LEE SMITH'S *FAIR AND TENDER LADIES:*

IT IS THE WRITING THAT SIGNIFIES

By

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CHRONOLOGY

1944	Lee Marshall Smith born on November 1 in Grundy, Virginia, only child of Ernest Lee Smith and Virginia Marshall Smith
1961	Attends Saint Catherine's School in Richmond, Virginia, for her junior and senior high school years
1963	Graduates from Saint Catherine's, early acceptance to Bryn Mawr, but her mother does not want her to travel that far north
1963	Chooses to attend Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia
1964	Studies abroad in France but is sent home for disciplinary reasons
1966	Makes a river journey down the Mississippi with several friends and begins work on her first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed,* during the trip
1967	Graduates from Hollins College with B.A. in English
1967	Marries poet James Seay in June
1967	Awarded Book-of-the-Month Club Fellowship for *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*
1968	Publishes *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*
1968-1969	Writes for *Tuscaloosa News* in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, first as reporter and then as feature writer, film critic, and editor of newspaper's Sunday magazine
1969	Gives birth to Joshua Seay
1971	Gives birth to Page Seay
1971	Publishes *Something in the Wind*
1971-1974	Teaches English at Harpeth Hall School in Nashville, Tennessee
1973	Publishes *Fancy Strut*

1974	Moves to Chapel Hill, North Carolina
1975-1977	Teaches English at the Carolina Friends School in Durham, North Carolina
1976	Serves as writer-in-residence at Hollins College during spring semester
1977	Teaches creative writing at Duke University
1978-1981	Serves as lecturer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
1979	Receives O. Henry award for "Mrs. Darcy Meets the Blue-Eyed Stranger at the Beach," first published in *Carolina Quarterly*
1979-1980	Serves as director of summer writing workshop at University of Virginia
1980	Publishes *Black Mountain Breakdown*
1980-	Leads workshops on writing at Hindman Settlement School Writers Workshops, Hindman, Kentucky
1981	Receives O. Henry award for "Between the Lines," first published in *Carolina Quarterly*
1981	Publishes *Cakewalk*
1981	Divorces James Seay
1981-1999	Takes position as Professor, English Department, North Carolina State University
1983	Publishes *Oral History*, which becomes a Book-of-the-Month Club selection
1983	Receives the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction for *Oral History*
1984	Receives the North Carolina Award for Fiction
1985	Publishes *Family Linen*
1985	Marries Hal Crowther
1987	Receives John Dos Passos Award for Literature
1988	Publishes *Fair and Tender Ladies*

1988	Receives Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature
1989	Receives the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction for *Fair and Tender Ladies*
1990	Publishes *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse,* which is named a New York Times Notable Book
1990-1992	Receives Lyndhurst Grant
1991	Receives Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction
1992	Publishes *The Devil's Dream*
1994	Publishes a short story, *We Don't Love with our Teeth*, which was a limited edition publication of only 365 copies. The short story also appears in the collection of short stories in *News of the Spirit* under the name of the title of the book.
1995	Publishes *Saving Grace*
1995-1997	Receives Lila Wallace / Reader's Digest Award
1996	Moves to Hillsborough, North Carolina
1996	Publishes *The Christmas Letters*
1997	Publishes *News of the Spirit*, which is named a New York Times Notable Book
1999	Receives Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters
2000	Publishes *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* (editor)
2002	Publishes *The Last Girls*
2002	Receives Southern Book Critics Circle Award for *The Last Girls*
2004	Receives The Leila Lenore Heasley Prize
2006	Publishes *On Agate Hill*

EPIGRAPH

Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one can say,
"Look! This is something new"?
It was here already, long ago;
It was here before our time.

Ecclesiastes 1:4-10 (NIV)

PROLOGUE

Lee Smith, the author of eleven novels, three collections of short stories, along with several other venues for her work, believes the simple act of writing offers healing. She acknowledges writing provides a place to escape to when life is good and more so when life is bad. For Smith, writing is a place to go when "life is chaotic" (154)[1]; it is a place where the writer can create order, and for her, "that is somehow very therapeutic" (154). Writing is also a place where she creates a role model for herself, and Ivy Rowe is who Smith creates: "Ivy developed as a wonderful, strong character who was so helpful to me at a time when I needed her most" (152).

Ivy Rowe is Smith's strongest protagonist, and she is also a role model for every woman because she is Everywoman. She is an ordinary woman living an ordinary, albeit hard, life, but she never gives up. She rises above her meager existence to celebrate life in its purest form because she values what is real—she has no material wealth or possessions to speak of. She makes do with what she is given, and she creates an extraordinary life from her ordinary world by finding a place of her own in her letter writing. Ivy knows life is not permanent because "Generations come and generations go" (Eccl. 1:4); the only valuable thing in life is in relationships to others. Ivy maintains her relationships through her letters, even those not sent, because by writing she stays connected through her heart. For Ivy, "The letters didn't mean anything. [. . .] It was the writing of them, that signified" (Smith, *Fair* 313).

CHAPTER 1: BIOGRAPHY

Born in the small coal-mining town of Grundy, located in the southwestern corner of Virginia and surrounded by the Appalachian Mountains, Lee Smith grew up in a place that is embedded in both her psyche and her body of work. This place and the people who live there are where Smith's heart is and where she returns over and over in her work. In fact, she hits her stride as an author when she returns to the hills in her work in terms of place, theme, and characters in her fourth novel, *Black Mountain Breakdown.* Smith has devoted much of her life to preserving this mountain heritage in her novels and short stories and also in her work in the communities she so obviously loves: "This is an enviable life, to live in the terrain of one's heart. Most writers don't—can't—do this. Most of us are always searching, through our work and in our lives: for meaning, for love, for home" (Smith, "Terrain" 281).

As the only child of the local dime-store owner, Lee Smith grew up surrounded by love, privilege, and the mountains. She attributes her ability to capture the flavor and people of Appalachia to both of her parents. Her father, Ernest Smith, was a native of Grundy and knew the region and everyone in it. On the other hand, Smith's mother, Virginia Elizabeth Smith, was from the eastern shore of Virginia, an outsider to Grundy, and that view allowed a perspective of distance for Smith to see her world. Both of Smith's parents were storytellers, and her love for a good tale began early. She says that quite naturally her writing began to take shape at an early age because of her love of a

good story and also because of her love of reading. Being one who always hated for a book to end, she would simply add more chapters.

Most of what has been written about Smith implies she was quite precocious. She was loved beyond measure by her parents and encouraged in her creativity and curiosity. Because Smith developed a gift of telling stories as a child, she says she has always had trouble differentiating between what is real and what is made up. This innate ability and her gift of storytelling helped shape her writing. In fact, long-time friend and critic Anne Goodwyn Jones refers to her as a speakerly writer rather than a writerly writer: "she likes words in people's mouths better than on a page" (251).

Among other factors that influence Smith's writing are that she was sickly as a child, which afforded her time to read and think, and to write and begin the creative process she still continues today. She spent a lot of time in her father's dime store, looking, listening and helping out. Through a one-way window overhead in the store she was able to observe the patrons as they browsed. She credits this window, her private view of the world, with helping develop the omniscient narrator in a lot of her work:

> I could see out, but when they looked up they just saw a mirror. And I could see everything. It was like watching a pinball machine because you could see all the aisles and people would come up and down and go out you know; have fights and kiss, and I think just every kind of thing. And it was just fascinating. [. . .] I couldn't hear them, so I just made up what they might be talking about. (Personal Interview 138)[2]

Something else that has shaped Lee Smith's world and penetrates her work is the mental illness in her family. Both of her parents suffered from depression, and many times were hospitalized in their battles. Many of Smith's characters battle the same sorts of illnesses prominent in her family and are either immobilized by them or overcome them. In an interview with Virginia Smith (no relation), Lee Smith says:

> And also there is a lot of mental illness in my family. Once when I was a girl, both my mother and my father were in separate psychiatric hospitals at the same time. My father was overworked and had a nervous breakdown; my mother was always anxious and had colitis and every now and then would get into a "state." I was fourteen; I was staying with my aunt when my mother was in Charlottesville in the hospital. I remember going down there to see her with my aunt. Her doctor was absolutely wonderful. He took me out to lunch and—nobody ever said this to me before—he said to me, "I guess you are wondering if you're going to go crazy, huh?" And of course I was just *dying* to talk about that, but I wouldn't say a word. And he said, "Well, chances are, no." And then he went on, blah, blah, blah, and I was thinking, "Whew." (Virginia Smith in Tate 72)[3]

Fortunately for Smith, she was surrounded by extended family members who were caring and supportive even when they might have their own battles to wage. Also, the people of Grundy were warm and felt genuine care and concern for her family, which helped shape her fondness and admiration for the region that shows up time and again in

her work. All in all, Smith had a happy childhood and roamed the hills and hollows surrounding Grundy.

