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*Trailing the Azimuth*

by Danita Dodson

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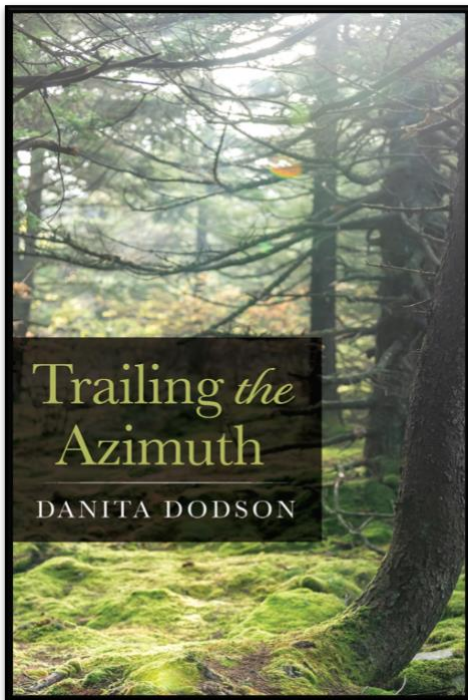
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## New Title from Danita Dodson *Trailing the Azimuth*

*Trailing the Azimuth* guides the readers down various trails through striking imagery, resonant language, and intensity of vision. Linked by allusions to the “azimuth,” the poems in this collection represent the search for direction in a world that is complex and uncertain, prompting the journey toward light and more

mindfulness of self, others, and God. These lyrical compasses exhibit a multiplicity of style and subject informed by the poet’s travels, interest in hiking, and cultural awareness. Her multifaceted handicraft draws energy and empathy from everything in her background.



Taking us along on walks within her own native landscape and around the world, Danita Dodson gives us verses about the ancestral identities of an Appalachian homeplace, meditations upon places like the Southwest that unfold Native American storytelling, celebrations of global journeys that rejoice both diversity and oneness, psalms that uplift the divine presence in nature, and poems that reveal healing pathways through COVID-19 by elevating memory, hope, and rebirth.

Illuminated by Dodson’s unique voice as both a mountain woman and a citizen of the world, *Trailing the Azimuth* bridges physical and spiritual landscapes, offering readers a word map as they traverse their own paths of life.

**Danita Dodson** is co-editor of *Teachers Teaching Nonviolence* (2020). Her critical articles have been published in various literary journals. This is her first book of poetry. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Southern Mississippi. Combining a love of scholarship and diverse experiences, she has been a Fulbright-Hays fellow in Turkey, a professor in Nicaragua, an amateur archaeologist in the Southwest, and a Spanish teacher in Appalachia. She lives in East Tennessee, where she teaches English and Humanities at Walters State Community College.



## Interview with Danita Dodson

**What prompted you to write *Trailing the Azimuth*, and how did you arrive at that title?**

At first, I began by loosely pulling together some of poems, not really with a plan other than to write a book of poetry. However, when my nephew visited me in December 2020, he inspired a poem that appears in the collection, “December Azimuth,” which was written on the day after winter solstice began and which led me to contemplate how we are all attempting to seek the light and find our way in a complex reality impacted by a global pandemic. Then, as I later began to organize the poems, I found that the word “azimuth” kept coming back to me, and I recalled again that conversation with my nephew, during which he had described how he navigates the wilderness in military field exercises, using a compass and a map to chart the azimuth—in other words, to find bearings in the puzzling wild and to seek the direction toward which to walk. The context of the book then begun to take shape. The idea of the azimuth is woven intricately into the fabric of the collection as a key symbol and theme, representing the various trajectories for both physical journeys and those allegorical ones we all make through the wildernesses of life.

**Can you describe the ideal readers for whom this book is written, and what do you hope they will take away from it?**

This collection is intended for a wide audience, for we are all “travelers” on paths that influence who we are. Because of this, I envision *Trailing the Azimuth* much like I do the forest—open and far-reaching—so my readers would hopefully come from many walks of life: poetry lovers, adventurers, spiritual seekers, lovers of culture and the diverse human experience, people who love nature, those who appreciate history, travelers to new and varied places, both lay and academic readers, both progressive and traditional readers, and just curious minds. Since the poems cover a wide range of places, peoples, and subjects, I hope that the readers “walk” away from the book with a greater appreciation of the trails of life that they have experienced—both literal and symbolic. I hope that they can revisit memories and rediscover the beauty that has encompassed—is encompassing, will encompass—their lives.

