and questions who we
choose to honor as a country and as
individuals:

*& the boys outside walgreens selling
candy
for a possibly fictional basketball team are
my presidents*

*& the bus driver who stops after you yell
wait! only twice
is my pres*

*& the dude at the pizza spot who will give
you a free slice
if you are down to wait for him to finish the
day's fourth prayer
is my president*

*& my auntie, only a few months clean, but
clean
she is my president
& my neighbor who holds the door open*

*when my arms
are full of laundry is my president*

These poems are also for *Smith's* people. I
wish I could share with you my favorite
poem, but it's full of the n-word, (with, as
they specify at one point, the friendly “soft
a”), which we are told before the poems
even begin, they do not want white people
(of which I am one) to say. But, you should
read it. It will delight you and break your
heart—and isn't that the goal?

Danez Smith is a Black, Queer, Poz writer &
performer from St. Paul, MN. Danez is the
author of “Homie” (Graywolf Press, 2020),
“Don't Call Us Dead” (Graywolf Press,
2017), winner of the Forward Prize for Best
Collection, among others, and a finalist for
the National Book Award They are the
recipient of multiple fellowships, including
from the Poetry Foundation, Cave
Canem, and the National Endowment for the
Arts. Danez's work has been featured
widely, from Buzzfeed to The New York
Times to PBS NewsHour to Best American
Poetry to the Late Show with Stephen
Colbert. They are a member of the Dark
Noise Collective and co-host of VS with
Franny Choi, a podcast sponsored by the
Poetry Foundation and Postloudness.

Full bio and more information found here:
danezsmithpoet.com

[Performance of Smith's "Alternative Names
for Black Boys"](#) (piece ends at 2:25)

"5 things I wish I'd known before I started writing," with Danez Smith