During her youth, Smith attended camps and became fascinated with the religion of her region. She attended the Pentecostal and Holiness churches in her area and has used these experiences in her short stories and novels. Smith is quick to acknowledge an almost obsessive fascination with the religions in the area where she grew up. Coming from a rather straight-laced, small Methodist church background, she admits that Karen in her short story "Tongues of Fire" is very much the type of young girl she was. A friend's mother spoke in tongues; later a boyfriend belonged to a church she refers to as a *"wild* church." Repeatedly, she was saved and baptized in the other churches she attended, which was an embarrassment to her mother. And like Karen, Smith says she believes she heard God speaking to her. Her religious fervor continued up until the time she went away to St. Catherine's, an Episcopal preparatory school for girls (Ketchin in Tate 130-132).

Growing up as a town girl provided Smith with a life of privilege—a more stable life than members of her family and friends from the hills. Her life was different from her relatives and friends whose fathers worked in the coal mines and dealt daily with the uncertainty surrounding the coal mining industry: financial ruin, union strikes, disability, and death. Smith is quick to acknowledge a certain sense of guilt because of her privilege, yet she is quick to explain it away. Part of her privilege was a misconception garnered from the other children who thought because her father was the owner of the local dime store she had access to anything in the store "and to other children, that I was

going to school with, that's the most privileged you could be, to have a daddy that owns a dime store that is full of things they don't have" (Personal Interview 141). Her real privilege was a childhood spent reading and listening to the storytellers in her family. Later she realized the stories she had heard growing up were worth writing about:

> I grew up in the town, but I still had all these deep mountain experiences, these talks with my older relatives. [. . .] I was a town girl, and there *is* a difference. Our house was down along the creek, in Grundy, and all the hollers run up from it. But I was always fascinated with the mountain kids, and went up with them and spent the night there. I had cousins that grew up in a company town and I would stay with them. But I was always the town girl, always writing, the one whose father was weirdly bookish, the one who was always sent away to school. (Bourne in Tate 54)

Smith's work proves over and over she has a genuine love and respect for all the mountain folk of Appalachia. She gains strength from the lives of the citizens of Grundy and admires the perseverance and fortitude they had in order to endure the treacherous and sometimes insecure world of mountain life.

As Smith grew and matured in Grundy, she became enmeshed in its surrounding culture:

> Grundy was—and is—a small town of fewer than two thousand people, and Lee Smith grew up surrounded by her relatives, the Dennises, Belchers, and Venables. Though she was a town girl, all county children went to the same school, and from them Smith began acquiring a sense of

> the poverty and deprivation that poor mountain folk suffered. By high school, Smith showed all signs of becoming a willing participant in the culture. (Parrish 170)

However, Ernest and Virginia Smith had other aspirations for their daughter. Even though they both loved Grundy, and remained there until their deaths, they wanted more for their daughter. Smith's mother, affectionately called Gig, came from a genteel southern family and wanted nothing more than for Lee to be a lady. In fact, she sent her daughter to her sister's in Birmingham, Alabama, on several occasions for her lady lessons, which Lee Smith quickly says did not take. Because of her parents' desire to provide her with a larger view of the world than the Appalachian Mountains, she was sent to Saint Catherine's Girls High School in Richmond, Virginia, where she spent her junior and senior years. Her time at Saint Catherine's provided a view of a world she was unaccustomed to, and she came face to face with wealth unknown to the inhabitants of Grundy, Virginia. What disturbed Smith most at Saint Catherine's was its opulence and certain expectations for the young women who attended the boarding school. In Grundy, Smith was not aware of social classes, and suddenly she came face to face with that world at Saint Catherine's (Parrish 170). Consequently, Smith has spent much of her career helping her fictional women escape those very confines she found at every juncture of the life she encountered at Saint Catherine's.

In 1963 Lee Smith graduated from Saint Catherine's. While a senior there, she was accepted at Bryn Mawr; however, her mother preferred that she not go north for college. So she decided to remain closer to home and attend Hollins College because of

its fine writing program. At Hollins, Smith once again came face to face with a world with more social constraints and difficulties than she had faced at Saint Catherine's. But at Hollins, Smith found her niche and discovered a community that helped her "stay focused on her writing and on publication strategies. [. . .] she discovered a sisterly community that encouraged her to break free from the social constraints upon her to be a good southern daughter and lady" (Parrish 172).

Among her mentors at Hollins was Louis Rubin, whose teachings eventually led Smith to discover her voice in writing. His advice to her was to write what you know, and after experimentation, and three novels, she began to do just that. Hollins College was called a girls' school when Lee Smith attended—the last era to use the term. There were certain unspoken expectations for southern women in the sixties who attended school, among them an MRS degree, which Smith got right after she graduated from Hollins.

Once Smith arrived on the scene at Hollins College, she says she just went wild. She constantly got into trouble that might have gone unnoticed in a co-ed institution; however, the expectations for the women at Hollins were strict. The atmosphere at Hollins was what Smith needed: it housed a premiere writing program, and it was also an environment whose standards required she adhere to them or she simply could not stay. She recognizes the fact that at any other college she might have pursued cheerleading or something equally frivolous and might not have developed as a writer. The community of writers Smith encountered at Hollins encouraged her to free herself from the constraints of being a "good southern daughter and lady. She came to Hollins to write,

and the Hollins community quickly recognized, encouraged, and shaped that potential" (Parrish 172).

Smith says that up to this point she thought she had to write about glamorous lives and events. She used exotic locales and themes in her work: Hawaii, stewardesses, evil twins, for example—things she was totally unfamiliar with. In a class of Louis Rubin's, she was introduced to Eudora Welty, and immediately she felt an affinity with her writings. Introductions to Faulkner and O'Connor also provided possibilities. She realized, like Welty, she could write about ordinary people and their lives, and the work could have meaning and substance and dignity. An epiphany occurred for Smith as she realized she was full of stories of Appalachian folk and situations just waiting to be told. Following Louis Rubin's advice to write about what she knew, she did and continues to do so.

During Smith's sophomore year at Hollins, she participated in the Hollins Abroad program, through which she studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and was supposed to travel throughout Europe with the group. While in France, she served as a foreign correspondent for the school paper, *Hollins Columns*. Her humorous articles about the trip and her tongue-in-cheek look at the restrictions the young women faced in the program began to develop an audience. However, the trip came to an abrupt halt when Smith decided to spend the night out with a young man in a café. Even though they were in a public place and simply talked the night away, her rebellious act had a severe cost attached. Her study abroad abruptly ended, she promptly had to return home, and she

was suspended for a semester and had to re-apply before she could return to Hollins (Parrish 177-78).

Smith was distraught at the severity of her punishment. However, Louis Rubin came to her rescue as he often did for others who had to face severe punishment from the administration. Through a friend of his, Rubin helped Smith secure a job at the *Richmond News-Leader*, and she used this time wisely to work on her writing skills. When she returned to Hollins, her writing was much more serious and focused. Her adventurous spirit and her desire to question the expectations of women versus men never changed, "but the usual disruptiveness and underlying challenge to authority marking the earlier newspaper features were conspicuously absent, as though the punishment for the Paris incident lingered as a reminder that flouting social conventions was not always funny" (Parrish 179).

Between Smith's junior and senior years at Hollins, the summer of 1966, she and fifteen of her classmates set sail aboard a crudely built raft down the Mississippi River. The trip was sparked by reading *Huckleberry Finn* in a literature class: "The girls constructed a 40 x 17 foot 'floating porch' made of a wooden platform on oil drums and hired a 73-year-old retired riverboat captain to navigate. The raft took 18 days to travel the 950 miles from Paducah, Kentucky, to New Orleans" (Swilley 1). Smith was the historian for the trip and kept a log of the events surrounding the adventure. The trip later provided the framework for Smith's novel *The Last Girls*.

Smith continued to write feature articles for the newspaper during her senior year at Hollins:

> Ultimately this newspaper writing allowed Smith to test the capabilities inherent in humor and to develop a gentle, perceptive, irreverent view of society that has become a hallmark of her mature writing. This youthful journalism indicated that she was a close observer of social details, that she disliked the demands of convention, and that she was eager to go beyond intellectualizing and throw herself into experience. (Parrish 182-83)

For her senior creative writing project at Hollins, she expanded one of her short stories into what became her first published novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed,* which received one of twelve Book-of-the Month Club fellowships. During her time at Hollins, Smith's work continually explored the restraint and expectations forced upon women, themes she continues to explore.

However, Smith did not escape those expectations. Shortly after her graduation from Hollins College, she married James Seay, whom she had met three months earlier at a poetry reading. She became a model wife with very traditional values, yet she managed to continue writing. She gave birth to two sons, Josh and Page, during their marriage. During her first pregnancy she worked at the *Tuscaloosa News* in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where much of the material for her third novel, *Fancy Strut*, comes from. During her marriage to James Seay, Smith spent her time raising her boys and working at a local newspaper or teaching in the towns or cities they moved to when her husband's job required a transfer. Her writing was fragmented and done during Little League, laundry, and lunch.

