

Lee Smith's River Ride

Writing means as much to Lee Smith as breathing. Her place in the South—Appalachia—defines this author, although her stories hold universal appeal.

I'm not sure my mother would think her 'lady lessons' succeeded," says Lee Smith as she sits in The Tutwiler hotel in Birmingham. The North Carolina author is in town to serve as grand master of the Birmingham-Southern College Writing Today conference. For many summers of her childhood, however, tomboy Lee brought her scuffed-knee self to this Alabama city to receive lessons in proper deportment from her aunt.

Descended from a fine family on Virginia's Eastern Shore, Lee's mother thought the tutoring necessary because Lee "just ran the hills" in her mountainous hometown of Grundy, Virginia. Lee was the adored child of doting older parents. "If I had told them that I wanted to be an ax murderer, they'd have said, 'Fine! Let me buy you an ax,'" Lee says with a grin.

A Family of Tale Tellers

The Smith family lived in a modest house bordered by the Levisa River, a body of water blackened by area coal mines and prone to flooding. Lee's father owned a dime store, and her mother taught home economics. "My dad's family had lived in the mountains for generations," Lee says. "It was a huge family of storytelling, yellow-dog Democrats. My mother was a great storyteller too." No slouch at talking herself, Lee's forte nonetheless proved to be writing.

An avid reader, she waded alphabetically through the local library's holdings, often penning her own sequels to books she liked. At age 8, she wrote her first novel, an unlikely romance between politician Adlai Stevenson and actor Jane Russell. In young Lee's tale, the couple traveled west in a covered wagon and became Mormons.

Becoming a Writer

When Lee attended Hollins College (now Hollins University), the would-be author began to recognize the value of her family's tall tale talent. "This language that I grew up with—this wonderful, spoken vernacular language—was beautiful and just so full of rich imagery," she says.

Since her graduation, she's been a

PHOTOGRAPH BY LACY KEISER ROBINSON



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top: Author Lee Smith **above:** "It was hard, physically hard," says Lee (third from the right) about the original Mississippi River raft trip she and friends made while in college. "We wrecked twice. We were wet the whole time. But it was still wonderful." The trip became the inspiration for her latest novel, *The Last Girls*.

journalist and a teacher, only recently retiring from North Carolina State University. All along, Lee has written. She's published 11 novels and 3 short story collections. Among her works are *Oral History*, *Saving Grace*, *The Devil's Dream*, *News of the Spirit*, and *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

Mountain Magic

Place figures prominently in Lee's works. "People in other parts of the country still have very stereotypical notions about the South—which is not to say they don't enjoy all of our

wonderful Southern exports, such as books and NASCAR and Krispy Kreme doughnuts," she says with a laugh. "[Yet they] don't understand that we have many, many Souths."

Lee's South, the hills and hollows of Appalachian coal-mining country, differed greatly from the white-columned-plantation Deep South. "There were no black people in the county where I grew up," she says. "Nobody had ever been rich and lost their land."

Lee's caring portrait of fully dimensionalized mountain folk filled a

void in the literary community. She's widely recognized as one of the first to give an authentic and dignified voice to Appalachian characters.

A Watery Ride

In her latest novel, *The Last Girls*, she drew from a real-life experience. While at Hollins, Lee once drifted down the Mississippi River with a group of college girlfriends on a crudely constructed raft.

"It was simply a wonderful adventure," she says. She laughs and adds, "I have been trying to write this book for 35 years."

Although fictionalized, each of the characters faces challenges similar to those faced by Lee and her friends. "When we graduated from college—the women who went on that real raft trip in 1966—we were going into a world that would be radically different from anything our parents had envisioned for us," Lee explains. "We would have many more opportunities and challenges and privileges and

freedoms—but there would also be a loss of certainties."

Questioning Roles

One aspect that hasn't changed is how women often spend their entire lives taking care of other people. "It's hard to combine that responsibility with something that you really want to do for yourself," says Lee. "This book is meant to be a query into that. So often we internalize the voice of our mother or our grandmother, saying, 'You know you don't want to do that,' or 'A lady doesn't do such and such.'"

"Even when I had published four

or five books, when I would sit next to someone on an airplane, if they asked me what I did, I never said I was a writer," she says. "I just had it in my mind that it wasn't a ladylike thing to do."

Now she readily admits to her profession, yet she still struggles to drown the voice of that censor in her head. Has she managed to jettison other "lady lessons" along the river of life?

"Well," she says with a grin, "I have finally decided that I don't ever have to make the bed. Now that," she drawls, "was a huge breakthrough."

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

WHAT'S NEXT

Lee Smith never suffers from writer's block, but rather a lack of time. She's deciding now among three possible future writing projects: a love story set in Piedmont North Carolina soon after the Civil War, a novel about a "picture man" modeled after the itinerant photographers who came through her mountain community, and a novelization treatment of the period when Zelda Fitzgerald stayed at an Asheville hospital while husband F. Scott Fitzgerald resided at The Grove Park Inn.

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