**Observing that one of the sections in *Trailing the Azimuth* is entitled “Wayfarer’s Psalms,” which is overtly spiritual, I am curious to know if you consider writing as a kind of spiritual practice?**

The poems in that section very much come from my spiritual meditations about nature and the Something Larger than myself that lies within it. But there are poems in the other sections that also tap into the spiritual centeredness that informs my vision, so I definitely believe that writing can be a spiritual practice. When I first starting writing in my youth, my poems seemed a type of prayer written down as an attempt to solidify my questions about life, and writing is still a form of prayer or psalm for me. Writing is also an act of mindfulness that comes from being present in the moment, taking note of what is looming within my view or my mind—simply allowing the essential self to write what it observes. All my poems begin from giving form to something that begs to be written down, which I feel is like a whisper from God.

**Since *Trailing the Azimuth* includes quite a few allusions to history and geography, can you tell us a bit about what draws you to the stories of the past and place in your poetry?**

Author Tim O'Brien says that "All writers revisit terrain." The poems in the "Tennessee Trails" section mention literal historical trails in East Tennessee, like those carved by Native Americans on the Warrior Path and Daniel Boone on the Wilderness Road, as well as the journeys made by my ancestors to these hills, but I also write about such cultural trails left behind in Tennessee by Dr. King and Myles Horton at the Highlander Folk School during the Civil Rights era. My "terrain" also includes poetic revisits to places outside Tennessee, which have all informed the person I've become. For example, while the "Outbound Treks" poems recapture my walks in places like the Southwest, the "Global Footsteps" poems have been inspired by memories of living and working in Nicaragua, Jamaica, Guatemala, and Turkey. My practice of revisiting terrain is a chance for readers to see the beauty of cultures they might not have considered before, or even to look again with wonder at the places and faces where they live.

**Why are there quite a few foreign words in the poems in *Trailing the Azimuth*?**

I simply love language; in fact, I feel that poetry itself is a type of foreign language because it has to be translated by the individual reader's heart and mind. Perhaps I also weave in foreign words because I was once a Spanish teacher, and the rhythms of words excite me. However, the main reason I include words in Spanish, French, Turkish, Cherokee, Navajo, and Jamaican patois in some of the poems is to reflect the authenticity of cultures and peoples I've encountered on my trails of experience. Such words resonate place, both honoring a land's literal language and also transposing it into a mystical voice that celebrates both diversity and oneness. The foreign words I use are always italicized and make sense in the context for the readers, but I also invite them to look up the words to make their own discoveries.

**Since *Trailing the Azimuth* alludes to your experiences of hiking at home and out in the world, I am curious how long have you been hiking and why it is one of your favorite activities?**

I've roamed the woods since I was a child, an activity that is part of most people's experience if they are blessed to live in a place like my East Tennessee. However, I began to seriously commit myself to hiking after my mother died; it was at that time when I recalled how my grandmother had also hiked the mountain behind her house to help her deal with grief after her husband died. Nature is a healing force, and hiking within its beauty has the power to cause us to think about the steps we make in a realm that seems forever alive, nurturing, and accepting of all. Nature also informs so much of the world's greatest literature, so I have always considered hiking and writing as kindred acts because both return us to something essential since both are connected to "creation."

**Can you share with us some little secret about the book that isn't in the blurb?**

*Trailing the Azimuth* is dedicated to my father. On the dedication page, I've written, "For Alfred Clarence Dodson, my father and my friend, who introduced me to literature, who blazed a forest trail so I could walk, and who always imagined that one day I would sing my life in lines." While he is still living, I wanted to give him the gift of realizing that everything he saw in me as a child, the future poet, has come to fruition because of his positive influence. Daddy has always been kind, generous, and receptive, and I know that it certainly matters what fathers choose to instill in their daughters. Even before I began school, he noticed my love of books and literature and nurtured storytelling in such a profound way—bringing home books from the public library; reciting the plot of *Oedipus Rex*; giving me his collections of Milton, Shakespeare, Hardy, and Maugham.

