

partisanship, the poems fail, not just because of the predictability of the content, but because of the loss of quest that we find in his best work. One of the longest poems in this book, a full twenty-nine pages, the poem “The Lives of the Toll Takers” is a poem hijacked by theory and presented in the “experimental” form of atomized print (that is, pages that are typed up in sophomoric ways that, for example, leave periods on lines by themselves and monosyllabic words broken into two separate lines, all to no real consequence except the annoyance of this reader). The poem also contains—as do his other lesser poems—bald statements that seem unworthy, such as “brought to you by DuPont, a broadly diversified company dedicated to exploitation through science and industry.” Regardless of one’s political and economic convictions, this is just not good poetry. There *is* a selected poetry of Bernstein worth saving, but it is a much slimmer, more heavily *selected* volume than what we have here.

Fred Dings
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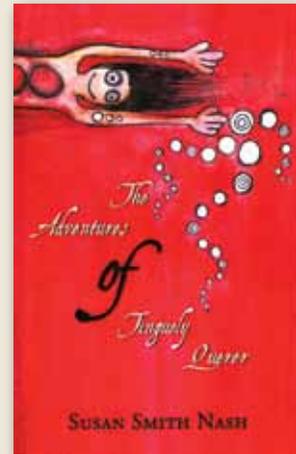
Ken Hada. **The River White: A Confluence of Brush and Quill.**

Duane Hada, ill. Norman, Oklahoma. Mongrel Empire. 2011. ISBN 9780983305262

Brothers Duane and Ken Hada have produced an unusual and unusually beautiful book, which traces the White River, from its origins in northwestern Arkansas south to where it joins the Arkansas River, just before it flows into the Mississippi. Duane Hada’s watercolors on each page arrest the reader’s attention at different locations, creating a pictorial narrative; Ken Hada’s short poems facing the illustrations remind us that the best travelers perceive and think sideways, fusing what is before them with memories and associations.

To be true to the nature of the river as it presently exists, Duane Hada doesn’t look away from the human structures that mark various locations, such as Bull Shoals Dam, the floating house at DeValls Bluff, or the bridges at Clarendon. The value of certain places for Ken Hada, too, lies in the presence of humanity along the river: the town of Calico Rock, which held “mysterious sway” over the brothers as boys; at one point, “the lucky ones / tie john boats / to a fading red / dock. . . .” While very much in evidence, however, the human form is quite spectral in the watercolors, compared to the sharper close-ups of birds, fish, and deer. A red canoe in the middle distance, a silhouette of a fisherman against the water, a small vertical brushstroke against the flat blue-gray of the river: they are there, but what looms and glows behind them and in front of

Nota Bene

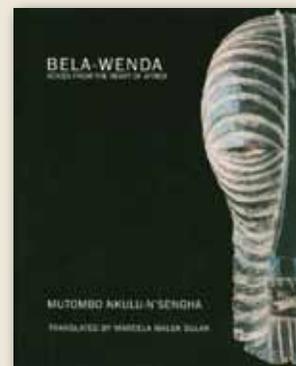


Susan Smith Nash

The Adventures of Tinguely Querer

Texture Press

A metafictional portrayal of journey and self-discovery, the story follows the life of Tinguely Querer as she journals her mental and physical experiences while working for her father. Susan Smith Nash incorporates her own amusing and creative illustrations throughout the book.



Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

Bela-Wenda: Voices from the Heart of Africa

Marcela Malek Sulak, tr.