In the ensuing years, Smith taught seventh grade in Nashville; she taught in Durham, NC; she was a writer-in-residence at Hollins; she was on the faculty of the North Carolina State University as a creative writing instructor; and in 1981 she divorced husband James Seay. Lee Smith married Hal Crowther, noted journalist, in 1985, and they reside in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

Always believing that one should give back, Smith continues to work and encourage other writers. She has been involved with the Hindman Settlement School in Eastern Kentucky and continues to teach there. She also is a supporter of the Appalachian School of Law in Grundy. She says it best: "these are the kinds of—literacy programs and so on—these are the kinds of issues that I really would choose to be involved with rather than a real fancy school. If you're able to make a donation, I like to try" (Personal Interview 141).

For Lee Smith, writing fiction about Appalachia is not enough to preserve the place she loves, and when she realized that her hometown of Grundy was changing—literally being moved to higher ground because of flooding—she felt compelled to find a way to preserve its past. With the help of a high school teacher in Grundy, an oral history project was born and local high school students interviewed several of the citizens of Grundy, Virginia. The interviews were published in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench,* and edited by Smith.

Surrounded by loss and also by a great amount of love, Lee Smith writes about what she knows. She has used her life's experiences as backdrops for the novels and short stories she writes along with her love for the people and places of the Appalachian

Mountains. The themes she is concerned about are universal in their appeal: how passivity is paralyzing, how looking at life rather than living it is immobilizing, or how one makes it through a life of love and happiness and sadness and grief. Smith's work is clearly shaped by the place she is from, by the stories she heard and told, and by the people she encountered in the hills and hollows of Appalachia.

CHAPTER 2: EXPLORING THE WORK OF LEE SMITH FROM GENESIS TO PUBLISHING

Few authors, in all likelihood, began publishing their work and got paid for it when they were children. In fact, few authors probably wrote their first novel as a child. Lee Marshall Smith did. She is a natural-born storyteller, raised in a world peopled with storytellers, and she got hooked early on in the oral tradition so prominent in the Appalachian south.

Lee Smith's love of writing springs quite naturally from her environment. She had doting parents who were both gifted storytellers; she grew up in a world rich in tradition, a place of natural beauty, and people who genuinely cared for each other. She was surrounded by an extended family also steeped in the oral tradition; she loved to read, and when a book ended before she was ready for it to, she simply added more chapters. However, in the midst of her world, Smith came to know sadness very early in her life. Both of her parents suffered from mental illness, which extended to other relatives as well, and her family life was unstable. Even though her childhood was often full of contradictions and uncertainty, she still had love and encouragement in abundance, alongside an insatiable curiosity and a clearly emerging talent. As a result, Smith has emerged as one of the South's beloved contemporary authors. Her desire to share a good story, her desire to champion her characters, however ordinary they are, and her desire to preserve her past and the memories of a rapidly changing region are the hallmarks of Smith's body of work.

As a precocious youngster at the age of eight or nine, Lee Smith wrote her first novel on her mother's stationery. Her story was about Jane Russell and Adlai Stephenson going west to become Mormons—Jane Russell was her favorite actress, and her parents were admirers of Adlai Stephenson. Smith says, in retrospect, that somehow this novel addresses themes she has come back to over and over in her writing: romance, flight, and religion.

When Smith was about eleven, she and her best friend, Martha Sue Owens, began a neighborhood newspaper and sold copies for a quarter: "It was named *The Small Review*. All the copies were printed by hand and tied together with embroidery thread. And we had like hole punches, and we would have news—it was all about us. Like, 'Lee Smith and Martha Sue Owens went to Bristol to buy school shoes'" (Personal Interview 142). She says the paper was full of features and editorials. In particular, one editorial she wrote about a grumpy man who lived across the street from her got her in a lot of trouble. She was forced to apologize; however, her natural bent toward truth in her writing had begun to emerge.

Smith's parents also supported and encouraged her love of writing. In fact, she had a writing house her father built on the river bank behind their house where she would go to write. She is quick to tell stories from her childhood, always with a laugh, smile, and fondness that reach deep into her memories. She says she was a very imaginative and theatrical little girl. Along with other children in her neighborhood, she wrote plays they performed frequently. One in particular was a play she wrote, *The Drunken Saloon*,

where "everybody was just drunk and just falling on the floor" (Personal Interview 144). Once again Smith and her friends found themselves in trouble.

Smith continued to write as she grew up in Grundy. Once she arrived at Hollins University, she found herself in an environment that fostered her writing skills and allowed her the freedom to embrace the creative process. She is quick to tell her stories about writing of exotic settings and about women such as stewardesses, whom she knew nothing about at all; all of her papers kept coming back with C's on them. However, Smith says that by the end of her freshman year she had written a story about women sitting around on a porch talking about one of them having colitis (which actually occurred on her porch at home in Grundy when her mother was suffering from an illness). She received an A on this paper, which was important to her, and her stories of Appalachia began to show up in her work. When "Louis Rubin advised his students to write about the life experiences they had known" (Parrish 48), Smith took his advice to heart and achieved success in her writing.

A short story written during Smith's freshman year at Hollins, "The Wading House," evolved into a senior creative writing project that eventually became her first published novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed.* One of twelve winners in a Book-of-the-Month fellowship writing contest, the novel was published after Smith's graduation from Hollins. This coming-of-age tale features protagonist Susan Tobey and begins Smith's journey of delving into the obstacles women face in their maturation process. The loss of innocence is the central theme in the book, and Smith carefully exposes how the protagonist loses every illusion most children have: Susan's secure

home life is shattered by adultery and lies; the base and evil bent of others is revealed in Eugene and his fictionally created character, Little Arthur; and finally Susan is raped and becomes isolated and unsheltered in the world. Smith also displays in this first novel her gift for voice and the ability to weave her tale through the dialogue as her characters tell their story.

Susan Tobey is nine years and two months old in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed.* The book begins much like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because the story is being told from a memory rather than in real time: "That whole summer is as clear and as still in my head as the corsage under the glass bell in Mrs. Tate's parlor. Even now, summers and summers since, I can remember everything" (Smith, *The Last Day* 1). Like Scout's life in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Susan Tobey is forever changed by the events that occur during a summer in her childhood. And in a fashion reminiscent of Harper Lee, Lee Smith blends the elements of innocence with the danger of a world charged with evil and suspense in memory.

The story in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* is humorous yet dark and foreboding. Because she is telling her story from memory, Susan Tobey almost feels as if she is an observer rather than a key player. She retells the events that happened that summer and recreates the world as she saw it. Any security that Susan may have had prior to that summer is destroyed. Not only does her family unravel, but her innocence is stolen, and no one comes to her rescue.

Her mother and sister, whom she describes as the Queen and Princess, live in another realm that Susan is not privy to, nor is her father. Early in the novel we learn that

all is not well in the family because the father is not the King in Susan's fictionally created kingdom, but there is a Baron present in the world with a place of prominence. The baron is assigned his place of prominence because Susan believes he is more important to her mother than her father is. Why else would her mother choose to run off with him and abandon her family?

The novel's setting is a small southern town whose safety and sanctity are threatened when outsiders happen on the scene. We know from the moment we meet Eugene that no good will come from anything in which he is involved. The reader knows that the eyes mirror the soul, so Susan's description of Eugene when she meets him is at once foreboding and precise:

> Eugene's eyes looked like whoever was putting the color into them got a phone call in the middle and just quit, and then Eugene had gone away before the guy got back to finish the job. And behind that flat white were the secrets. The secrets were all there behind the eyes, and I knew that they were there without knowing what they were, but I knew that they were not nice ones. Eugene's eyes gave me goose bumps all over. (Smith, *Last Day* 20)

In *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, Susan Tobey is forced to grow up at lightning speed. Two different male characters, both outsiders, turn her world upside down: the Baron who steals her mother and the city boy, Eugene, who steals her innocence. In this first-person narrative tale, Susan Tobey's world is shattered as she comes face to face with the evil and cruelty of people, both in her fantasy world and in

the real world. She learns first-hand what it is to be victimized and have no one to turn to or no one to rescue her. The novel ends not on a happy note, but rather on a sad one: Susan realizes a safe and secure world is precarious at best. Evil is real and palpable and just waiting for the next opportunity; the only weapons she has are herself and her desire not to give in to fear.

Smith's next novel, *Something in the Wind*, also evolved from a short story, "The Red Parts," that she wrote while at Hollins. Again she uses first-person narration. It is important to note that Smith was working, raising children and home-making while she developed her short story into the novel. Apparently, Smith took Louis Rubin's advice to heart and was writing about things she knew about: the novel is about a young woman who attends a private girls' school in Richmond and, after graduation, goes on to college.

As in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, in her second novel Smith explores the constraints imposed on women. However, in Smith's first novel the heroine is a naïve victim of others, and because of that she is incapable of changing the events of that fateful summer. In *Something in the Wind*, the protagonist is older, and while she is not subjected to the violence that Susan Tobey encounters, she is trapped by the expectations that society has of women. More than that, though, she buys into those ideals and is trapped because she is incapable of seeing herself except through the eyes of others. There is a sense in the novel that she is not actively participating in her life, but rather watching it from a distance. For author Lee Smith, a passive life is a life of misery, and she will come back to this theme over and over again in her work.

