

A READER'S COMPANION

for

Maggie Smith's

Good Bones

Tupelo Press (2017)

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Biographical Note

Born in 1977 in Columbus, Ohio, **Maggie Smith** earned a BA in Creative Writing at Ohio Wesleyan University and a MFA in Poetry at The Ohio State University.

She is the author of three full-length collections of poetry: *Good Bones* (Tupelo Press, 2017); *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* (Tupelo Press, 2015), winner of the Dorset Prize and the 2016 Independent Publisher Book Awards Gold Medal in Poetry; and *Lamp of the Body* (Red Hen Press, 2005), winner of the Benjamin Saltman Award. She is also the author of three prizewinning chapbooks: *Disasterology* (Dream Horse Press, 2016); *The List of Dangers* (Kent State University Press/Wick Poetry Series, 2010); and *Nesting Dolls* (Pudding House Press, 2005).

Her poems have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Paris Review*, *The Best American Poetry 2017*, *AGNI*, *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, and many other journals and anthologies. A 2011 recipient of a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, Maggie Smith has also been awarded the Emerging Writer Lectureship at Gettysburg College, and has received five Individual Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council, two Academy of American Poets Prizes, and fellowships from the Sustainable Arts Foundation, the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

The title poem from the book *Good Bones* went viral, and in addition to many appearances online (see the list of **Links** on page 12 of this guide), an excerpt of the poem is featured in an episode of the CBS drama *Madam Secretary*, which originally aired on April 9, 2017. In the coming year, the poem “Good Bones” will be made into a short film by Anais La Rocca as part of Motionpoems Season 8.

Critical Praise for Maggie Smith's Poetry

On Good Bones

“As if lost in the soft, bewitching world of fairy tale, Maggie Smith conceives and brings forth this metaphysical baedeker, a guidebook for mother and child to lead each other into a hopeful present. Smith’s poems affirm the virtues of humanity: compassion, empathy, and the ability to comfort one another when darkness falls. ‘There is a light,’ she tells us, ‘and the light is good.’” —**D. A. Powell**

“Smith’s voice is clear and unmistakable as she unravels the universe, pulls at a loose thread and lets the whole thing tumble around us, sometimes beautiful, sometimes achingly hard. Truthful, tender, and unafraid of the dark, the poems in *Good Bones* are lyrically charged love letters to a world in desperate need of her generous eye.” —**Ada Limón**

“One of those specific tests for me as a reader is listening to hear if a poet has something to tell me about the sky/moon/stars/wind/ocean/autumn leaves/sun—the old stock footage of verse—that I don’t already know. In her wondrous new poetry collection *Good Bones* . . . Maggie Smith has much to tell us. And she does so with such a clean, aching clarity of lyricism that I discover those now frequently exhausted human touchstones freshly, with real surprise. In the poem “Twentieth Century,” she asks, “Do you remember . . . the lit windows painting yellow Rothkos on the water?” Her dynamically precise and vivid images of what others would find and leave ordinary stem directly from Smith’s uncanny ability to find just the right word or action to crack open our known experience. It’s this gift especially that makes *Good Bones* an extraordinary book. Maggie Smith demonstrates what happens when an abundance of heart and intelligence meets the hands of a master craftsman, reminding us again that the world, for a true poet, is blessedly inexhaustible.” —**Erin Belieu**

On The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison

“Maggie Smith’s collection is magical and troubling. . . . Time alternates between the forest where there are refrigerator magnets and safety belts, and The Forest where you, a now-human you, once preened ‘your blue-black wings.’ . . . Time stops for violence and passion. Be intrigued. Find yourself welcome.” —**Kimiko Hahn**, final judge of the Dorset Prize

“Enchantment: that rarest of all poetic gifts. As when the neurons, in the kaleidoscopic movie they call a ‘functional MRI,’ speak to us in colors on a screen from the deepest recesses of what we already know. Maggie Smith’s are poems of transformation: haunting, gorgeous, intimately unsettling. I cannot remember when I last read a book to match her powers of delight.” —**Linda Gregerson**

“Some kind of primary mythic world lies behind and throughout these adult tales of ultimate matters. Maggie Smith’s skill at bringing archetypes into her own individual stories is both seamless and transforming. *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* is as much about the terrible and beautiful dreams of children as it is about waking up as a parent. This is a rare book of poems.” —**Stanley Plumly**

