



Brown: Poems

Kevin Young

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James Brown. John Brown's raid. Brown v. the Topeka Board of Ed. The prize-winning author of *Blue Laws* meditates on all things "brown" in this powerful new collection.

Divided into "Home Recordings" and "Field Recordings," *Brown* speaks to the way personal experience is shaped by culture, while culture is forever affected by the personal, recalling a black Kansas boyhood to comment on our times. From "History"--a song of Kansas high-school fixture Mr. W., who gave his students "the Sixties / minus Malcolm X, or Watts, / barely a march on Washington"--to "Money Road," a sobering pilgrimage to the site of Emmett Till's lynching, the poems engage place and the past and their intertwined power. These thirty-two taut poems and poetic sequences, including an oratorio based on Mississippi "barkeep, activist, waiter" Booker Wright that was performed at Carnegie Hall and the vibrant sonnet cycle "De La Soul Is Dead," about the days when hip-hop was growing up ("we were black then, not yet / African American"), remind us that blackness and brownness tell an ongoing story. A testament to Young's own--and our collective--experience, *Brown* offers beautiful, sustained harmonies from a poet whose wisdom deepens with time.

Brown: Poems Details

Date : Published April 17th 2018 by Knopf Publishing Group

ISBN : 9781524732547

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Format : Hardcover 161 pages

Genre : Poetry, Race

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From Reader Review Brown: Poems for online ebook

Bonnie says

This is why I love the Book Riot Read Harder challenge; I rarely read poetry, and read this in response to the Read Harder prompt "A collection of poetry published since 2014. The collection was wonderful, not a weak piece. I was particularly delighted with Ode to the Harlem Globetrotters (turning tears into confetti is one of the most heartbreaking and true allusions I have heard.) De la Soul is Dead was a close second, and the best laugh came in the Ode to Old Dirty Bastard. And there are a lot of laughs, a lot of joy in this collection, but it takes its place beside a lot of anger, a lot of frustration and confusion. The Emmett Till piece is gutting and adds depth to the stark pain as Young invokes the names of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland and other more recent victims of the devaluation of black lives. This slim volume touches on every aspect of brown-ness in a way that demands real reflection rather than just visceral response, and at this moment in time I can't imagine a more noble and necessary thing to demand than reflection.

One note: Young wears his love of music well. In addition to the omnipresent references to music, (from Prince to ODB to James Brown to Jim Carroll to Radiohead to Leadbelly) there is a rich musicality to Young's poetry, and listening to him read on the audio was a real advantage for me.

Michelle Despres says

I really enjoyed reading poems about things I've never seen in poems before. I especially liked the baseball poems. With some poems, I felt I would have appreciated them more had I had knowledge of the references.

I never even considered that black little league teams would be denied championship trophies, but of course. That poem hit me hard. (I'm currently listening to [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#), so I've been doing a lot of thinking about how racism specifically impacts the lives of children. Here was yet another example.)

Favorite lines:

"The hate mail you quit opening / kept coming" (13)

Quoting Ted Berrigan: "The true test of a man is a bunt." (15)

"to reach somewhere / safe, where I / never thought / to stay." (17)

"their parents hated us, claimed / to have forgotten our trophies." (24)

"*go home.* / I never did ask / Where's that?" (32)

"young girls dressed / as women, high strung, / & mothers dressed as girls" (39)

"The cobbler one day disappears like the very / word *cobbler*. My dry cleanser now does shoe repair." (109)
[books says "cleanser," not sure if that's a typo]

"A poetry where Saturday night / meets Sunday morning, / a midnight music, / a crossroads sound- / coming home from the juke / & heading right to church / for sunrise service" (119)

"so a man need / a place to go inside / his head & walk around / & rest." (135)

"& just from the scent / of something someone we love / cooked for us / feel fed." (143)

"There are things / that cannot be seen / but must be." (153)

Ken says

As poetry books go, this is a big 'un. Kevin Young if nothing if not prolific, both books and poems-wise. This baby has a little of everything, starting with childhood and school days poems and working up to civil rights works and tributes to black men who were the victim of racist violence. Throughout, like a refrain, the words "brown" and "black" appear again and again in different ways.

My only complaint is the overuse of tercets, especially in the entire first section of the book. If you ever thought you'd never care about stanzas, that view may be put to the test here after so many 3-lined stanzas. Luckily, later in the book, Young mixes it up.

Kaleigh says

I liked this book of poems a great deal, however, Young's style of writing poetry does not gel easily in my brain. I had to slow down and process many of them in order to feel like I was even scratching the surface on the deeper meaning.

The reason I gave this book the three stars I did, is because although the writing style didn't resonate with me, it was very immersive and personal-feeling. It made me learn more about the experiences of PoC, as athletes, within legislation, and within the experience of being black in America. I found that tremendously impactful, and for that reason, I recommend anyone read it who enjoys poetry.

Liz Mc2 says

I have enjoyed Young's conversations with other poets on the New Yorker's poetry podcast (he is their new poetry editor) so wanted to read some of his poems. I loved this collection and its reflections on brown-- James Brown, Brown v. Board (a case I always forget is, like Young, from Kansas), growing up brown. There's baseball, jazz, 90s hip hop, civil rights. Violence and slights, music and food, love between friends, between father and son.

Ursula Villarreal-Moura says

3.75/5

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This is my favorite collection from Kevin Young yet!

Publisher blurb: "Divided into "Home Recordings" and "Field Recordings," Brown speaks to the way personal experience is shaped by culture, while culture is forever affected by the personal, recalling a black Kansas boyhood to comment on our times."

Kansas boyhood= baseball poetry

Our times= moving, devastating tributes to young black men killed needlessly.

My favorites include all the parts of "De La Soul is Dead," which quotes a different 90s song in each one, and "Hive."

I received an advanced reader copy of this from the publisher through Edelweiss. It comes out April 17, 2018.

Christopher says

Throughout American history, Brownness has been the source of some of America's greatest ills: racism, slavery, and injustice. But the word Brown has been important throughout our history too: *Brown v. Board of Education*, John Brown, and more. In this collection of poetry, Mr. Young explores this wide spectrum through reflections on America's past and present culture as well as his own childhood recollections in Kansas. It is a fine collection with some very memorable poems, especially the ones in the second half such as "Triptych for Trayvon Martin" and "Repast." His poems in the first half regarding sports and famous African-American athletes were also very enjoyable too. As we continue to grapple with this nation's history of racism and racial injustice, voices and poems like these are as important as ever and I recommend this book for anyone interested in both poems and racial justice.

Matt Graupman says

Finally, finally, FINALLY I've found the kind of poetry I've been looking for: eloquent, insightful, blunt, and beautiful. Kevin Young's "Brown," an exploration of brown-ness, be it James Brown, Brown Vs. Board Of Education, or the more general minority experience, doesn't hide behind flowery language or dense layers of allusion and metaphor. Young's poems get in your face, say what they need to say, and leave you dizzy and altered. With short bursts of imagery and deft turns of phrase, the works in this collection feel primal and unforgiving. I'm blown away. THIS is what I want poetry to be like.

FAVORITES:

"Rumble In The Jungle" - An appreciation of Muhammad Ali's famous "rope a dope" tactic in his fight with George Forman.

"Lead Belly's First Grave" - An examination of how the influential musician has been memorialized over the years.

"De La Soul Is Dead" - An epic chain of poems examining Young's experiences of growing up as a black man, seen through the lens of popular music.

"Sundaying" from the "Repast" oratorio - A gentle ode to contentment.

Shirleen R says

Fantastic collection. Kevin Young divides the collection into sections such as school athletics, hip hop of his youth, Kansas, and young blackn young black boys in their wrestling, baseball, and other team escapades surprised and delighted me . Frankly, I forget the *beauty* of these games. That athletics and arts, sports and literature are not antithetical.

