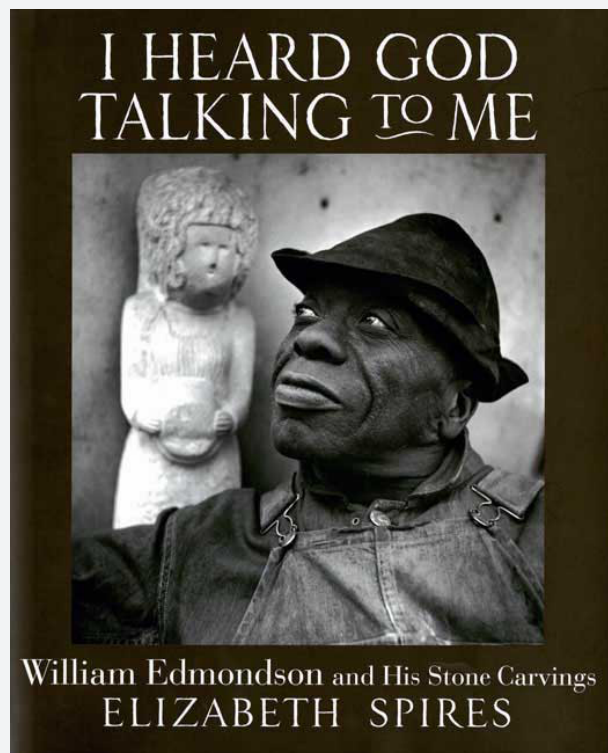


Second Reaction: Various Opinions on *I Heard God Talking To Me*

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

Sudha Pillai



Elizabeth Spires is to be commended in educating young readers on the life and work of William Edmondson in her book of verse, *I Heard God Talking to Me*. In an interview for *The Baltimore Sun*, Spires explains that Edmondson “carved by divine inspiration” and that her title for her book is based on Edmondson’s description of his artistic process when talking to a reporter for the *Nashville Tennessean*. According to Edmondson, God talked to him, starting his seventeen-year career. Ultimately, Edmondson produced over 300 limestone figures. Spires became interested in Edmondson’s stone carvings during several trips to Nashville while visiting places where he lived and worked in the 1930s and 1940s. Four of the poems in the book are from Edmondson’s own words: the first three poems, “A Vision” (2), “The Gift” (4), “A Conversation” (6), and the last one, “Wisdom” (47).

Edmondson began to see and hear God his early teen years, and this is reflected in "A Vision," which ends: "God. He just showed me how." In "The Gift," Spires uses Edmondson's explanation that God first told him to make tombstones as her emphasis; in "A Conversation," she tells how he was informed by the Lord to begin cutting limestone: "old curbs, sills, steps- / things no one wanted. / And I began to cut on the stone / with an old railroad spike / and a chisel and file." He used the tools of a handyman instead of those of a sculptor; his chisel was a railroad spike. He worked with recycled limestone from old curbs, window sills, "things no one wanted." He created tombstones and worthy art sculptures out of rejected materials. In "Shoes" (21), Spires uses an incident when Edmondson's sister Sarah complained about his tattered shoes, and he responded, "If I went out to buy new shoes, / some poor soul would be waiting / even longer to be free."

Edmondson lived during difficult times. Born in December of 1874 to freed slaves who were illiterate, he was expected to accept his lack of status and conform to the societal notions of the time. Yet he became a famous American sculptor.

Teachers of the primary and secondary levels could use this book as a teaching tool in interdisciplinary studies: in history, art, and poetry. This would give the students an immediate sense of history, vicariously, by learning what life was like during Edmondson's time, who was one individual of everyday society, but who strove to create a life of meaning for himself through his spiritual focus.

At the age of fifty-seven, Edmondson began creating his limestone sculptures, and at first only poor African-American families would come to purchase his headstones. After word spread of his talent, higher income and status families came to view his sculptures. Eventually, the New York photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe was informed of Edmondson's work and took over 100 photographs of his sculptures, which she showed to Thomas Mabry, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. Mabry informed the museum's director Alfred Barr, resulting in an exhibit of twelve sculptures in 1937, and making Edmondson the first African-American artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1938, there was an exhibit of his work in Paris, France. In 1941, his work was displayed in the Nashville Art Gallery, and photographer Edward Weston took photographs of the sculptures. Poor health forced Edmondson to stop carving in 1948, and he died on February 7, 1951 and was buried in Nashville's Mt. Ararat Cemetery, now Greenwood Cemetery West. While he held a number of jobs throughout his life, being a stonemason's assistant and a WPA artist gave him the most joy. WPA—the Work Projects Administration—was created during the Depression of the 1930s by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to put unemployed people to work on public projects. This part of Edmondson's life could also serve as an opportunity for teachers to inform the class about how the WPA directly affected individuals.

Three families participated in the second reaction of this book, one of whom was African-American. In regard to the issue of whether teachers should expose their young

students to racial matters, one twelve-year-old, non-African-American stated that he did not deem it appropriate as it was done in the poem "Eleanor Roosevelt" (19). He enjoyed reading the book, thought the poems complemented the photographs of the sculptures, and was impressed by the artwork and the artist. He found Edmondson to be inspiring; he used his gifts and abilities to show love to others when he made tombstones for free. He would recommend the book to his friends. He found the "Adam and Eve" (11) poem to be irreverent, implying God was being blamed for man's sin.

In another family, the two brothers shared Edmondson's religious beliefs and attended Sunday school. The twelve-year-old brother remarked that "Adam and Eve" was his favorite. He liked the poems and the sculptures and thought the poems represented the sculptures well. His eleven-year-old brother agreed; their mother did not agree. She felt there was a disconnect between the poems and the sculptures, and she felt the poems were not spiritual enough. The twelve-year-old preferred to have color in photographs. Both brothers would recommend the book to their classmates. Their grandmother also read the poems, but she prefers rhyming poetry; for her, the poems seemed to be short stories. The cover photograph of Edmondson was her favorite; it captured the essence of his spirituality.

The third family is African-American, and the eldest son, at twelve, liked the sculptures but prefers color and rhyming poems; he might recommend it to his friends. His seven-year-old brother liked the photographs, but also prefers color. Their mother thought there was a disconnect between the poems and sculptures, citing, "Porch Ladies" (17). The language was too formal and lacked insight; she would have preferred hearing Edmondson's own words as in the four poems mentioned earlier, which she enjoyed. The mother felt: "It is a good opportunity to share during Black History Month or to explain the Plight of Black America." She also felt that the young generation cannot identify with Edmondson's era; it would be difficult for the youth to understand outside a classroom setting. She was impressed with Edmondson and his work as her family is also spiritual.

I would highly recommend this book for young readers as an interdisciplinary study in history, art, and poetry. The sculptures could be used to teach the elements of design. The students could practice writing poems, short stories, or prose poems for the different sculptures of Edmondson, who sets a fine example for us all.

Work Cited

"Elizabeth Spires' *I Heard God Talking To Me*." *The Baltimore Sun*. March 18, 2009.

About the Author

Sudha Pillai is a graduate student specialized in English Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University.