

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**Contact Information:**

Danita Dodson

[dodsondanita@gmail.com](mailto:dodsondanita@gmail.com)

423.300.8593

<https://www.danitadodson.com/>

*The Medicine Woods: Poems*

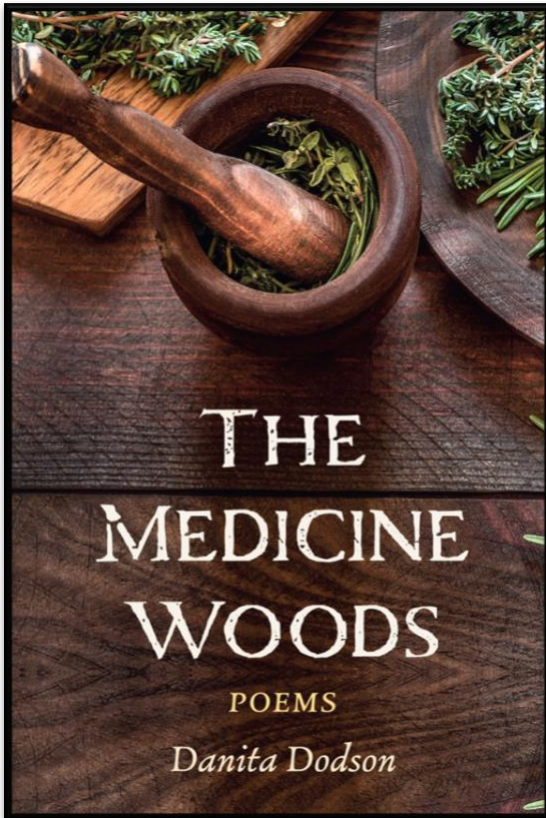
by Danita Dodson

Resource Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

978-1-6667-5415-5 / paperback / \$13

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

**New Title from Danita Dodson**  
*The Medicine Woods: Poems*



*The Medicine Woods* is a graceful and soul-stirring meditation on how our planet's future lies in the ability to embrace the oneness of life and practice nonviolence toward each other, the trees, the seas, and all beings. In this second collection of awe-inspiring poetry, Danita Dodson uplifts the ecological stewardship that obliges us to seek healing in its many forms—to walk in the woods, to cure waters, to return the soil to its original state of health, to mend broken hearts and minds, to give justice to the oppressed. With perceptive musicality and stunning natural imagery, the poet offers the spirit of what her grandmother sought when she ventured into the East Tennessee woods to find medicinal plants to heal her family—poems that carry an imaginative ethnobotanical essence as they distill curative words in this time of climate change and escalating violence. Uniting the natural and the divine and connecting the hills of Appalachia with the planetary landscape, Dodson's mystical verses exemplify the wisdom of a poet with a love of place, illuminating the deep connection to the land that underlies the desire to love it, to protect it, and to listen to its stories.

**Danita Dodson** is an author and literary scholar from East Tennessee. This is her second book of poetry. Her debut collection, *Trailing the Azimuth*, was published in 2021. She is also the coeditor of *Teachers Teaching Nonviolence* (2020). Dodson 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 literature professor in Nicaragua, and a Spanish teacher in Appalachia.



## Interview with Danita Dodson

**What prompted you to write *The Medicine Woods*, and how did you arrive at that title?**

At first, I only knew that I wanted to write a collection of eco-poetry that is conscientious and transparent in its articulation both of the ways that the earth heals us and the ways that we should, in turn, heal it. Then, as I later began to organize the poems, I found that the phrase “the medicine woods” kept resounding from one of the collection’s poems, “Medicine Woods and Monkey Wrenches.” This poem is based upon my memory of my grandmother, a woman gifted in the art of folk medicine, who took me with her into our family woodland to find herbs. The context of the book then began to take shape. The idea of the “medicine woods” is woven intricately into the fabric of the collection as a key symbol and theme, representing the various ways that nature can heal us, make us more positive, and inspire us to cure its damaged spaces.

**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 all of us seek ways of healing. Because of this, I envision *The Medicine Woods* much like I do the forest—open and far-reaching—so my readers would hopefully come from many backgrounds: 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 descriptions of nature, I hope that the readers walk away from the book with a greater appreciation of the landscapes they have experienced. I hope that they can revisit the spaces and memories that call to them and then rediscover the beauty that has encompassed—is encompassing, will encompass—their lives.