“Folk tales and their eerie, animistic wisdom are a wellspring for these powerful lyrics. The poems are ethereal and dark, brimming with dread, beauty, and rapture. *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter’s arresting prose engagement with fairy tales, comes to mind. Smith updates motifs of the pacts children make with nature, the power of luck and curses, loss of innocence, the vulnerable and the sinister, primal fears of being eaten, and much more. The images are so fresh and inventive they shimmer. Original, cautionary, rich, delicious, *The Well Speaks . . .* is a spellbinding collection.” —**Amy Gerstler**

On Lamp of the Body

“Vivid and surprising language? Check. Sly yet taut rhythm? Check. Serious engagement with serious issues? Check. Maggie Smith’s poems have the traits we look for in a good poet. But for Smith those virtues are where she begins, not where she ends. Smith’s intelligence shines in every word, every rhythmic pulse, every engagement of this masterly first book. In ‘The Poem Speaks to Desperation,’ Smith offers a compelling *ars poetica*: ‘I inhabit you, a nest of bees / in your mouth. You cannot / swallow without waking them. . . . / I have the last word. / On the tip of a tongue, / suddenly, I am what swarms.’ It’s a big claim. The poems live up to it. Check.” —**Andrew Hudgins**

“Here in Maggie Smith’s first book we encounter a voice that is spare, confident, and precise. Her images click into place, and the movement of each poem is deft, muscular, taut. These are poems we trust, poems that ask hard questions while at the same time convincing us of the magic in the world. Smith’s voice is reserved, yet she carries her world forward in her teeth, so to speak. . . . These are poems that do not flinch in the face of grief while at the same time they do not give into formulas that either comfort or accuse. I admire the courage and the control, the gorgeous turns, the leaps she takes in the poems while keeping the center of each poem intact. These are poems that do not wobble; the voice is confident and secure, the authority claimed, and the darkness met head on. . . . This is a book that delights, intrigues, and instructs. A wonderful debut.” —**Carol Potter**

“In *Lamp of the Body*, Maggie Smith illuminates nothing less than the opportunities for and the possibilities of poetic utterance. Her themes—landscape, loss, and western myth—are richly classic; her language, sensuous and elegant. Primitive and visionary, exacting and unrestrained, these poems are in possession of a good strangeness, an awful nostalgia that irrevocably transforms the now.” —**Kathy Fagan**

“These spare, deft lyrics excavate a lost world and recuperate that world with unremitting clarity. . . . A sharp metaphysician, Smith’s narrator also addresses abstractions such as “Doubt” and “Progress”—and astonishes with her cunning use of personification. I admire Smith’s handling of anaphora and syntactical repetition, her shapely stanzas, her beautifully configured line turns. When the speaker asks (in “In the Beginning”), “What was I made of?” readers will appreciate, poem after poem, Smith’s piercing reply.”—**Robin Becker**

On *Disasterology*

“In Maggie Smith’s *Disasterology* the poems lie down and make angels in the fallout as “a tide of fire drags everything away.” Whip smart and darkly funny, Smith chronicles how disaster proves itself time after time, film after film, yet another doom after doomsday. But everything is not one red phone ringing away from ruin. There is a future still waiting to be said, a hope that the pear trees will outlast us, bright, unending, maybe even sweet.” —**Traci Brimhall**

“As with the Hollywood hairdos of her poems’ heroines, no strand is out of place in Maggie Smith’s fraught and funny new chapbook. Smith brings her characteristic crispness and smarts to questions of disaster, large and small, with poems that expertly snake through iconic films, color-coded terror alerts, and the bleakest of daydreams. Read it, and read it fast—tomorrow we might all be gone.” —**Natalie Shapero**

On *The List of Dangers*

“Tight and purposeful as a fable, *The List of Dangers* gives us sorrows and warnings from a world imbalanced by beasts and little beauties. The images are precise as a child’s playroom—keyholes, miniature candelabra, the ‘trebly notes’ of wrens and gypsies—but perilous in their tender transformations. Maggie Smith’s rich lyric gifts produce here a poetry of balancing composure in the face of peril and pretty chance.” —**David Baker**

“In Maggie Smith’s *The List of Dangers*, as in the Brothers Grimm, we learn early how hazardous life is and how eagerly our fate awaits us. In these inventive new poems, Smith borrows elements from folktales, fairy tales, and fables to remind us once again that ‘Nothing stays good for long’ and ‘No one [is] preserved.’ And just as before, we’re thrilled by each tale and tickled to death at our own imperilment.” —**Kathy Fagan**

Author's Commentary and Discussion Questions

Here are my thoughts on some of the poems in *Good Bones*. I'm wary of "closing" the poems by saying too much here, so I hope this brief commentary will instead provide an opening into a handful of poems. I've addressed some poems specifically, and some in groups.