The novel is framed by a funeral at the beginning and a wedding at the end: an ending and a new beginning. Brooke Kincaid, the heroine, comes face to face with the instability and insecurity death causes when her best friend is killed in an automobile accident. Everything she thought she knew is overhauled by the tragedy, and she realizes that she does not have a clue about what she is supposed to do or how she is supposed to act. So she decides she needs a life plan and that "The only concrete thing about the life plan was that it involved imitation. I would imitate everybody until everything became second nature as the song says and I wouldn't have to bother to imitate any more, I would simply *be*" (Smith, *Something* 25).

Early in the novel we learn something Brooke's now dead best friend had told her: she is not a lady. Brooke admonishes, however, that "Nobody knows me" (Smith, *Something* 31). She realizes that she has two personas: a public self and a private self. Only the private self is what is real, yet she does not remain true to herself in the book. She does what is expected of her and lives on the surface. The title for the book is taken from Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*: "There is something in the wind, that we cannot get in" (III.i.75), and like the play, Smith's book deals with outward appearances. While things of real importance are hinted at in the book, any resolve is merely alluded to; the surface is simply skimmed. Brooke is not capable of delving deeply; she believes the role that society has created: women are not supposed to be much more than something pretty to look at or someone to have sex with or someone to cook and have babies and care for others.

Brooke Kincaid is trapped in a world of change and choices. However, for the most part, the biggest mistake for Brooke is that she chooses not to make a choice. She does not participate and instead imitates; she is not someone who holds a mirror up for self-examination, but merely someone who is a reflection of others. What is acceptable is defined by society in Smith's second novel, and Brooke Kincaid falls short of the mark.

Humorous and engaging, Smith's third novel, *Fancy Strut,* is set in Speed, Alabama. Smith is again writing from what she knows. Living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and working as for the *Tuscaloosa News* provided the inspiration for the book, centered on the sesquicentennial celebration of Speed in 1965. In this novel, Smith uses third-person narration, which opens up the book to more complex characters and allows better insight into the idiosyncrasies of each.

The omniscient narrator in *Fancy Strut* never misses even the smallest detail in the description of the characters. The precise descriptions provide wonderful caricatures for the reader. For example, Miss Iona, whose chapters frame the book, is the epitome of the unchanging Old South: "She looked like an antique figurine on ball bearings, wound up and set loose, magnificently incongruous upon the modern streets" (Smith, *Fancy* 2). We become familiar with the characters immediately through Smith's very readable and enjoyable prose, and we watch the lives of those in this small southern town unfold.

The machinations surrounding the planning and execution of the sesquicentennial celebration reveal much about the inhabitants and the code they live by in Speed, Alabama. The town that Smith describes could be any other small town in the South.

The problems—racism, infidelity, and violence, among others—hide just below the surface and are brought to the forefront in the novel as the town rushes to make its anniversary celebration a success.

Fancy Strut begins and ends with details about Miss Iona, an unchanging fixture in Speed. Miss Iona likes things just the way they are in her hometown, and she is reluctant to see any change take place. In fact, she thinks that:

> The whole pageant had been a mockery of her heritage and the Southern way of life. It had been diametrically opposed to her own Ideal Pageant. Instead of an exalting theatrical experience, it had been nothing more that a medicine show, a carnival, pandering to the lowest possible tastes. (Smith, *Fancy* 341)

Smith's depiction of the people in the small southern town of Speed is both accurate and ironic. On the one hand, the town is poised for the change and progress of the twentieth century, yet underneath run the unchanging currents of deception, greed, bigotry, lust, and violence. Time has not visited any change on the townspeople of Speed. In fact, its very name is ironic because there is no speed toward progress in Speed: the place is stagnant, unbending, and unforgiving.

In her fourth novel, *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Lee Smith is back at home in Appalachia. She returns to the hills and hollows where she grew up, to the language and landscape she loves, and to the place where her heart and her best stories reside. In this novel she finds her rhythm and begins to emerge as a noted author. She more fully develops the passive protagonist, Crystal Spangler, in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, and

from this novel forward, her female protagonists evolve into stronger, better-developed characters. In an *Artful Dodge* interview, Smith says *Black Mountain Breakdown* is "a cautionary tale, if you will. It's a book about the dangers of being passive. At the end, the heroine is lying flat on her back being fed jello by other people. She is literally, completely, immobilized by her passivity, by her failure to act and take responsibility for her own life" (Bourne in Tate 41). Ironically, Lee Smith describes her mother as this type of woman, and in fact, she says that she has known women who suffered from anxiety and depression and simply went to bed as a method of coping. Since Smith acknowledges that her writing is a way to make sense of an unstable world, to create order and control, perhaps creating Crystal Spangler helped her understand such impassive women a little better. Crystal is certainly an example of what not to be, and in her later works Smith creates stronger protagonists who are better equipped to handle the lives they live and the circumstances they face. However, in *Black Mountain Breakdown* Smith has clearly found her voice and setting, and she moves ahead with confidence and clarity of purpose.

Like Smith's first two novels, the book is based on one of her short stories, "Paralyzed: A True Story," which first appeared in the Spring 1977 issue of *Southern Exposure*. Another part of the book was printed in the winter issue of *Carolina Quarterly*.

Black Mountain Breakdown is the story of Crystal Spangler from the age of twelve until she is thirty-two. Crystal's world is one with two diametrically opposing views. Smith cleverly portrays this contrasting world in the early pages of the novel

when we are introduced to Crystal's parents, Lorene and Grant. Lorene Spangler actively participates in life even if it is in the role that society demands of women; she is more concerned with outward appearances and has trouble understanding Crystal. Lorene places all of her hopes on her beautiful daughter and plans for her to make something of herself, attend a fine school, and marry well—the very things she herself did not do. In contrast, Crystal's father, Grant Spangler, has removed himself from the world: "His removal to the front room was so gradual as to be almost imperceptible, a slow receding from life" (Smith, *Black* 20). He keeps the blinds pulled and is oftentimes unaware of whether it is morning or night. Lorene knows that "Grant has been a bad influence on Crystal, but Lorene ignores it, as she ignores everything she can't change" (Smith, *Black* 21). These two worlds collide in the novel, and the story builds until Crystal decides which world she will live in.

Agnes, Crystal's best friend, is firmly rooted in the here and now. She knows that "she can take care of herself, but she is not sure that Crystal can: Crystal seems to lack something, some hard thing inside her that Agnes and Babe were born with" (Smith, *Black* 16). Crystal is too much like her father, who lies in the front room of her home with the blinds drawn.

Black Mountain Breakdown is a tragic novel. The young Crystal is raped by her father's younger brother, an event she does not remember until much later and one that shatters her world. The real problem for Crystal is that, like Brooke Kincaid in *Something in the Wind*, she drifts through life allowing herself to be defined by others. She chooses not to face her problems, but the crisis Lee Smith dramatizes is that Crystal

makes a choice: "The next day is when Crystal paralyzes herself" (225). She does it to herself, and like her father, she removes herself from reality. She becomes frozen in time while Black Rock, Virginia, moves ahead.

Even though there was a period of seven years between *Fancy Strut* and *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Smith never stopped writing. Several of her short stories were published in periodicals and magazines during this time. Her first collection of short stories, *Cakewalk*, included these stories. Two of the stories, "Mrs. Darcy Meets the Blue-Eyed Stranger at the Beach" and "Between the Lines" received O Henry awards in 1979 and 1981 respectively.

In *Cakewalk*, Lee Smith's collection of short stories provides her reader with vignettes of small-town life. Thematically, each of the stories involves characters who are trying to make sense of their worlds. The stories vary in point of view, and many times the characters are defined by roles cast by society—an issue Smith continually addresses in her fiction. The first story, "Between the Lines." is about Joline B. Newhouse, who writes a weekly column about the inhabitants of Salt Lick. Her column is more about what she does not say rather than what is printed. More than likely, the story was deliberately placed as the first one in this collection for much the same reason: Smith wants her readers to understand that there is more going on than what is on the surface. She, like Joline B. Newhouse, wants her readers to read between the lines.

The collection is a total of fourteen short stories. Smith's narrative skills shine in this collection as the narrators spin their tales in a fashion that feels as if they are sitting right there, in person, telling their stories. Capturing every nuance and inflection of the

spoken word is one of Smith's attributes as a writer, and it resonates in these stories. Also, a certain sadness that is such a part of life underpins the stories. At the end of "Between the Lines," Joline B. Newhouse asks the question that Smith returns to over and over again in her work: "Now where will it all end? I ask you. All this pain and loving, mystery and loss. And it just goes on and on" (Smith, *Cakewalk* 25).