**Observing that one of the sections in *The Medicine Woods* is entitled “Meditations for Healing,” 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 started writing in my youth, my poems seemed a type of prayer written down as an attempt to solidify my questions about the earth that I walk each day, 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 *The Medicine Woods* includes 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." My terrain necessarily includes poetic revisits to the East Tennessee woodland where my ancestors have lived for five generations. Just like them, I have walked this land, and many of the poems recapture my treks through these woods and my encounters with the small creatures, flora and fauna, and the people there. My "terrain" also includes poetic revisits to healing natural spaces outside Tennessee, such as Italy and Costa Rica, which have also informed the person I've become. Furthermore, I revisit the natural spaces of memory—such as my first journey into the woodland with my grandmother, my last hike with my father, and the Civil War's historic impact upon the landscape of the Cumberland Gap. My practice of revisiting terrain is a chance for readers to see the beauty of spaces and memories they might not have considered before, or even to look again with wonder at the places and faces where they live.

**You clearly love to play with words in the poems in *The Medicine Woods*, including both foreign words and seldom-used words in English. Why?**

I simply love language; in fact, I feel that poetry itself is a type of foreign language because it has to be translated and unraveled 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 new words for the reader is to reflect the way that words themselves have the power to serve as energetic units of healing, especially for an anguished planet. Words resonate place, both within and without, honoring the literal language and also the mystical voice from a deeper place. Words make sense to the readers in the context in which they appear, but I also invite them to look up the words to make their own discoveries.

**Since *The Medicine Woods* alludes to your experiences of being at home in the wilderness both in your native Tennessee and also elsewhere in the world, I am curious how long have you been a nature enthusiast and why being out in the wild 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. Then, recently, when my father passed away suddenly this past April, I took to the woods again to find solace amid my deep pain. Nature is a healing force, and walking in its beauty has the power to cause us to think about the steps that 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 walking in the woods 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 official book description?**

*The Medicine Woods* is devoted to my father. On the dedication page, I've written, "For Daddy—whose memory looms taller, wider, deeper than the land he nurtured." He died while I was writing the book. Though the poems, at first, seemed to be a collection of snapshots of the woodland and an articulation of what we might be losing during this time of climate change, when my father passed away, the collection began to take on the textures of memory. I rewrote a poem from his own childhood memory of his mother, "Lizard Lore." I also wrote one I entitled "One Last Mountain" about my memory of my final hike with him, a poem that also included my memory of finding him dead upon the earth. Since I went into a process of thinking about nurturing myself through the trauma of loss, the collection began to overtly be identified with the concept of healing. My father was always a kind, generous, and positive force in my life. When I was a child, he also tenderly connected himself to my love of literature, and he nurtured storytelling in the same profound way that he nurtured the land—bringing home books from the public library; reciting the plot of Greek dramas; 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 *The Medicine Woods*?**

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, so these two poets 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. Berry, for example, has influenced my commitment to creating an ecological voice in these poems. However, since I love reading fiction as well, I feel that there is something of the storyteller in me that transfers to the narrative framework of the poems.

**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 cup of coffee.

## Medicine Woods and Monkey Wrenches

When I was a child, curious and restive,  
it was a Granny Woman who guided me  
into the mystic woods for the first time,  
where everything of the earth is an ally.  
Enveloping my tiny-girl hand in hers—  
her parchment skin stretched delicately  
over palm and fingers like a paper glove  
or an explorer's map with long rivers—  
my native scout gave me forest lessons.

She named all the signs of life we saw—  
beech and bloodroot, sumac and 'sang—  
her visual lectures turning abruptly aural  
when she noted the echoes of woodsongs,  
teaching me to identify the sweet call  
of the yellow warbler as she spoke about  
the captive canary in Aunt Ethel's house.  
“Pity the caged bird,” she said, sighing,  
then turned her hazel-green eyes toward  
the poplar, the pine, and the peace.

And if ailments seized my frail body,  
this Appalachian folk doctor foraged  
the medicine woods along Swan Creek,  
returning with roots and herbs in hand,  
taking from the earth only that needed.  
Like she'd quilted the Monkey Wrench,  
weaving the truth of healing into cotton,  
she secured anew what'd been loosened,  
concocting teas of feverweed and cedar,  
brewing sassafras root to heal the blood,  
humming old hymns like it was Sunday.