"Weep Up"

The book opens with "Weep Up," a poem inspired by something I overheard my then-toddler daughter say from her crib. In those days she woke very early in the morning, often before the birds, and while still in bed she would talk to them. From my room next door, I would hear her peeping and saying what sounded to me like "weep up." She was trying to say "wake up," but she couldn't quite pronounce the word *wake* yet.

I think of the first poem of a book as the doorway to the world you've created, a doorway you're inviting readers to walk through, and "Weep Up" felt like the right door to me. Several strands from the book come together in this poem—new motherhood, the idea of home, the tri-generational experience of being both a daughter with a mother and the mother of a daughter, a sense of longing for another time, and the blend of melancholy and hope suggested by the title.

1. What do we know about the speaker of this poem? What do we know about the setting—the time and place?
2. How does the phrase "Weep Up" work as metaphor in the poem?

*

"Marked" and the "Hawk-and-Girl" Poems

There is a series of eight poems in the book, beginning with "Marked" and ending with "Mountain Child," that were inspired by the work of an artist named Katherine Fahey. While in residence at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in 2011, I met Kathy and watched her perform a shadow puppet "crankie," which she describes on her website as "an old fashioned visual hand-cranked scrolling device. It's a box containing a ream of paper or fabric rolled around two posts, which is then pulled across the front, much like film in an old camera." This particular crankie (see the [link](#) on page 12) was based on the life of Elizabeth Whitmore, a midwife who lived in Vermont in the mid-1700s. Whitmore spent a great deal of time in the wilderness with her young daughter while her husband was working elsewhere.

At VCCA I wrote “Marked,” inventing the mystical element of the hawk as a sort of guardian for the young girl—but, in turn, it is also something that keeps her in shadow. Over the next year I wrote many more poems about this family.

Although these poems are not overtly autobiographical, I found myself writing about my own experiences through them. When my son was born, I added the boy to the family in the poems. Using archetypal characters and an out-of-time setting, and writing with the distance of third-person, freed me up to address material that I was not ready to write about in first-person. For example, before I began to write about my own miscarriages in poems like “Dear” and “Clock,” I wrote “Transparent,” projecting experience onto the character of the woman.

I chose only eight poems from the longer series to include in *Good Bones*, and I’ve used them as scaffolding for the collection. The narrative arc in these eight poems aligns with the arc of the more autobiographical poems.

1. *The characters in these poems are not named, but are called the woman, the man, the girl, and the boy. What is the effect of this choice?*
2. *How does “Marked” relate to the poems that come right before and right after? How does this series of poems work as a thematic and narrative strand in the book?*
3. *Who do you think is the “protagonist” of the story told through these poems? In other words, whose story is this?*
4. *Why do you think the poet chose couplets as the form for all eight of these poems?*

*

“Sky” and the “Nonnets”

“Sky” begins with a question my daughter asked me one day while we were driving in downtown Columbus: “Why is the sky so tall and over everything?” She was three or four years old at the time. Other questions she asked as a preschooler inspired the poems “Past,” “Leaves,” and “Future.”

I call these poems “nonnets” because they’re fourteen-line poems with a turn—typically around line ten—so they feel quite a bit like sonnets, but they are not quite sonnets. They’re non-sonnets. Nonnets.

The poem “Sky” isn’t the answer I gave my daughter but is a meditation on the question, a meditation that ended up disputing her basic claim that the sky is “over.” According to the mother-speaker, the sky is “around,” and we are inside it, not beneath it. The question my daughter asked from the backseat of the car opened my eyes to something I move through every day. What a gift a question can be.

1. *What is the role of the epigraph in “Sky” and the other “nonnets”?*
2. *What happens at the turn in this “nonnet”? What does the speaker reveal about the sky? How does her perspective differ from the sky in the child’s drawing—a blue line at the top of the paper?*

*

“Accidental Pastoral” and Poems of Place

I began drafting this poem on a scrap of paper in my car as I was passing through Centerburg, Ohio, one summer day. What I saw—the chairs lined up on the lawns, the flags staked into the grass—reminded me of the parades I watched as a child in my own Ohio town. I wrote the final image of the clouds as description only, not metaphor: they looked like they were resting on something that was holding them up.