As is the case in most of Smith's work, the stories in *Cakewalk* are never judgmental. If someone has an affair, it is simply stated and not evaluated. The tone of these stories is matter-of-fact—and the events are everyday occurrences in real life. Smith simply offers her reader a glimpse into the many types of people who reside in the world, and the worlds they live in are juxtaposed so that the contrast and conflict are clearly defined in her stories. For example, "Between the Lines" offers a view of the world as Joline B. Newhouse writes it while the unwritten word is what is most important in the story. "Georgia Rose" contrasts two families from different worlds yet they still face the same problems; they are both trapped by the rules and roles created by others. In "All the Days of Our Lives" a heroine becomes disillusioned and finds relief in the lives of others on a soap opera. Helen has bought into the belief that she has failed because she is not in a role dictated by society—her marriage crumbled even though she is responsible for its failure by an act of infidelity. Helen's real failure occurs when she is offered a job that will give her a career and independence in a role that she will have to create. But she turns the opportunity down and instead looks ahead in the direction that women are supposed to go, to a role where they are not created by individuality but rather through someone else.

The final short story in the book, "Cakewalk" is about two sisters—Stella, who considers herself an artist, and Florrie, who is actually an artist. This story is all about appearances and nicely sums up this collection of Lee Smith's stories. While Stella is concerned about what others think and outward appearances, Florrie creates art through her cakes. Smith celebrates the creation of Florrie's art, which Stella is embarrassed by because it is ordinary, simply because Florrie is creating. Florrie is indifferent to the rules and roles society assigns women. She is, in fact, much more of a participant in life than is her sister Stella, who will not venture from what she feels is expected of her, but who believes that "Florrie had stepped off the upper crust straight into scum. Into *lowlife*, which is where in her opinion Florrie had been heading all along" (Smith, *Cakewalk* 242).

The same themes continue in the other stories in *Cakewalk.* Smith is clearly concerned with the restrictions that society places on women. But more than that, Smith holds up for examination how women face those restrictions. Do we, in fact, buy into the myths of how we are supposed to act, or do we make choices as to who we want to be? Smith never ridicules the various roles of women, from mother to daughter, to wife, to lover, and to artist. She simply develops stories about people we all know, and she tells them in such a spell-binding fashion that we are captivated by her place, her characters, and her creations. Not until we step back and look at these stories do we see that they too, like *Black Mountain Breakdown*, are all cautionary tales.

Smith's next novel, *Oral History,* appeared on the scene with much critical acclaim. The elements she had been using in her previous work including form, setting,

voice, characters, and themes come together in a skillfully crafted and mature work. The art of her storytelling is at its zenith, and *Oral History* is a strong venue for Smith's talents. This work of fiction was born as a result of real-life events: Grundy was beginning to change in the name of progress, and fearing a loss of both the memories and the place she dearly loved, she began taping the older people's conversations, their oral histories, and doing research. During this time she met a young woman who was doing an oral history project and taping the sounds of a haunted house: "That girl became the subject of a short story, 'Oral History,' and the two halves of that story became the bookends for the novel's storytellers, who explain the history of that haunted house and the family who lived there" (Kalb 210).

Smith mixes up the narrative devices in *Oral History* from first-person to third-person. The tales span three generations of the Cantrell family and are told by different family members. Smith's uniqueness unfolds in *Oral History*: her characters are alive through their voices—they are living and breathing while they are speaking. There are no literary devices to analyze, only a genuineness and directness not muddied by mechanical or poetical devices. Her characters are neighbors, friends, family members who are living and breathing on the pages of her novels, telling their stories about life. Lee Smith's novels are about coping while living. Human folly is real; mean spiritedness is real; underhanded, manipulative power is real, but so are dignity, graciousness, and love. She captures the essence of the human spirit as it lives, struggles, rejoices, and even dies. The most compelling part of Smith's novels is that she is true to her characters: she never sacrifices them to make a statement. They trek through life, and along the way

whatever happens are the points they make. Her characters are ordinary, everyday people moving from one day to the next, with pasts that are worth preserving and stories waiting to be told.

Oral History begins in the present with the story of Jennifer, who comes to Hoot Owl Holler near Grassy Creek to observe and explore what she believes to be her birth mother's family. Her oral history project brings her to Hoot Owl Holler with preconceived notions of a stereotypical Appalachian family—one that is ignorant and somewhat backwards. However, as the stories of the Cantrell family are told, the reader sees otherwise. The perversion lies in the outsider, like Jennifer and like Richard Burlage, who cannot see the reality of the lives of the people of Hoot Owl Holler because of their own versions of what they believe them to be. They see only through a vision that is blurred and tarnished at best by myths of the region and its inhabitants—they only see the surface and mistakenly interpret the events that occur in the novel from their point of view. Their focus is narrow, and they are the real danger that threatens the lifestyle of Appalachia.

Smith's purpose in writing *Oral History* was two-fold: to preserve the customs, characters and traditions of Appalachian life, but also to remove the stereotypes of the people of Appalachia. The world of the Hoot Owl Holler residents has shaped them, and while the circumstances of their lives are different from those who might live in a town, or a coastal region, they have endured and overcome the hardships of that mountain life. They are a strong, decent, caring people, and Smith is compelled to remind her readers of this fact over and over again in her work. Jennifer never sees them for who they really

are; instead she sees them as "really very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe. Crude jokes and animal instincts—it's the other side of the pastoral coin" (Smith, *Oral* 284).

The history of the Cantrell family is rich in the land that the family is tied to and in the way they are tied to each other. The connection runs deep and begins with Almarene Cantrell, who came back home to Hoot Owl in August 1902 when he was twenty-two years old. Granny Younger, who is the typical midwife/healer, begins telling the history of the Cantrell family as she traces its roots back to Almarene, and the novel shifts from present day to the past. Many of the rituals and traditions of mountain life are captured through Granny Younger's eyes and heard through her lyrical voice as she describes the places and people from and around Hoot Owl Holler early in the novel. The story becomes more intricately woven through omniscient narration and then through first-person accounts of events that happen as time passes in the area. The family grows and expands, but their ties to the land and each other remain constant. Even in an unstable and changing world, the ties remain unbroken.

In *Oral History*,

> Lee Smith's ability to invent full and fully distinct human voices lets her tell *Oral History* as she does, giving us so various a group of narrators. Again, she prefers the spoken voice to the written one. And in this novel, she explores the implications of oral and written language. A kind of authenticity comes from the diction and tone of speakers like Granny Younger. (Jones 268)

In all of Smith's works, she is a masterful storyteller, and she invents characters who are gifted storytellers as well; she is "endlessly fascinated by the idea that it is always the teller's tale, that no matter who's telling the story, it is always the teller's tale, and you never *finally* know exactly the way it was. [. . .] no matter what attempt you make at understanding how it was, you can never quite get at [it]" (Arnold in Tate 6).

Smith re-visits this idea of the storyteller's tale through another family's history in her next novel, *Family Linen.* She says:

> I am fascinated by the way you can interview six people, say, who shared the same experience, and you will get six completely different stories. I think we underestimate the extent to which we experience the same events differently and create very different narratives from them. When you interview different members of the same family, their stories often bear very little resemblance to each other; sometimes it's as if these people came from totally different families. We remember things the way we choose to, the way we need to. What *did* really happen? Often, we never actually know. The best we can do is listen carefully to everybody's account and come up with our own version of the truth. (N. Anderson 278)

Family Linen is a murder mystery involving a very dysfunctional and somewhat estranged family who come together because of the bonds that are the fabric of a family. The catalyst for reconnecting the fibers of this family occurs when the family's matriarch falls into a coma and eventually dies. Suddenly, all of the dirty linen of the family is

aired, from the sordid details of a murder, to adultery, intrigue, and basic character flaws—things that can tear a family apart—yet the death of their mother serves as the foundation to reconnect the fibers of this family. Lee Smith provides a funny and perceptive look at how a family functions, how it loves and hates, how it envies and shares, and finally how it heals and continues in *Family Linen.*

Smith says that the story in *Family Linen* came from an account of an actual event in a newspaper in Raleigh, North Carolina. Like Sybill, whose narrative begins the novel, a local teacher recounted, under hypnosis, an event similar to the one in the book that Sybill remembers. The real-life event had the mother killing her husband, chopping him up, and stuffing him in an outhouse. The mother was a pillar in the local community, and when her daughter confronted her after her hypnosis, the mother promptly committed suicide. Afterwards, they dug up the body. Smith says that tales such as these are fascinating, and she clips and keeps them when she reads one such as this. After reading the details of the story in the paper, she says she did not do any additional research into the events surrounding the murder or the family members; she simply began writing and made everything up as she went. She says the story was a gift: "Plot is always my weakest point, and here was one all ready-made, as if I'd walked into a store and bought it off a sale rack. I got right to work" (N. Anderson 275-276).

