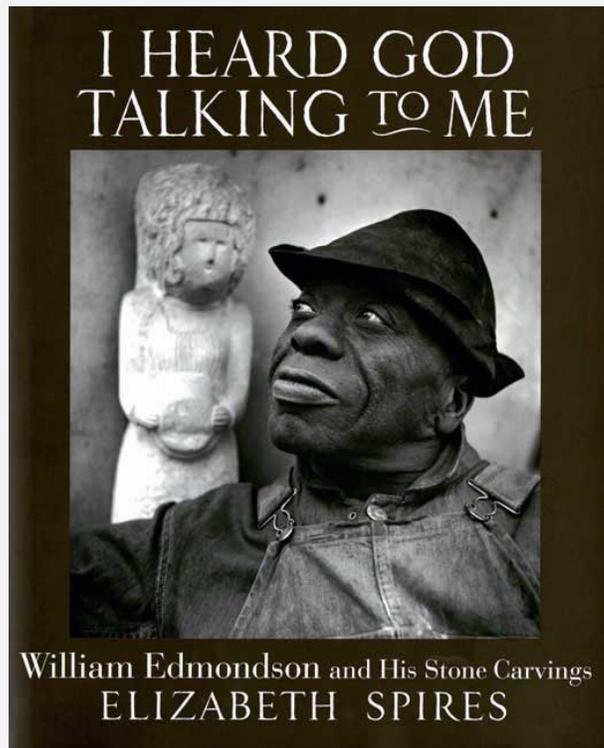


## First Opinion: Stone Conversations

Spires, Elizabeth. *I Heard God Talking to Me: William Edmondson and His Stone Carvings*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

*Emily Pendergrass*



“The spirits in these stones been waiting a long time to be what they’ll be...to be free” (21) captures the spirituality of William Edmondson’s divine call to sculpt and serves as a metaphor for his once enslaved family awaiting freedom and equality. Elizabeth Spires honors the life and work of Edmondson as she crafts poems and gives voice to his sculptures. The interaction between the written words and photographed sculptures shows the powerful relationship between art and poetry.

In twenty-three free verse poems, Elizabeth Spires takes the reader on a historical journey from Edmondson’s first vision and conversation with God to the end of his life, communicating in words paired with pictures of the sculptures. Edmondson began his stone carving career making tombstones for poor people who lived nearby. As he expanded into sculpting various Bible stories and famous people, his work became more

widely known. In 1937, Edmondson became the first Black artist to have his work shown in a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Spires uses humor, imagery, and personal quotes from Edmondson to engage the reader in a dialogue with the sculpture. As I read each poem, I often felt like I was having a conversation with each sculpture or with Edmondson himself. These conversations allow readers to gather a deeper meaning than the pictures of the stonework alone.

Pairing art and poetry is an excellent strategy for teachers. So many times students initially resist writing a poem. Using this book as an example or mentor text, students are able to see poetry as a tool for capturing a broader spectrum of the experience than a single snapshot will allow. For example, the poem "Hands" (37) provides deep description of Edmondson's hands sculpting. All we see are two hands, a chisel, mallet, and a piece of limestone. The written words describe all that these hands have done and how these hands feel after working all day. The repetition focuses the reader on the importance of his hands.

Pairing art and poetry is also an excellent strategy for synthesizing research in a multi-genre format. Students can use the information about a person, place, or subject to write a poem that shares their new knowledge. For example, Edmondson carved Eleanor Roosevelt in 1934 after her visit to Nashville with the president. Using a photo of the sculpture, Spires gives the reader a historical perspective of the trip from the voice of the first lady. Spires inserts facts and quotes from historical accounts to connect the readers with this event emotionally. One can almost hear Eleanor questioning the president. This multi-genre research presentation has the potential to invite students to interact with their collected data and materials instead of simply forcing together information into a written report.

Spires's collection of poems is an excellent contemporary publication that combines poetry, art, and research to pay homage to Edmondson's contribution to folk art in the early twentieth century. This book is a must for teachers who seek to engage students of all ages in the creative writing of poetry for multiple purposes.

### **About the Author**

**Emily Pendergrass** is working on her PhD in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. She has taught middle schoolers for the past nine years. Alongside her doctoral work, she tutors students in language arts and volunteers at her daughter's school.