Later, when the poem began to take shape and I could see it wanted to communicate something about being rooted, and something about the love/hate relationship with home, I tweaked the image. The clouds are “flat-bottomed as if resting on something / they push against though it holds them.” The “something,” of course, is home. We resist it at times, though it holds us.

Living in the same general area all of my life continues to have a profound impact on my work. Many other poems in the book—“This Town,” “Twentieth Century,” “Museum,” “Orientation,” “Home-Free,” and “Deer Field,” among others—meditate on rootedness and transformation. I’m particularly interested in the ways a place can change over time, and the ways we change within a place.

1. *How does the speaker feel about home in “Accidental Pastoral” and “Home-Free”?*
2. *What details in the poems reveal a “love/hate” relationship?*
3. *What details in the poems reveal that they are set in the Midwest, and Ohio specifically?*

*

“Rough Air” and “Parachute”

I’ve paired these poems here because they were triggered by events in the news—tragedies involving mothers and children.

“Rough Air” is set on an airplane, and the speaker’s meditation on motherhood, protection, and danger leads to the story of a mother and infant who died in a plane crash.

Maria Rader, an opera singer, was on Germanwings Flight 4U9525 with her infant and husband when the pilot locked the cockpit and flew the plane into a mountain. In the poem, the speaker comes to accept that there is no “magic” protecting mothers and children, no benevolent power who would reach in and save them. At the same time, the speaker accepts that she, too, is at the mercy of circumstance. The poem closes with: “I am in the sky, but do not pray to me. I have no power here.”

“Parachute” was initially inspired by two things. The first was a conversation I had with my daughter after a preschool field trip to the local fire museum. (I loved that her phrase for being killed in a fire was “got fired.”) The second was a story I read in the *New York Times*, about a mother who, likely in the midst of severe postpartum depression, strapped her infant son to her chest in his baby carrier and jumped to her death. Cynthia Wachenheim had intended to kill herself and her son, but he survived the fall. The story haunted me, and this poem allowed me the space in which to imagine an impossible outcome—somehow the baby transforming in a way that would save him and his mother.

1. *How do these two poems relate to the poem “Invincible,” also in this book? For instance, how are they thematically related?*
2. *Why do you think the poet used general language (“an opera singer,” “a mother,” “a plane”) in these poems, instead of using the mothers’ names or more specific details from the news stories? How would more specific details change the poems?*

*

“Good Bones”

Interested readers will find a detailed and insightful reading of “Good Bones” by the poet Sandra Beasley here:

<http://sbeasley.blogspot.com/2017/05/talking-about-good-bones.html>

In the web links at the end of this Reader’s Companion, there are a number of additional interviews and articles about this poem.

1. *What do we know about the speaker of the poem?*
2. *Why is the title of this poem the title of the book? Is this an effective title for the whole collection? Why or why not?*

*

“Rain, New Year’s Eve”

This poem opens with something my daughter said a couple of weeks after she turned five. It was New Year’s Eve, and we were driving downtown to pick up takeout from our favorite Indian restaurant. From the backseat she said, “The rain is like a broken piano. It plays the same note over and over.”

This was almost four years ago now. I wrote it down but didn’t have a place for the metaphor yet. Recently I felt compelled to go back to this idea as a metaphor for finding beauty in brokenness. (I was thinking of course of Adam Zagajewski’s famous poem “Try to Praise the Mutilated World.”)

My poem has a bit of humor to offset its earnestness: the pop-culture reference to *MacGyver*, a popular television show in the 1980s, which starred Richard Dean Anderson as a secret agent who could solve almost any problem with common household objects.

I experimented with different ways to end the book—different poems to land on. I wanted it to conclude on a note that could be read as hopeful.

The book begins with a sunrise and ends with rain, both poems meditations on my daughter’s words. Bookending *Good Bones* in this way felt right to me.

1. How does the speaker’s view of “the world” in this poem compare to the speakers’ views of the world in “Good Bones” and “Panel Van”?
2. How would you describe the mood at the end of this poem and, as a result, at the end of the book?