Once again, as she did in *Oral History*, Smith uses multiple narrators to create her characters and the story in *Family Linen.* Readers get to see not only the story as each character tells it, but also we come to know the character as well. Sybill begins unraveling a memory when she undergoes hypnosis to try and find the cause of

headaches she is experiencing, which takes her back home to her family and her past. As we meet the members of her family, we see how Smith creates characters who are real, funny, and complicated, and who struggle to survive in a world that is not always kind and forgiving.

The mystery begins as Sybill tries to discover the reason she is having severe headaches. She goes to see a hypnotist and after her first visit finds herself "crying because suddenly there are big jagged holes in this life which has seemed to her now for so long like a roll of fabric over at Cloth World, floral print polyester perhaps, rolling on and on forever in a perfectly straight even path" (Smith, *Family* 31). Sybill is very judgmental and does not care for her family—she is embarrassed by them. But Sybill is a woman full of contradictions and because she is single, an old maid if you will, she finds her life empty when measured by the standards that society sets for women. Unfortunately, Sybill has bought into that myth, and while she believes she is above those standards, she stoops to snooping in a man's neighboring condominium because of a secret longing she has that only a Mr. Right can fulfill.

When Sybill undergoes hypnosis, the reader is introduced to her family members one by one as Sybill sees them. She describes her mother as a "*real* lady, in spite of this little town she's lived in all her life" (Smith, *Family* 35). She is strong and writes poetry; she tried to introduce her family to the finer things in life; she is the source of strength in the family. Her stepfather, Verner Hess, is a popular man, yet he was not a strong man. Verner Hess is the owner of the local dime store, like Smith's own father. Sybill admits to feeling embarrassed by Verner during her youth because of "his dullness, how ordinary

he was, and how limited" (Smith, *Family* 36). She is surprised that her memory sparks a feeling of warmth for him. Sybill goes on to introduce her mother's two sisters, Fay and Nettie, who she says are crazy even though Nettie runs a local store. Then she describes her sister Candy Snipes as a disappointment because she did not do what her family expected of her. Her brother, Arthur, who is in his forties, is a mess. Myrtle is the sibling that Sybill thinks turned out the best because she married a dermatologist. Lacy, her youngest sister, is the intellectual—the one who got all the brains from her mother, yet she did not follow through writing her dissertation after spending years in graduate school. And then there is Sybill, who views herself as the responsible family member. Once she is hypnotized the world as Sybill sees it is overturned. Her recovered memory is what sets the story in motion, and Lee Smith is quick to show her reader that the story is truly only as accurate as the storyteller's memory. Sybill's opinion of her family members is overturned and examined in the pages of the novel as we come to know them one by one. As she does in *Oral History*, Smith drives home the point in *Family Linen* that there is always more going on than what is seen in the lives of others as well as how a person's vision is often blurred by preconceived ideas.

The events that draw the family together, their mother slipping into a coma and her subsequent death, are what end up binding them together as often only families can. Once Elizabeth slips into a coma and Sybill begins questioning her father's death, the family begins to question the very fiber that connects them. The novel's theme is succinctly summed up as Lacy looks at her mother lying helplessly in the hospital:

> *with her, appearances are everything.* [. . .] *she could never tell good from bad, poor thing, or see beyond the iron pink palace of niceness and illusion, of should and sweet, which she had constructed around all of us. She never knew any of us, really. I wonder if she ever knew Daddy, or anybody. Anybody at all. I wonder now if anyone ever does—and if we do, if it's worth it, all the trouble and pain, when it doesn't last—* (Smith, *Family* 69).

By the end of the book, the family is reconciled and celebrating at a wedding: the fabric that binds the family together is made stronger by the unearthing and airing of their dirty linen.

Considered by many as Lee Smith's masterpiece, *Fair and Tender Ladies* followed in 1988. Daring and brave, Smith chose a new form for her for this book: the epistolary novel. The book is about one woman, Ivy Rowe, who writes letters. Through her epistles we see the other characters through her eyes, but we never read responses to the letters, many of which are written when she does not expect a reply. *Fair and Tender Ladies* is a novel about living life and getting through it; about triumph and tragedy; about love and loss. But even more important, *Fair and Tender Ladies* is about writing as art, writing for salvation, writing to preserve the past and those in it, and writing as a way to bring order into a chaotic world. It is about finding a place to escape to when life is sometimes too much to bear.

Lee Smith knew that she wanted to write a novel about a mountain woman's entire life, but how she could do that in a reasonable length was unclear to her.

Coincidentally, she stumbled on a woman's packet of letters at a yard sale, bought them, and after taking the letters home and reading them, she realized she knew this woman and her life's story after reading these letters. She knew then that the epistolary novel was just the sort of vehicle she needed for the story that had been swimming around in her head.

Smith says Ivy Rowe came into being because she needed a strong role model in her life. She needed someone who was a survivor, someone who could show her the way to cope with life's hardships. For Lee Smith, life was difficult at this time. Her mother was ill, her oldest son was having his first bout with mental illness, and her youngest son was in drug rehab. During this time, her father was also in and out of the hospital because of depression. She needed a respite, and the pages of this novel are where she found solace, where she could create order in a chaotic world spinning out of control, and where she found a way "to make it through the night" (Irv Broughton in Tate 89). From Crystal Spangler in *Black Mountain Breakdown,* the feminine ideal has evolved and becomes fully realized in Ivy Rowe.

Fair and Tender Ladies spans Ivy's life from the age of twelve until her death when she is in her seventies. Ivy never moves far from her childhood home in Sugar Fork, but she does not become bound up in the roles imposed on women in her world. She does marry, she does have children, she cooks, she cleans, and she loves and loves deeply. She finds a way to manage and cope and discovers early that what she loves best in the world is writing. Writing is Ivy's solace, her way to cope, and her way to document her existence. Ivy Rowe is the quintessential artist: one who is creating not

for profit but merely to create. Life is not easy for Ivy, but she forges ahead and deals with its trials as they come. Not one who always makes the right choices, she does at least choose. She is not a passive bystander to her life, but rather an active participant. She is one of Smith's grandest creations, yet she is just a plain, simple, and ordinary creature. She is a survivor; she is a writer; and she "walked in [. . .] [her] body like a Queen" (Smith, *Fair* 308).

Smith's next publication is another collection of short stories. In *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*, there are nine stories, at least eight of which deal with what Sybill, in *Family Linen,* calls "a total eclipse of the heart" (Smith, *Family* 29). These short stories tell about events that occur in the lives of the characters which eclipse their lives and force a change of some sort. For example, in the first story in the book, "Bob, a Dog," about Cheryl Stone and the break-up of her marriage, Smith revisits the theme of a woman's identity being caught up in the role or expectations of others. In fact, Cheryl Stone, as is often characteristic of Smith's characters, believes in the myth herself. Cheryl's world is eclipsed when her husband leaves, but slowly she realizes she is both capable and also likely to make it on her own. The eclipse that occurs in Cheryl's life is a positive event, and she begins to make choices about how the rest of her life will go.

All of the characters in the stories in *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* are once again just ordinary folk—the waitress at the local restaurant, the clerk at a local store, a local beautician, or someone's mother. All of the characters face a moment when everything becomes clearer, a moment of change or recognition in their lives. Smith chooses to write about ordinary people—the character whose stereotype she likes to

overturn by proving there is always more going on underneath the surface than is obvious at first glance. She shows how everything ordinary has something extraordinary happening. She holds up for examination the preconceived notions of both the characters in her stories and those of her readers; she forces each to review and evaluate the basis for those beliefs. She is trying to force an eclipse to occur for each of us, to awaken us to the possibility that there is more than meets the eye in every situation and, as a result, create empathy in a judgmental and self-serving world.

One of her more autobiographical stories, "Tongues of Fire," is about a thirteen-year-old girl whose life resembles Smith's own adolescence. In fact, many of the details mimic Smith's own circumstances: the father in the story becomes immobilized by his depression; the mother has high expectations for her daughter and notions of a better life; and Karen (the protagonist in the story) hears God speak to her at camp. She attributes all the quotes in "Tongues of Fire" to her Aunt Gay-Gay and the events to her religious fervor as a young girl.

The book ends with the title story, "Me and My Baby View the Eclipse." In it, Sharon Shaw puts in words the message Lee Smith is perhaps trying to get across to her reader: "that you could live in the same town with somebody all these years and just simply never notice them, never think of them once as a person" (198). By the end of this collection of short stories, we have indeed met people we already know, but maybe, just maybe, we have come to think of them as the persons they are.

Another facet of Smith's heritage she feels compelled to write about is country music. In *The Devil's Dream* she uses devices she has employed in some of her other

books. Its scope is multi-generational, and it is told through multiple narrators. Several generations of talented musicians are introduced in a lively, heartfelt account of both the personal and professional triumphs and tragedies of a family of musicians—the Bailey family, whose family includes the successful Grassy Branch Girls, Mamma Rainette and the Raindrops to the modern-day superstar, Katie Cocker. The story's heroine, Katie Cocker, another strong female character who marries into the Bailey family, struggles to survive in the world of country music and in roles defined by others. Smith's love of country music is evident in the book, and her gift of story telling fills the pages of the novel. Once again Smith is at home in this book, and the families live and breathe for the reader. Katie Cocker sums up the essence of the novel—and many of Lee Smith's novels and short stories—in the opening pages of *The Devil's Dream*: "It took me a long time to understand that not a one of us lives alone, outside of our family or our time, and that who we are depends on who we were, and who our people were. [. . .] they are bone of my bone" (Smith, *Devil's Dream* 14).