These poems are intimate and honest. Their growing young black subjects aspire to turn sports places into college scholarships. They voice anxiety over their wrestling weight and their body image. They devote themselves to their coaches and teachers, and those teachers raise them up, but as easily say racist comments that dehumanize their Black players, and demoralize them. Overall, I liked how Young's poetry reminds us that early Black sports legends Arthur Ashe (tennis), the Harlem Globetrotters (basketball), or Reggie Jackson (baseball) were as artful as they were powerful

I loved Young's love of language. The way he extracts favorite lines from hip-hop classics in the poetry section "Field Recordings", 'Ode to Dirty Bastard' or 'De La Soul is Dead'

The final section 4 pays tribute to Emmitt Till, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown. A synesthetic confluence occurs again, when Young pairs visual images with oral poetry tradition. IN titles like Triptych for Trayvon: Not Guilty (A Frieze for Sandra Bland); Limbo (A Fresco for Tamir Rice), Nightstick (A Mural for Michael Brown), Young's emblematic painting forms insist that Bland, Rice, Brown remain visible, imho.

I know Kevin Young the critical thinker and researcher. He is Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and prior to the Schomburg, Young was a Professor at Emory University. IOW, I think of Young as the panel moderator, or the talking expert who gives "blurbs" and "soundbites" when racial conflicts hit the news events. Add to Young's portfolio, he is an adept researcher. Last year he published **Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News** (2017). I didn't know what to expect of his poetry, but I sense poetry is his first love and perhaps his most solid writing ground.

Kim says

This book is an education, immersive in the way excellent fantasy novels often are. Inasmuch as it's possible to grok another culture, *Brown* has invited me into the experience of growing up black in America. The racism, yes, and the violence perpetrated against, but also sports and music, friendship and fatherhood, the rhythm of language and the claiming of heritage and history, heroes and tremulous, pained hope. I want to read more of Young's poetry...and once I have, I'm coming back to discover these again.

Ross says

Powerful poems by award winning poet Young. The second collection of Young's poems that I have read this year; he has become a personal favorite!

Kevin says

While I've read Kevin Young poems before, this was the first collection of his I'd read in its entirety. It made me want to chase down a few more of them before the year's out. His poetic preoccupations—baseball, blues, and the world his son is growing up in—are keenly examined. While the collection's title, "Brown", indicates Young's desire to engage with brownness as a thematic and topical springboard—brown skin, James Brown, John Brown, Brown v. Board, etc.—its scope is quite broad. In "History", for example, he talks about the mid-year death of teacher Mr. W does not present as a warm, woke, or otherwise inspiring teacher; he's dubbed "brilliant" but has, by the time the narrator arrives, begun to "slip." There's a finality to what he teaches, something unconcerned with "coloreds & women's libbers" and a patriotic vision of American military might. "History/ was what each night/ he erased." And yet as we learn more about Mr. W, we see some tenderness; we see his life condensed into a few dozen stanzas; we see him preparing feverishly for when he'll no longer be able to teach or take care of his kids "who built or broke/ his heart." It reminded me a bit of Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays", where Hayden, thinking of his father's thankless, cold, and remote work helping his family, asks "What did I know, what did I know/ of love's austere and lonely offices?"

Young is also fantastic on sports, and his descriptions of baseball, wrestling, etc. made me feel about stories my own father told me of his childhood. In "Mercy Rule", he describes stealing bases thusly: "I ran/ like only the sly,/ four-eyed can—to get there/ & to get away—/ to reach somewhere/ safe, where I/ never thought/ to stay." He's also got a great and rather moving piece about racial prejudice that hinges on Roberto Clemente. Later, he praises the Harlem Globetrotters: "Because where else do Generals/ meet defeat without blood."

Young's poems are also fantastic to read aloud. He's got a great control of rhythm and I found myself syntactically lead while reading in a way that's hard to find with some other contemporary poets.

RIYL: Wrassling, poetic renderings of the terrors of Phys. Ed., Fishbone, Ken Burns's Baseball in theory but you don't have the time for it.

Ellie says

Reads with rhythm, like songs of passion and sadness. Many poems documenting (in poetry of course) racism and the human cost. There is also elegiac poems about the young and their passions. A beautiful collection.

AfroLit says

Familiar, Warm, Weathered, Resilient, Tragic, Childhood back flashing, Injustice rules, I want to hear, read, feel and be a poem for a moment and Mr. Young delivered.