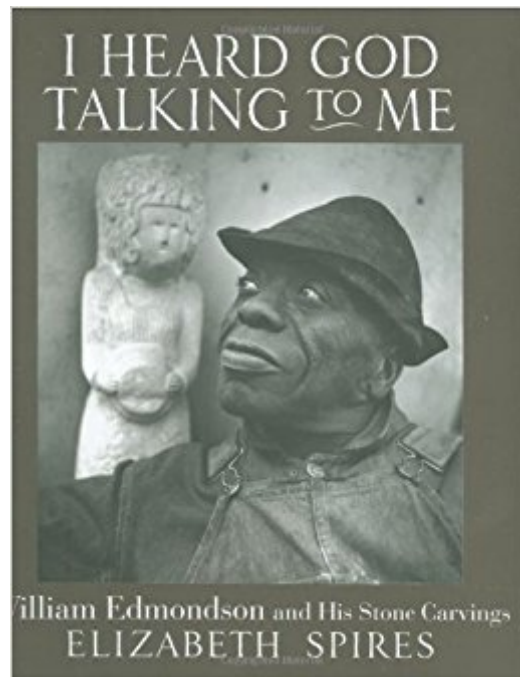




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# **I Heard God Talking To Me: William Edmondson And His Stone Carvings**



## Synopsis

One night in the early 1930s, William Edmondson, the son of former slaves and a janitor in Nashville, Tennessee, heard God speaking to him. And so he began to carve tombstones, birdbaths, and stylized human figures, whose spirits seemed to emerge fully formed from the stone. Soon Edmondson's talents caught the eye of prominent members of the art world, and in 1937 he became the first black artist to have a solo exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Here, in twenty-three free-verse poems, award-winning poet Elizabeth Spires gives voice to Edmondson and his creations, which tell their individual stories with wit and passion. With stunning photographs, including ten archival masterpieces by Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Edward Weston, this is a compelling portrait of a truly original American artist.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Grade 7 Up • In 23 poems, Spires pays homage to a little-known folk sculptor, William Edmondson. Born on a former plantation outside Nashville in 1874, he was well into his 50s and had spent nearly a lifetime in a variety of jobs ranging from racehorse swipec to janitor when he heard God speaking to him. In the vision, God told him to pick up his tools and carve leftover bits of stone into a tombstone. This divine directive would lead Edmondson to create not only tombstones, but also sculptures and become the first black artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Each of Spires's poems is accompanied by a full-page, black-and-white photograph, either of Edmondson or of one of his works. Poems paired with photographs of the sculptor weave in some of the artist's own words to flesh out his biography. In

poems paired with images of his works, the verse gives voice to the piece itself. The "Three Crows," for example, proclaim "'cause Will made us /cooler than cool, three crows/looking over your shoulder.'" Though this personification feels forced or simplistic in a poem or two, in others the simplicity matches the unassuming nature of the subject itself. All in all, Spires has presented readers with a delightful glimpse into the life and work of a relative unknown. This is a special book.

—Jill Heritage Maza, Greenwich High School, CT Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Moved by a religious vision at age 57, Nashville janitor William Edmondson began carving tombstones and whimsical figures out of stone in 1931 and went on to attract the attention of international collectors, eventually becoming the first African American artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This handsome picture-book-sized poetry collection pairs full-page, black-and-white photos of Edmondson and his works with poems inspired by the images. A few poems incorporate Edmondson's own words, and many of the most memorable selections imagine the sculptures' thoughts, as in the lines accompanying the piece "Girl Thinking": "Make me a girl, I wished. / A girl with a space of quiet around her; / a girl with time to dream her dreams. / And he did. He did!" Supported by an appended prose biography, these playful, thought-provoking poems introduce a fascinating artist, and like Jan Greenberg's collections *Heart to Heart* (2001) and *Side by Side* (2008), they will encourage both youth and adult readers to explore the rich interplay between poetry and art.

Grades 6-12. --Gillian Engberg

I am not a great fan of poetry. But I am a great fan of Mr. Edmondson and his sculpture. What is good about this book is the editor's inclusion of 1 or 2 works of art I had not seen before. That alone makes the purchase worthwhile.

Would have been 5 stars but I would have liked less poetry and more about the artist. Edmondson is an amazing artist who deserves his due. I cannot believe his house was razed and he has no headstone. Tragic.[...]

William Edmondson listened to voices no one heard and saw things only visible in his mind's eye. God was watching over him and relaying, in visions and in voice, what his life's work would be. Edmondson, who was the son of freed slaves, was illiterate, but he was no stranger to hard work.

He was practically a slave himself with the owner of the land he was born on, but by the time he was sixteen he felt he needed to move on to Nashville. He worked an assortment of jobs, but due to an injury he ended up working as a janitor at a woman's hospital. The voices and the vision never quite left William and soon he would act on them. He was in his driveway when the voice came again and he claimed he "knewed it was God telling [him] what to do." At first he was directed to make tombstones, but later he was almost "divinely inspired" and his work began to flourish. People began to notice, to find joy in his artwork. In 1937 Dahl-Wolfe introduced his work to a people William would never know, but who would come to know him through his art. His exhibit at MoMa would make him "the first black artist to have a solo show at that prestigious institution." William was a simple man with a grand vision and even his friends and neighbors never realized just how special he was. In this book Elizabeth Spires makes the man and his work come alive in her poetry. This is a phenomenal work that meshes the visual and sculptural world of William Edmondson with the poetry of Elizabeth Spires. The black and white photographs of William and his work remind me of old museum catalogs and the effect is very appealing. Spires very nicely captures the personality of a man who will, because of books like these, never drift into obscurity, but be cherished for generations to come. In the back of the book is a mini biography of William, a selected bibliography and photo credits. This is a stunning book about a man you really should get to know!

William Edmondson, the child of freed slaves, spent most his life working hard in a variety of low-paid jobs, including field hand and janitor, before Divine intervention changed the course of his life. When he was about 57 years old, religious visions directed him toward the vocation of stonecutting. He began carving and selling tombstones, and then moved on to garden ornaments, birdbaths, and stylized human figures. Completely self-taught and often needing to use small, irregular stone pieces that he could buy cheaply or scavenge, Edmondson slowly gained notice in the art world and wound up becoming the first African American artist to have a solo exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In this stunning book, Elizabeth Spires has created a series of moving poems that give voice to the images of Edmondson and the figurines in the accompanying photographs. Yet this book is no ordinary art book, with the poems, photographs, and detailed author's note all communicating a powerful set of economics ideas related to Edmondson's life and his work.

"One night God talked so loud he woke me up.... pick up my tools and start to work..." So starts the legendary vision and transformation of William Edmondson. Son of slaves who had religious visions

inspiring him to carve stone sculptures. From sewer worker / janitor to having a solo show at the MOMA. Not some fancy over 'trained' over produced arteest. Not sculpture in huon, koa, nor marble. . . . Rather stingily economical crude limestone sculptures. Not finished to the nth degree but stylized unrefined and absolutely true to themselves. With fundamental hardness & hardiness that many a sculptor struggle to achieve. Per strict definition this is not an 'art book'. But in its homage to this artist it presents dozens of his 'original' works.

Less interested in the poetry than the artist himself. Still a good book.

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