The novel's beginning and ending focus on a reunion of the Bailey family taking place in Nashville, the capital of country music. In between, however, is the real story of the Bailey family. Smith says that "The first story in the book—about the girl from the fiddling family who marries the preacher's son—is an actual story I ran across up in Madison County, North Carolina" (Shea in Tate 105). In the story, Moses Bailey, the preacher's son, marries Kate Malone, from a fiddling family. In *The Devil's Dream,* Smith models the Bailey family after country music legends like the Ritchie family, the Carter family, the Stoneman family, and the White family.

The saga that unfolds is born out of a warning issued by Moses Bailey to his son Jeremiah: "'The fiddle is a instrument of the Devil, and iffen you ever take it up you will have to leave home. Fer you won't be my boy no more, you'll be the Devil's boy'" (Smith, *Devil's* 27). Moses Bailey's words are not heeded by his family, and as a result, it seems as if a curse falls upon their family. When Moses discovers that Kate and his children failed to listen to him, he becomes enraged, beats his wife and children, and starts the legacy of unhappiness that is visited upon the future generations of his family.

Music is in the blood of the Bailey family members. So is their Appalachian heritage. One constant in the book is that "Blood will tell, in the end" (Smith, *Devil's* 45). Blood is the connection, and Smith's point in the novel is that it will bind a family together and connect them when nothing else can.

Once again, Smith captures the voices and flavor of the lives of her characters. The book is put together in much the same way as a record album: "I thought about this book as an album: Each section of it would be somebody's song, and together the songs would make up an album" (Shea in Tate 105). She says that part of her purpose was capturing part of the history of country music. She explores the roots of country music in its Appalachian heritage and also how it has become commercialized as it moves out of the hills and more into the southern arena of areas like Nashville. Early in the novel Aunt Dot explains the difference to Ezekiel Bailey, "'Honey, they is pretty singing, and then they is true singing'" (Smith, *Devil's* 40).

The underlying theme in the book is about women finding their own voices. Smith says, "I think singing your own song and being in charge of how it's actually

produced, recorded, and distributed is a certain metaphor for women getting in control of their lives" (Shea in Tate 107). Katie Cocker, even though she is pulled in opposing directions by her career and her home, is successful and independent. *The Devil's Dream* is:

> a conflicted tale in which success carries within it the seeds of failure; the very independence of Katie Cocker, its contemporary heroine, who directs her own life, who produces her own records, doesn't come without a price. Empowerment is always at the expense of connection. It's the eternal conundrum of country music, it's the eternal conundrum of life: As you sing a song that arises from a particular place, "what you want, of course, is to be successful, and as soon as you're successful . . . that's never your place again. You're always singing of home, but you're never home. And there's something about that—I think I feel like that about a lot of things, this intense ambivalence. To me that is the perfect ground for fiction." (Guralnick in Tate 149)

Smith's next published novel is *Saving Grace*. Once again, Smith embraces the magic of Appalachia and the mystery surrounding the folklore and religion of the region in the story about Florida Grace Shepherd, whose father is a Pentecostal snake-handling preacher. The title is indicative of the storyline of the book whose protagonist faces and survives a dominating father, the death of a child, and a failed marriage. Smith describes the world in *Saving Grace* as a darkly religious and violent world:

> The primitive Pentecostal world that it portrays, whose practices and premises *Saving Grace* simply presents as a given (the story is told by the daughter of a serpent-handling preacher, who doubts her faith but never her father's power), represents both "what terrifies me and fascinates me the most about the South in a certain way. I see it both ways. I see it as real attractive and also very, very dark. It's all about giving over yourself, giving up yourself, issues that to me somehow also have a lot to do with being a woman, and particularly a Southern woman. It's that desire to affiliate, you know, that terror of being on your own and thinking that you shouldn't be on your own. I mean it's always easier to do what you're expected to do and with the group that will tell you what to do—[. . .] there's something about that kind of religion, that kind of fundamental religion, and that kind of father, that is both totally compelling and desirable and terrifying, to me: *then you don't have to make any decisions—ever.*" (Guralnick in Tate 150-151)

In *Saving Grace,* Smith returns to the world of religion from her childhood. The story expands on the world she explored in her short story "Tongues of Fire." Smith says that religion was an inherent part of her upbringing. In Appalachia you were often described as a Methodist, a Baptist, or a Pentecostal. Smith goes a step further and admits to an intriguing fascination with religions: she is drawn to them like a moth is to a light, but they also terrify her. It is that sense of giving oneself over that frightens her: "if you give yourself over completely in this mystical sense, then who's left? Who are

you? If you're born again, then who are you? Where did you go? This is a kind of identity struggle in a way for me" (McCord in Tate 173).

Florida Grace Shepherd got her name "Florida" for the state she was born in and "Grace" because of the grace of God. She is one of eleven children and describes herself as the child who is argumentative and full of doubt. *Saving Grace* is Florida Grace Shepherd's story, and she tells it from memory, much like Susan Tobey does in Smith's first novel. She resents the nomadic life that her family lives all in the name of religion; she yearns for an ordinary life with an ordinary home like any other ordinary family, and that is not possible because of her family's traveling from place to place delivering the message of the gospel.

Smith says that in her writing frequently a character, or her voice, possesses her. Such is the case with Grace Shepherd. Smith claims that Grace's voice ultimately took over her creator: "'It was the most compelling narrative that had ever come my way'" (McDonald in Tate 183). Even though the book was not planned, she felt compelled to write Grace's story. Again Smith's gift for storytelling, her keen ear for her character's voice, and her uncanny ability to capture the reality of Appalachian life and the South dominate *Saving Grace*. Issues of redemption, identity, loss, and love are explored throughout the book. Inside the novel's universe, domineering characters dictate roles that each of us should fulfill, from those in our family, to ourselves, and even to our salvation.

Florida Grace Shepherd, a child when we first meet her, is caught up in the religious fervor of her father, and as a result, her world along with the other members of

her family is dictated by what he desires. As are other women in Smith's fiction, Grace's role is defined by others: "For many of us, especially women, that gap between what we want or need and what our society expects of us is wide indeed, and we spend our lives trying to negotiate it. Trying to balance work and family, responsibilities and desires because she has no choice, all that stuff. It is not easy" (Ketchin 285).

Florida Grace Shepherd is deeply affected and drawn to the two opposing sides in religion, both the light and dark. Her journey is long and filled with stories of love and redemption, courage and longing:

> I think this novel is about the search for home—both a spiritual home and a literal home. It is also about the helplessness of children—something that bothers me profoundly—how children are so often born into difficult or dangerous situations over which they have no control, and how those childhoods affect them forever. (Ketchin 286)

Grace tries to escape the confines of her father's religion for most of her life. During the final pages of the novel she returns to the place that is home in her heart and finally is "interested in the fruits of the spirit now, not the things of the world" (Smith, *Saving* 268). She longs for the safety and stability that a family home often provides, and her trip back to Scrabble Creek provides a renewal for her and the ability to let go of her past. She is at last free to acknowledge her spiritual quest—what Smith calls "a kind of unorthodox *Pilgrim's Progress*" (Ketchin 285).

After publication of *Saving Grace,* Smith's next published work was *The Christmas Letters.* Returning to the epistolary form for the novel, *The Christmas Letters*

is another multi-generational tale. Three generations of the Pickett family share in a tradition of writing Christmas letters that encapsulate the events in each writer's life. As in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, these letters capture the flavor of the South through their language, their attention to detail, and their story-telling quality. Once again Smith explores the idea of a woman's identity and search for place in a world where she is often defined by whom she is married to, who her children are, or who the parents are. Individuality is not the treasured ideal in much of Smith's fictional world; however, underneath is the fact that Smith is concerned with the loss of individuality as she returns to that theme over and over in her work.

Perhaps Mary Pickett sums it up best: "*Taking care. Taking care of Andrew, taking care of Sandy.* Isn't that interesting? A person reading back through these letters might decide that my life has been largely a function of other people's lives, and that would be true too" (Smith, *Christmas* 90). Not until the women who are the letter writers in *The Christmas Letters* face some sort of eclipse of the heart do they re-evaluate their own self worth. Most often, the women realize that while they might have been literally alive, they somehow lost themselves during the child-rearing and homemaking years. It takes a major upheaval in their lives for the realization to hit home:

> But after about thirty minutes of this, a funny thing started happening. Imperceptibly, even in the midst of all the crying, I felt my spirits start to lift. This continued. I could actually feel energy coming into me, some essential energy that seemed oddly familiar, like an old friend you don't quite recognize at first. Now, I believe—without

> dramatizing too much, I hope!—that this was the moment when my *self* came back, or when I came back to my own real self again. (Smith, *Christmas* 87).