I believed in her magic all along, for she—  
my grandmother—was larger than life,  
towering above me like an herbal myth,  
a scroll from another world, another day,  
who in the ancient earth of the Cherokee  
carried a lucky shamrock from the Arsh,  
bending the gold clock of Father Time,

embracing the old truths of Mother Earth,  
believing in the healing power of God.

As I watched her, I grew to understand  
the palliative poetry written in the soil,  
where memories grow roots in the soul.

### **The Ancestors**

From a plot of ground on a family farm,  
from a story written in an inherited bible,  
from a walk in an undisturbed woodland,  
from many spaces and places on earth,  
the voices of our ancestors hasten us  
to preservation because the future  
will not exist in a vacuum but must be  
linked to a remembrance of the past.

The wind and the trees and the creeks  
prompt us to hear the restorative echoes  
of the gray-haired wisdom-keepers  
of the land wherever it is we each live,  
whatever heritage we carry within us—  
they who left their footprints in the soil,  
their prayers for us in the mountain dells,  
their nurturing legacies in the flowers.

Their voices move like Achachilas—  
ethereal mountain spirits connecting  
themselves to the right weather for crops,  
praying for rain or sun in the seasons,  
safeguarding the lives of descendants,  
appearing in dreams like wise old men  
who descend their cave dwellings  
in the hills to convey folk-wisdom.

Their stories float like Pachamama—  
fertile essence of woodland ground,  
life force encompassing all that is,  
allowing time and space to envelop  
an earth that produces and sustains,  
that contains each historical event,  
the principle of nature that recycles  
life from death, and death from life.

Their songs rise like Granny Women—  
healers of maladies great and small,  
blending Ulster and Cherokee beliefs  
to provide healthcare for the rural poor,  
sharing what gifts they've inherited—  
like grinding the yellow root for colic,  
blowing out the fire on a burned arm,  
and stopping blood with bible verses.

Touched by grace and quiet beauty,  
inspiring a responsible way to live well,  
their voices rise in hymns of celebration,  
in prophecies of coming disasters,  
in speeches of resistance to wrongs,  
in prayers of thanksgiving and praise  
to the Spirit that binds the human soul  
to the natural world for just a little while.

What we learn from them will make us  
the ancestors one day.

Praise for *The Medicine Woods: Poems*

“In a world altered forever by climate change, *The Medicine Woods* leads us to remember and call upon the healing properties of flora and fauna—the woodlands—because ‘the earth is borrowed from our children’ and the ‘days of swinging grapevines . . . are slipping into oblivion.’ These poems are necessary when even the memory of abundant medicinal plants and calling their names can steady, guide, and heal our souls.”

—Hilda Downer, author of *Wiley’s Last Resort*

“Danita Dodson’s Zen-graced poems are restorative reminders of our indissoluble connection to creation. Keenly aware of the devastating effects of what Thoreau termed our ‘war on wilderness,’ Dodson evokes a spirit of oneness, her words serving as energetic units of healing for an anguished planet. To this end, she summons her considerable talents as mystic, alchemist, and augur extraordinaire. Reading *The Medicine Woods* is transformative and affirming.”

—Edward Francisco, author of *The Ever Changing Sky: Meditations on the Psalms*

“Stop and listen. You can hear it, feel it. Look more closely than you ever have. From holy trees and river stones to the five-lined skink, come and explore the healing power of the medicine woods. Deeply rooted in her Appalachian home, yet a wanderer in the wider world, Dodson is devoted to nature and spirituality. In these powerful poems, each one a meditation, she has reaffirmed for me the importance of defending the earth.”

—Ann Shurgin, author of *While the Whippoorwill Called*

“Danita Dodson’s latest book of poems, *The Medicine Woods*, is a beacon that lights the way for humankind to find healing and sanctuary in nature. Medicine lives in the woods. And nature is a meditative prayer. *The Medicine Woods* imparts that all beings on Earth are intrinsically connected. These poems implore us to consider our human footprint and take better care of our wise, ancient soils, ‘to return to the wholesome ancestral voices of the keepers.’”

—Delonda Anderson, editor of *Appalachia Bare*

