

ON REGIONALISM AND WOMEN'S WRITING. A CONVERSATION WITH LEE SMITH

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Lee Marshall Smith has enjoyed a prolific career as a reporter, film critic, news editor, educator, and as an award-winning novelist. An impressive body of work, consisting of ten novels and three collections of short stories published to date, signals Smith as a productive and gifted writer with plenty of good stories to tell. Among her many published novels and short-stories are *Oral History* (1983), *Family Linen* (1985), *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* (1990), *The Devil's Dream* (1992), *Saving Grace* (1995), *The Christmas Letters* (1996) and *News of the Spirit* (1997). Her latest novel, *The Last Girls* (2002) was a New York Times Best seller as well as a co-winner of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award.

Raised in Grundy, a small town located in the coal-mining region of southwest Virginia, Smith has been widely recognized as one of the first female writers to give an authentic and dignified voice to Appalachia. Her writings are endowed with a strong sense of place. From the marginality of the southwest Virginia mountains, she weaves together history, folklore and legend to explore changes in family, community, class and culture.

Part of Smith's effectiveness as a writer is due to her portrayal of the psychic dislocation of southern women in times of rapid culture change. Under a humorous, playful surface, the serious issues of female isolation and identity constitute the core of her work. She examines cultural conventions about the male and the female, the public and the private, romance and quest giving voice to communities of women bound together through shared experiences, hardships and triumphs.

Certainly, Smith's early experiences shaped her career. Her love of a good story began when she was a child, when she would spend her free time listening to the tales

of customers and townsfolk who frequented her father's drugstore. This love of the spoken world translated into a love of reading, and by the time she was nine years old, Smith had begun creating her own stories. In Grundy nobody had ever doubted that Lee would grow up to be a famous storyteller, especially not Smith herself, who says she had been «romantically dedicated» to the grand idea of being a writer ever since she could remember. Like, Karen, the teen-aged narrator in her story «Tongues of Fire» in the short story collection *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*, who Smith says is closest to her autobiographical double, she often pictured herself «poised at the foggy edge of a cliff someplace in the South of France, wearing a cape, drawing furiously on a long cigarette, hollow-cheeked and haunted.»

Smith has received eight major writing awards, including the Lila Wallace/Readers Digest Award (1995-1997), the Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction (1991), and two O. Henry Awards (1979 and 1981). The list of honours, awards and grants documenting her literary achievements goes on: Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts & Letters (1999), Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature (1988), North Carolina Award for Literature (1984), Sir Walter Raleigh Award for two of her books (1983 and 1989) and the Lyndhurst Grant (1990-1992). Numerous periodicals and anthologies have published her articles and stories, such as the *Southern Review*, *Redbook*, *The New York Times*, and *Atlantic*, to name a few.

Although she has retired from her teaching post at North Carolina State University, Smith shows no signs of slowing down. Rather, she began her retirement by leading a new generation of writers through the development of a project published in November, 2000, by Tyron Press of Chapel Hill. And in an effort to preserve oral history of her own stomping ground in Grundy, Virginia, she edited a book made up of interviews with the town's older residents, collected by high school students there.

I met Lee Smith on November 18, 2004 at Weaver Street, Chapel Hill. Even though I had never met her before, the minute I started talking to her, I felt like she was an old friend. No doubt she is a tremendous talent but what most impressed me was her generosity of spirit. With a warmth and grace southerners are often noted for she listened to me and answered my questions for about an hour and a half. I must say that I couldn't help falling in love with the charm of her voice as much as I did with her female protagonists.

M.F.: You've set all your novels in Appalachia. I wonder how the region has developed through the years and how the rest of the South see Appalachia nowadays.

SMITH: Oh, that's interesting because the Appalachian region has always been perceived as somehow less than the South. John Shelton Reed in his book referred to it as the «South South» in the same way that people in other parts of this country look down on the South. People in the South look down on Appalachia because of the Hillbilly image, which is pretty much a media image and it has to do with...

M.F.: Stereotypes?

SMITH: Yes, with stereotypes and misconceptions. But still it is very pervasive. And it has to do with major media and movies such as *Deliverance* about James Dickey's novel *Deliverance*. But this is not much applicable any more because there are certainly parts of Appalachia that are really progressive and really even becoming quite industrialized. You know, we all have schools, we all have shoes... (laughing)

M.F.: How do you think that industrialization and tourism have affected Appalachia?