**What books and authors have most inspired you to become a writer and perhaps influence the poems in *Trailing the Azimuth*?**

My experience with poetry goes back to my childhood, when I was introduced to Shakespeare's sonnets and Robert Frost's poem "The Pasture" at age six, two poets who continue to influence me because of their reflections upon nature and the complexity of human experience. Other poets I admire are Joy Harjo, Wendell Berry, W. B. Yeats, Rumi, Langston Hughes, to name a few. However, since I love reading fiction as well, I feel that there is something of the storyteller in me that transfers to the poems. Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood are my favorite because of the empathy infused into their books, and I revisit them often, especially Morrison's *Beloved* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In fact, I actually did a phone interview with Atwood for my dissertation.

**You are not only a writer but also a writing teacher. What essential advice, based on your own experience, can you give others to help them hone their writing skills?**

Writing is organic—I tell my students this every day—meaning that writers must allow for the growth of the seeds of inspiration that they first plant on the page. Nothing is perfectly written down the first time, so a writer must revisit and witness anew the words, allowing fresh seeds to sprout. That takes time and patience. But first it is important to tap into the raw and authentic voice that begs to speak, writing down the jewels of inspiration and not worrying about fine-tuning them until later. What has also helped me feel more relaxed as I write and rewrite is to establish a nurturing writing space that feels like a sanctuary, a welcome place for words—sometimes that is outside under a tree, or most often in my study with shelves of books, a candle, and a strong cup of coffee.



## December Azimuth

Charting the horizon, seeking a route,  
we venture out of the obsidian cave  
on the darkest day of the year, engulfed  
in the bitter chill of winter solstice,  
capstone on a number that first intoned  
rhythm and balance in the way it was  
written on a page before it became  
an ugly reminder of double trouble—  
2020.

Looking ahead toward the angular  
distance of the Star, alert in the night,  
we—the observers of all that has been  
and yet what might be—wonder if we  
have the courage in us to incline  
our sight toward the celestial goal and  
chase a path through the diurnal space.  
As we climb out of hiding, survivors  
in a broken land, our masks cover  
our faces but no longer hide our hope—  
we seek radiance.

With hands bearing ampoules  
of frankincense and the humble faith  
to heal a maimed earth, we walk lithely,  
dervish Magi spinning with grace as we  
glimpse a glowing orb, the vertical circle  
that will guide us.

Bound for Bethlehem in bleak midwinter,  
we follow the Arc of Horizon, tracking  
clockwise the pathway from which  
the sun will come with its incremental  
days of light.

Praise for *Trailing the Azimuth*

“Whether you are an explorer, spiritual contemplative, or poetry lover craving a glimpse into the mystical beauty of life, you owe it to yourself to take this enchanting journey. . . . Threads of light and hope skillfully weave the natural with the supernatural, and I felt refreshed and uplifted.”

—D. K. Reed, author of *The Stones of Bothynus trilogy*

“*Trailing the Azimuth* plumbs the deep complexities of being Appalachian, both inside and outside of Appalachia—a passionate exploration of beauty that ultimately transcends any region. Dodson’s is a fresh yet familiar voice. She has delivered here an extraordinary first collection of poems that will resonate long after the last one has been read.”

—Amy Greene, author of *Bloodroot*

“Part travelogue, part book of psalms, part meditation on a world-shaking pandemic, this collection reminds us of ‘the responsibility to remember,’ to ‘[bring] to light / the gold of buried knowledge.’ Dodson does so with keen observation and musicality, spiritual centeredness and mindfulness, and a deep love of place and culture. . . . After so much pandemic darkness and despair, this book offers its readers love and light.”

—Gary J. Whitehead, author of *Strange What Rises*

“Written in the spirit of a travel journal, these poems capture what it might be like to walk alongside Dodson on the trail. The reader is immediately struck with the union of the ‘here and now,’ the ‘what once was,’ and the ‘what lies beyond.’ . . . Dodson possesses a keen eye and perceptive lyrics, both of which are on full display here.”

—Paul E. Reed, University of Alabama

“The wisdom of Dodson’s words resonates in her soft attention to the nature, people, and wildlife of southern Appalachia and elsewhere. Familiar, song-like rhythms mix with clear images to compose poems that both dazzle and inspire awe. This collection embodies learning, looking, and each love that surrounds the speaker, and by extension, us.”

—Christina Seymour, author of *When Is a Burning Tree*

