

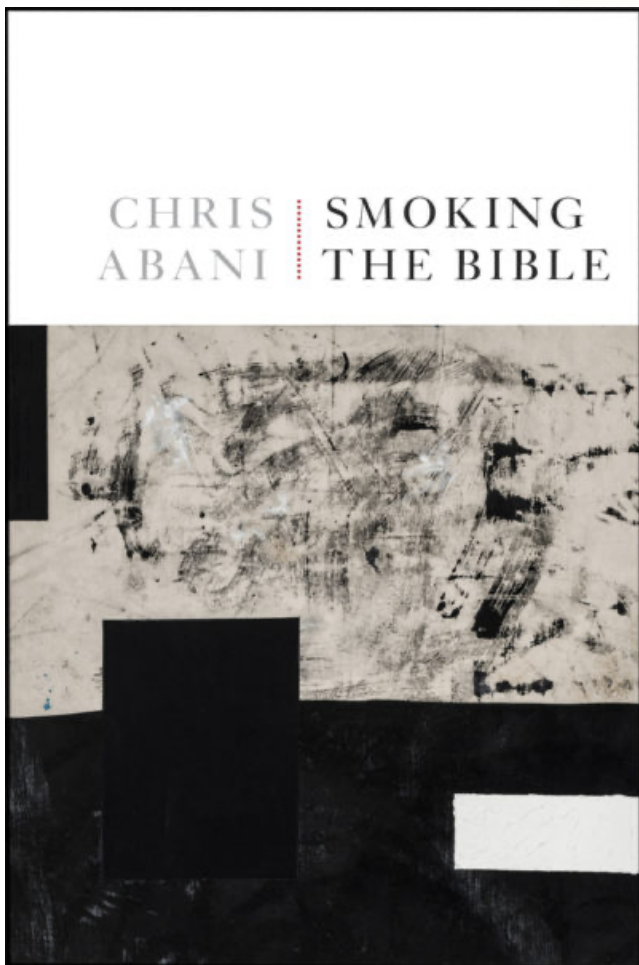
2023 UNT RILKE PRIZE

CHRIS ABANI

Smoking the Bible

Chris Abani's *Smoking the Bible* (Copper Canyon Press) has won the 2023 UNT Rilke Prize. The \$10,000 prize recognizes a book written by a mid-career poet and published in the preceding year that demonstrates exceptional artistry and vision. Abani will visit UNT in October 4-5, 2023 for a reading and book signing.

In his most recent collection, *Smoking the Bible*, Chris Abani memorializes—through the imaginative journey that poems so often take—a brother who has been given the diagnosis of “*Terminal*.” Alongside this commitment to elegize a loved one is a second voyage. Often in brief portraits, poems diminutive as carved cameos, Abani writes of migrations to new countries and continents, of leaving behind a homeland that is both “wound and suture,” a lost landscape whose “persistent aftertaste” follows the speaker everywhere he goes. *Smoking the Bible* is a book intent on understanding nostalgia, a word that burns with pain and grief, but one that also suggests the “flutter of release.” Evocative, rich with sensory detail, Abani’s poems transport the reader from Nigeria to America’s Midwest, ranging between memory, dream, and revelatory vision. At its heart, *Smoking the Bible* worries about acts of translation, how difficult it is to translate languages and cultures. And, beyond that, how we struggle to translate the past into present. “I promise / to walk with you as far as I can,” the speaker tells his dying brother, the space between death and the living the most difficult translation of all.



Abani's other poetry collections are *Sanctificum* (Copper Canyon, 2010) *There Are No Names for Red* (Red Hen, 2010), *Feed Me the Sun – Collected Long Poems* (Peepal Tree Press, 2010), *Hands Washing Water* (Copper Canyon, 2006), *Dog Woman* (Red Hen, 2004), *Daphne's Lot* (Red Hen, 2003), and *Kalakuta Republic* (Saqi, 2001). His prose includes *The Face, A Cartography of The Void* (Restless Books, 2016), *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (Penguin, 2014) *The Virgin of Flames* (Penguin, 2007) *Song for Night* (Akashic, 2007), *Becoming Abigail* (Akashic, 2006), *GraceLand* (FSG, 2004), and *Masters of the Board* (Delta, 1985).

He is the recipient of the PEN USA Freedom-to-Write Award, the Prince Claus Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a California Book Award, a Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, a PEN Beyond the Margins Award, the PEN Hemingway Book Prize, a Guggenheim Award, a Ford Foundation Artists Fellowship, a Middleton Fellowship, an Edgar Prize, a Finalist for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, a Finalist for the Los Angeles Times Award, a Finalist for the Dublin IMPAC Award, and Finalist for the PEN/Voeckler Award.

He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University where he directs the Creative Writing Program and the Program for African Studies.

The judges also selected three finalists for the 2023 UNT Rilke Prize: Dana Levin's *Now Do You Know Where You Are* (Copper Canyon Press), Victoria Redel's *Paradise* (Four Way Books), and Sean Singer's *Today in the Taxi* (Tupelo Press).

The UNT Rilke Prize, offered by Creative Writing and the Department of English, was founded in 2011. For more information about the prize and our previous winners visit: english.unt.edu