SMITH: Well, they have opened it up. Industrialization in terms of coal mining has put a lot of money into the county but it took coal away from the people that lived there and ultimately destroyed a lot of the land. Right now in any big part of South West Virginia we have mountain top removal. It's a kind of mining where they're just taking the tops of the mountains and causing it to flood everywhere.

The Appalachian region has certainly been opened up to tourism now... it's been a big deal! And one thing that seems interesting to me about that is that when I was growing up we felt we should be ashamed of the place we came from, of the way we spoke, of our accent. Even my parents were interested in going away. We didn't perceive the Appalachian culture as being a culture. But now many people are getting back to Appalachia and want their children to be raised there.

M.F.: Why do you think *outsiders* are now becoming interested in Appalachian culture?

SMITH: Well, I think that many people nowadays are feeling homogenized. People living in big cities, with a lot of traffic and no nature for the kids prefer to return to the rural, although many have an idealized conception of the mountains.

M.F.: Have you ever felt that the label *regional literature* is considered as something opposite to the so-called *grand literature*?

SMITH: Oh, absolutely (laughing). I think regional literature is regionalized. It's considered trite, and many urban people have trouble reading it because they cannot understand the Appalachian vernacular. For instance many people have told me they found trouble understanding Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

M.F.: Why are your first novels *Saving Grace* and *The Devil's Dream* so concerned with religion?

SMITH: Because when I was a child I was very dramatic and charismatic. I loved going to church and that everybody spoke in tongues. I also used to read a lot about ecstasy, saints and that stuff. The church was such a big deal.

M.F.: It is still a big deal.

SMITH: Yes! (laughing). And it's a lot about power. I wanted to talk about its terrifying side.

M.F.: What about your female characters? Most of them seem to have some trouble with their roles as mothers and wives. They are torn between two worlds.

SMITH: Yes. For me the novel that best expresses this idea is *Black Mountain Breakdown* where the protagonist gets paralysed. But for me *Fair and Tender Ladies*

was a kind of a breakthrough. It's the novel I'm probably most proud of, together with *Oral History*. With that book I sought to honour the memory of so many of the older women I had known growing up and I think at the end Ivy Rowe was able to solve the conflict. She came to terms with her life and reached spirituality.

M.F.: For Ivy Rowe writing was a kind of therapy. Is it for you too?

SMITH: Oh, absolutely. I think reading and writing are legitimately used as an escape for all of us at any time. For me writing is very visceral, and because I have a storytelling tradition I find it necessary.

M.F.: In Western tradition we are used to the idea of the male hero starting a quest for identity; do you think that women can perform the same journey?

SMITH: Well, I don't know any woman that has lived her life in this linear path. I think that plot has not been very honest in dealing with women.

M.F.: But what about *The Last Girls*? Isn't that a journey, a river trip?

SMITH: Yes, it's a journey but nothing gets resolved and they go back. It's a circular journey and it has to do with who you meet along the way. I was trying to show in that book that the whole notion of the hero and the journey is not a women's plot.

M.F.: Dealing with artists. You seem to make a clear distinction in your works between the so-called intellectuals and the artists that make art of the everyday. Actually you kind of make fun of intellectuals' pretentiousness.

SMITH: (laughs) I know I do that, but it's so easy! I prefer artists that are connected to the real world. For example I am not the kind of writer who's apart from the world. Anyway I'm afraid I'm going to do it again because I'm writing my next novel in the form of a thesis (laughing).

M.F.: Really?

SMITH: Yes, really.

M.F.: What is it about?

SMITH: It's set in North Carolina after the Civil War and it has a lot to do with the aftermath and how upsetting and chaotic life was. It's about a orphan girl whose family has moved to North Carolina from the Deep South and she's writing a Diary. Everybody in the 1900's was writing a Diary.

M.F.: What do you find more interesting, writing or teaching?

SMITH: I think teaching is more outgoing because when you are writing you have to think into yourself for a long period of time.

M.F.: What's your favourite novel?

SMITH: *Absalom, Absalom* by Faulkner and *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Wolf.

M.F.: Do you have a room of your own like Virginia?

SMITH: Well, I do have a study but I can really write anywhere as long as I don't get interrupted. I also have a cabin in the mountain.

M.F.: Do you usually write the ending lines of a novel before you start it like you did with *Fair and Tender Ladies*?

SMITH: Yes, I do.

M.F.: Really? And do you still use yellow pads to make notes?

SMITH: (Laughing) Yes, I'm afraid I still use them although the computer saves me a lot of work.

M.F.: Thank you Lee, for your time and help.

SMITH: Oh, you're welcome. This has been fun.