Host

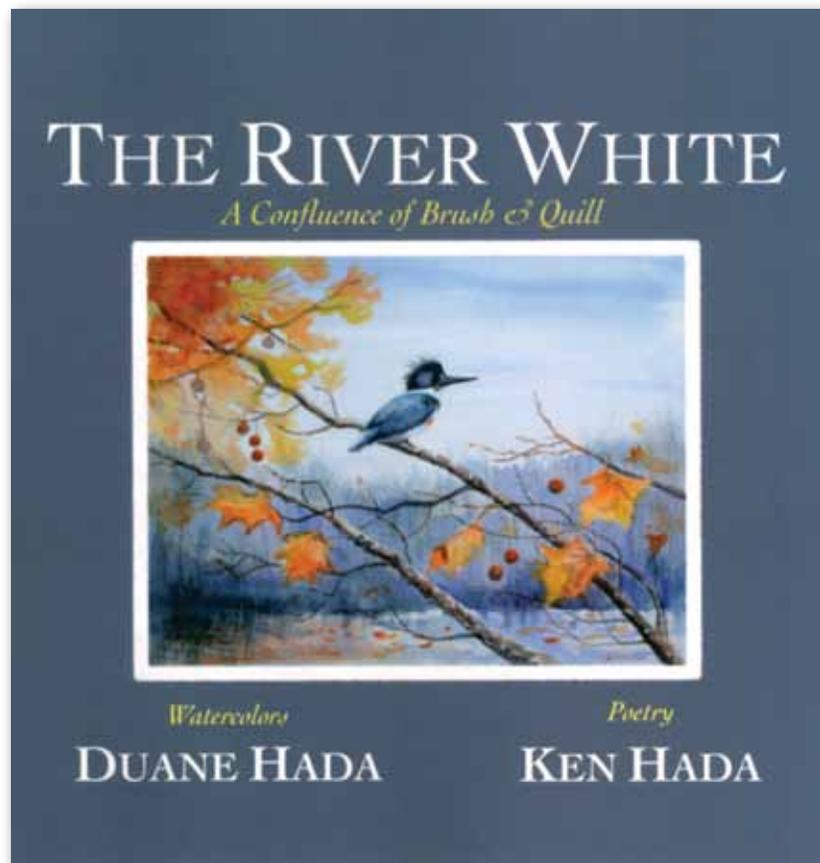
The detrimental effects of greed, oppression, cultural shock, and exploitative working conditions in a Congolese village are explored in *Bela-Wenda*. A diverse collection of characters narrate this musically cadenced poetry. Marcela Malek Sulak maintains the rhythm of African oral poetry in her English translation.

them is more. They are the spots to catch the eye before the eye widens to the reality of the scene. The poems, on the other hand, register the human consciousness, seeing and meditating. Two green mounds or mountains humped beside the river at Cartney summon memory of the Psalmist: "On some days goodness / and mercy are not / merely abstractions." At that point, the speaker becomes his feet, in gravel, a crawdad scooting away, while he waits for paradise to come to him.

Not that paradise comes to the reader from that poem, nor even from the green mounds and blue water that face it; it's an instance of what often happens in *The River White*, where the poems and pictures build on one another. The reader is brought into the world, into the journey, to discover what the poet means or wants to mean. For me, at least, "paradise" occurs before, in the hazy, impressionistic green-blue-gold pictures on pages 24 and 26; the best human responses are Edenic and after: assertion of voice, dominion, balanced with a bit of guilt—"I feel I should apologize"; the solitary "I noticed today," balanced with the need for someone "to go with me far enough," even to the end, where we leave the river in autumn, with the final image of a gold sycamore leaf sinking toward the stone bottom, facing a diminished memory shot of the green waterfall that began our journey.

The River is a calming and meditative book that gains momentum even as the river itself slows, increasingly crossed and elbowed by human structures, spreading into wetlands, before joining the Great River itself.

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Susan McCaslin. **Demeter Goes Skydiving.** Edmonton. University of Alberta Press. 2011. ISBN 9780888645517

Demeter Goes Skydiving consists of three sections, and the Demeter myth poems, set in a contemporary first-world culture, take up the first half of the book. The critique of contemporary consumerism threads throughout the Demeter/Persephone poems, as is the criticism of war, particularly the Iraq War, which Demeter visits during her nine-day search for Persephone. The war is described in such a manner that it makes the Underworld seem mild in comparison. In another poem, Demeter "Tries to Adopt Britney Spears," whose life in celebrity culture paral-

els that of Persephone's: "Too soon modified, mortified / commoditized / too soon married / lean, a fatty chomped by the machine."

In addition to narrative and lyric poems, there are monologues by Demeter, Hades, Persephone, Iambe, and a dialogue between Demeter and Hecate. Hades's monologue allows a glimpse into the bad guy of the myth, as does "Demeter Works on Non-Attachment," in which Pluto/Hades is described as "a boy who loved to gather leaves, / and gaze into mud puddles." In this retelling, gods are as much a product of their culture as contemporary mortals seem to be; indeed, *Demeter Goes Skydiving* is almost an allegory: Demeter's nine-day trip finds her holed up in a hotel