Writing Exercises

1. “Weep Up” is a poem inspired by overheard speech—the words of the child in the next room. Write a poem inspired by dialogue you’ve overheard at home, at school, in a restaurant, or somewhere else.
2. Using “First Fall” as a model, write a poem in which the speaker is a kind of tour guide, showing the reader around a particular place. Choose a place that is familiar to you, and use as much sensory detail as possible.
3. “Sky” and the other poems in this series—“Past,” “Future,” and “Leaves”— are poems inspired by a child’s questions. Think of a question you had as a child—or a question you have heard a child ask—and write a poem that responds.
4. Notice that I used a line from Maggie Nelson’s poetic sequence *Bluets* in one of the poems in this book, “Poem with a Line from *Bluets*”). Use the first line of “This Town” (“You might tell yourself you want to leave”) to begin a poem of your own. Write about a place with which you have a complicated relationship.
5. “If anyone can survive,” is a poem that uses children’s book characters as inspiration, particularly the orphaned children in *The Boxcar Children*, but also characters in books by Roald Dahl. Write a poem with the same title and use characters and details from a book you remember loving as a child.
6. “The Mother” is a kind of list poem, using repetition to describe the same concept over and over, and using a new stanza for each new metaphor. In the final two stanzas, two of the metaphors—prism and gun—come together. Write a poem that uses the same form, examining one thing in several different ways, using a new stanza for each metaphor, and then braiding two of the strands together at the end of the poem.
7. Riffing off of “What I Carried,” write a poem that confesses something and uses repetition at the beginning of each stanza.
8. In “Cloud Study,” the speaker imagines the clouds have consciousness and can see her. Write a poem that personifies something in the natural world—such as a tree, a rock, a river, or the moon—and describe or dramatize the speaker’s perceived relationship with that thing.

Links

Maggie Smith's home website

www.maggiesmithpoet.com

Maggie Smith's Twitter feed

twitter.com/maggiesmithpoet

Maggie Smith's Facebook page

www.facebook.com/maggie.smithbeehler

Maggie Smith on Instagram

www.instagram.com/maggiesmithpoet/

Maggie Smith's page on the Tupelo Press website

www.tupelopress.org/product-category/author/maggie-smith/

Video of Meryl Streep reading "Good Bones"

Meryl Streep read Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones" at the Academy of American Poets' fifteenth annual Poetry & the Creative Mind gala reading at Lincoln Center on April 19, 2017.

Interview with Maggie Smith on the BBC World Service

Listen to an episode of the [BBC's *Boston Calling*](#) featuring an interview with Maggie Smith and a reading of "Good Bones."

Public Radio International's *The World*

Listen to a conversation between Maggie Smith and Jeb Sharp for the PRI/BBC show *The World*, with a reading of "Good Bones," which PRI is calling "[the official poem of 2016](#)."

Washington Post

Nora Krug, editor of the *Washington Post's* Book World, writes about the impact of "Good Bones" in "[Maggie Smith and the poem that captured the mood of a tumultuous year](#)," including a video of the poet reading the poem.

"Nurturing Craft in an Age of Content"

An interview with Maggie Smith in the online journal *Upwrite Magazine*.

"Good Bones" in Essay on Politics and Poetry

Kathleen Rooney's essay "[Fever Pitch: On the function of authority in poetry and politics](#)," which includes discussion of Maggie Smith's "Good Bones," at the Poetry Foundation website.

“Writing in Dark Times”

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett’s essay “[Poetic Justice: The Rise of Brilliant Women Writing in Dark Times](#),” where “Good Bones” is discussed alongside poems by Patricia Smith, Patricia Lockwood, Hera Lindsay Bird and other poets, in *The Guardian*.

“Good Bones” Goes Viral

Maggie Smith’s poem “Good Bones,” first published in *Waxwing*, went viral on social media. Read more stories, press, and interviews in [Slate](#), [The Guardian](#), [The Telegraph](#), [Huffington Post Italia](#), [iNews](#), [The Oregonian](#), [Kveller](#), [The Columbus Dispatch](#), a story and interview in *Columbus Alive*, and both a [story](#) and [interview](#) in *The Seattle Review of Books*.

Katherine Fahey’s “Francis Whitmore's Wife” Video

As described on page 6 of this guide, a series of eight poems in *Good Poems* were inspired by a shadow puppet “crankie” by artist Katherine Fahey, which can be see in this online video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYrNBbVqQGE>