



Book Review

Bessie Smith: A Poet's Biography of a Blues Legend. By JACKIE KAY. New York: Vintage. 2021. Pp. 224. Price \$16.95 (Paperback). ISBN 13: 978-0593314271.

Bessie Smith: A Poet's Biography of a Blues Legend is a 2021 reissue of a 1997 UK publication and the book's first American edition. Poet Jackie Kay offers readers an homage to blues singer Bessie Smith. Smith was a contradiction, Kay points out, but one who also makes perfect sense to this biographer. As a poet, Kay sees language in every aspect of Smith's life. With a concentrated focus on names (of people, songs, and places), Kay explores a figure who was simultaneously *any woman*, *every woman*, and *no one*, since Smith lay in an unmarked grave for thirty years before receiving a headstone.

Kay identifies herself in the title as a poet and introduces her own background in the first few pages: she is Black and was raised in Scotland by her adoptive white family in the early 1960s. When her father brought home a Bessie Smith album, Kay was fascinated by the photograph on the jacket; Smith looked like Kay as no one else she had ever met did. And while Smith seemed to be Kay's alone, she also seemed to sing for every woman on the planet. Smith was thus a contradiction: foreign and familiar; personal and universal. In this book, Kay explains how she felt compelled to write about these "points of intersection" between herself and Smith, and among all the disconnected dots scattered across Smith's life (3).

In the 1990s, Kay was drafting what would become her novel *Trumpet*, which features a jazz musician with his own contradictions in name and sexual identity. The novel offers a fictionalized version of musician Billy Tipton, born female and choosing to live as a man. Just when Kay was wrestling with pronoun choices for her Tipton-like character Joss Moody, she decided to switch gears and begin the Bessie Smith project. Turning her focus to the contradictions of Bessie Smith helped her better understand Tipton/Moody and ultimately finish *Trumpet*.

ans-names.pitt.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 71 No. 3, Summer 2023

DOI 10.5195/names.2023.2568



Articles in this journal are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com/).

Any Woman

The record album that Kay first encountered is titled *Any Woman's Blues*. Each song's name in the collection was its own story, says Kay. She was sold on the track "Dirty No-Gooder's Blues" from the title alone. Smith mirrors back Kay's image in her Blackness, but the singer was certainly not referencing the men Kay knew in her small Scotland town, gentlemen with names like "Mr Aird, Mr Tweedie, Mr Dunsmore, Mr Macintosh" (10). Yet Smith called out each dirty no-gooder for all kinds of abusive treatment of his woman, and Kay credits Smith with getting through to any woman who has had such a figure in her life. Her blues songs "feature characters who are representative rather than extraordinary. The man in the blues songs could be anyman just like the woman singing about him could be anywoman" (90).

Every Woman

Smith was any woman, but she was also every woman, the royal "we", crowned by the industry and her fans. Columbia Records promoted her as *Queen of the Blues*; her fans called her *Empress*. She might be singing about abusive, no-good men but she did it royally, in evening gowns and pearls; she even travelled in her own train car (although that move was motivated by the segregation she and her Black entourage encountered throughout the US South). Many blues musicians seemed to be anointed, and they embraced the titles. "They even gave themselves royal names: Clara Smith was 'Queen of the Moaners'; Bessie Smith was the 'Empress of the Blues'; Mamie Smith was the 'Queen of the Blues,'" writes Kay (85). The men also took on the cloak of royalty, for we have *Duke Ellington* and *Count Basie*.

Some of Smith's contemporaries had more humble labels. Ma Rainey was the *Mother of the Blues*, and she worked with Pa Rainey, a couple of "asexual names" to Kay's ear (50). And Ethel Waters was nicknamed the *Long Goody*. Perhaps fitting for a figure as expansive as Smith, Waters was expansive sexually as well, marrying two men but having affairs with both men and women on the road. Kay, a lesbian, thus found more in the singer that resonated with her own life. For Bessie, these marriages and liaisons never took the name *Smith* away from her. She was always a Smith.

No One

Bessie's claim to her name can also be seen as a contradiction. The surname *Smith* is one of the most common in the US (Cohn 2023). There were a lot of *Smiths* in the music business at that time; Bessie, Clara, Mami, Laura, and Trixie (all Smith) even travelled and performed together. They were not blood relatives, but marketing for their concerts often hinted that they were family, perhaps even sisters. Kay reminds us that the commonality of the name is the "legacy of slavery. It created the illusion that large numbers of black people were related because they so frequently shared the surname of their master" (44).

Smith married twice and neither time took her husband's name; she thus rejected opportunities to onomastically attach herself to a man she had chosen. She even acquired family through her second husband but continued to resist sharing names. She had a stepson named Jack Junior, whom she called "Snooks" and whom she adopted, and there was her husband's niece, Ruby Walker, whom she took as a travelling companion and potentially also as a lover. Thus, Smith never shared a name with those who were her chosen family members.

At the age of 43, Smith died in a horrible car accident; a Dr. Smith (another Smith non-relative) was at the scene but could not save her. Her husband spent the money meant for her tombstone, and Bessie Smith lay unnamed, in a "pauper's grave", for thirty years (177). Kay marvels at the prescience of Smith's lyrics and cites the line from her song "Young Woman's Blues": "Nobody knows my name" (118). In 1970, Smith finally had her name returned to her. Donors from the NAACP, as well as Janis Joplin, helped rectify this omission. Her headstone now reads, "The Greatest Blues Singer in the World Will Never Stop Singing. Bessie Smith 1894–1937" (179).

Everywhere and Here

Readers of this book find themselves located in two distant parts of the world: Kay's home of Bishopbriggs, near Glasgow, Scotland; and Smith's Blue Goose Hollow, near Chattanooga, Tennessee. Every part of the world has "traumatic town names" (21), says Kay. Scotland has *Lockerbie* and *Dunblane*, scenes of 20th-century tragedies. The US has many towns whose names are redolent of trauma for people of color. Yet Bessie would embrace those names in song, put those places on the map, by singing about places called *Dixieland*, *Hot*

Springs, and *Long Old Road* (40). She sang directly to those locations, calling out the trauma, just as she did with the abusive men.

Throughout the book, Kay imagines scenes and invents dialogue from Smith's life. She also places Smith in a fairy book context: "A long time ago [. . .] lived a woman" (128) and "There was this woman" (130). Continuing to invent and customize her own Bessie Smith, Kay imagines a trunk of Smith's belongings being shipped to Scotland, pieces of the singer's life sailing closer to her own hometown, including "[a] jar of Harlem night air" and "[a] giant pot of chicken stew still steaming" (77). The poet fills in the dialogue and stories never recorded with a poetic license offered by that trunk of belongings.

Kay helps rename Smith. She gives Smith back to the world: "[H]as she cast herself in the role of Everywoman? The world's experiences contain her own" (65). She also keeps a bit of Smith for herself: "I will always keep the imaginary Bessie that I had from my childhood. I have partly made her up from there on" (186). Kay's Smith is simultaneously expansive and personal. Kay declares both that the blues were "the singing version of [Black audience's] lives" (97) and that Bessie Smith "is her blues" (61).

References

Cohn, Angel. 2023. "What's the Most Common Surname by State?" Ancestry.com.
<https://blogs.ancestry.com/cm/whats-the-most-popular-surname-in-your-state/>. Accessed 14 March 2023.

Susan J. Behrens

Marymount Manhattan College, New York City, USA