Regardless of the form Smith chooses for her work, one can easily argue that underneath each story lies a cautionary tale. The protagonists are ordinary women who, as in *The Christmas Letters*, devote their lives to their families, yet each shares a gift of writing or cooking—simply creating—with others. Smith's message to her reader is simple: be careful not to get lost in creating a world for others to live in and in the end lose oneself, but also, do not be afraid to acknowledge that creating in whatever form or setting is an art and is the essence of any artist. The recipes sent with each Christmas letter attest to the fact that some sort of creation is at work, and while the women in the book are plain and simple, they are directly responsible for helping to create a better world for those around them.

Another collection of short stories, *News of the Spirit*, follows (five of the six stories included in the book were published in different magazines prior to this volume's publication). Each story in *News of the Spirit* addresses thematic issues predominant in Smith's work. For example, "The Bubba Stories" is about a young woman who goes off to college but who realizes that "The whole point of college was to get a husband" (Smith, *News* 11). The protagonist in the story, Charlene Christian, acknowledges the fact that women are categorized as either saints or whores, and of course, whores are not marriage material. Charlene attends a girls' school, participates in the writing program, and during her time at college creates Bubba—her fictional brother who was an alter ego

of sorts. Through Charlene's creation of him, she is able vicariously to live an adventuresome life and not adhere to society's rules. Then she can create the role of the rebel in the staid environment of an all-girls' school where characters of his sort were not allowed.

Again Smith expresses her concern for women who do not meet their problems head on. In "Live Bottomless," Jenny is afraid she will be too much like her mother and end up lying down instead of dealing with her problems. Smith creates wonderfully engaging characters, and Jenny's narrative provides a stark contrast of the role of wife and mother to that of the artist. Jenny loves to spy, and during one summer she sees stereotype after stereotype overturned. The artist is the enigma, and eventually an outcast. Buddy Womble's father is discovered sobbing on his porch which "violated every known rule of conduct. Men were not supposed to cry, especially not fathers" (Smith, *News* 69). Jenny comes face to face with the hard, cold reality of a tarnished world and a world where her heroes cease to be heroic. She witnesses first-hand how reality and fantasy clash and the chaos it creates in those around her.

The tale that the book takes as its title, "News of the Spirit," first appeared in 1994 as a limited edition publication of 365 copies under the title, *We Don't Love with our Teeth*. In this short story, we are reminded of Flannery O'Connor and her love of the misfit. Definitely southern in flavor, "News of the Spirit" examines the complexities found in families and among friends, along with the roles each one is supposed to play, and the sense of duty that is expected of each. Smith turns expectations into acceptance and creates a disconcerting tale about family members trying to reconnect and pretend to

be normal in a very abnormal environment. Nothing is as it appears at first glance, yet by the story's end, the news is that Paula finally accepts her brother as he is, is able to embrace her past, and moves into the future.

Sitting on the Courthouse Bench is an oral history project of Grundy, Virginia, Lee Smith's hometown. Published in 2000, the project was the brainchild of Smith and coordinated through the local high school in Grundy. Seeing that Grundy was about to undergo radical changes and that the town she had grown up in would be gone forever, Smith knew that the only thing that could preserve it was for the memories of Grundy to be recorded. Smith's dream soon became reality as she began working with longtime friend, Debbie Raines.

Raines, a local high school teacher, worked for two years with Grundy's high school students to conduct interviews with the locals. Twenty-eight high school students participated in the project and conducted thirty-seven interviews (guidelines for the project are included in the book as well as on Lee Smith's website). The book is both a visual and verbal delight: "we are simply telling our own stories in our own words, in the belief that our voices will blend to create a vibrant testimony to the life of this whole community. We aim not only to preserve our rich culture, but to celebrate it" (Smith, Introduction 18).

Smith says that she has worked hard:

> to record the history, dialect and folklore of Appalachia. It is important, I think, to record these regional distinctions because of the homogenization that is going on in American culture. One place is becoming much like

> every other place. I am proud of my work in recording these regional distinctions and in creating a record of the values, mores, and manners of the Appalachian South. (Smith, *News* Reader's Guide 275)

Smith's next novel, *The Last Girls,* is a tale of five middle-aged women who were friends in college and who have reunited aboard a riverboat cruise to dispose of the ashes of one of their group. Hilarious and poignant, the book is Smith at her story-telling finest. Modeled on a real raft trip that Smith and several of her college friends took down the Mississippi after reading *Huckleberry Finn*, the book provides Smith the opportunity to examine what each woman thought her life was going to be like when she graduated from college and how it actually turned out. Once again Smith uses several different voices and points of view. In *The Last Girls*, the women are from the same generation as Smith, and one of her goals in writing this novel was to "bust up the stereotypes of women and men in this book" (Smith, With). The book is obviously about a journey—a journey of self-discovery. The fifty-something-year-olds are taking stock of their lives, and we see at once Smith's skillful use of voice, humor, and a dependable and uncanny ability to put it all down on paper that readily captures the flavor and essence of each of her characters.

As this second trip down the river begins, each of the four main characters, Harriet, Anna, Catherine, and Courtney, travels from the present to the past and back again. The book is shaped around memories and the fact that the story does indeed belong to the story-teller. The reason the group has re-assembled is because one of their own, Margaret (Baby) Ballou, has died, and they plan to dispose of her ashes when they

reach New Orleans. Written in a travelogue style, the story begins as the women meet in the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, to begin their journey down the Mississippi.

Smith once again explores the fact that appearances are deceiving. All four of the women in the book are not what they would have people believe, nor do they know each other very well after so many years apart. The illusion of life is what they have been trying to capture, and only on the river boat trip do they realize that they are smack in the middle of their lives. Even the character the reader comes to know best has a name indicative of her life—Harriet Holding. Everything has been on hold for Harriet.

The poignancy of *The Last Girls* lies in the fact that the trip down the river reunites the four college friends and should, in fact, fuse a bond between the women. But instead, it does not, and the title of the book suggests that something is lost, that a time period and an important opportunity has passed. None of the women is willing to let down her guard and allow any of the others a glimpse into her world. Isolation is the reality each of these southern women faces, and the loneliness of each is palpable.

On Agate Hill is Smith's latest novel. The subject of the novel—the Civil War—is new for Smith. Writing this novel was trying for Smith because it came at a difficult time during her life (much like *Fair and Tender Ladies* did), which was after the death of her son in October 2003. She readily admits that she "never gave much of a damn about the Civil War (or 'Silver War,' as my aunt Gay-Gay used to call it). After all, we'd scarcely noticed it in the Appalachian mountains of far southwest Virginia where I grew up" (Smith, "Getting"). Some of the men fought for the Confederacy while others fought

for the Union, but not many were involved because it was viewed as a rich man's war. In Appalachia the class structure was very different: "We had no aristocracy, no landed gentry (no flat land, in fact), and certainly no plantations --- the only columns in town supported the Baptist Church" (Smith, "Getting").

By accident Smith got interested in the topic of the Civil War. She and her husband, Hal Crowther, moved to Hillsborough, North Carolina, and next door to the house was a cemetery where Confederate soldiers were buried. Down the street from her home was the county historical museum with many artifacts from the Civil War. Her inspiration for *On Agate Hill* came when the museum's historian, Ernest Dollar, showed her an old diary that belonged to a young girl from the 1870s. Like the packet of letters that Smith found at a yard sale that inspired *Fair and Tender Ladies*, the diary sparked the form for her new novel.

As if that were not enough for Smith's imagination, she was introduced to a journal kept by Anna Burwell, who started the Burwell School for young women in Hillsborough, North Carolina, in 1837. As Smith toured the school and read Mrs. Burwell's journals, the imagined lives, friendships, heartaches, and conversations of the young women soon found their way inside her head. The seed for *On Agate Hill* was planted, and "The rest, as they say, is Fiction" (Smith, "Getting").

On Agate Hill is framed by letters from Tuscany Miller dated October 24, 2006. Miller is a graduate student, and the contents of her letters reveal that she has not completed her thesis; she is, in fact, requesting to be readmitted to the program at Carolina State University. She wants to change the subject of her thesis from her original

exploration of the culture surrounding beauty shops in the south since she has discovered a diary of a young girl from the 1870s along with other relics that belonged to her.

Tuscany Miller's comic and chatty letters reveal both her story and the story of Molly Petree, who is raised among the ruins of the Civil War American South. In *On Agate Hill*, Smith proves over and over again that she has an astute ear for language, an insight into the frailties of her characters, and a gift for storytelling. Molly Petree's story is hauntingly beautiful even though she lives "in a house of ghosts" (Smith, *On* 7). Thirteen when we meet her and orphaned, Molly is reminiscent of another of Smith's protagonist, Ivy Rowe, who is about the same age and who also loves to read and write. Ivy writes letters while Molly keeps a diary, having been encouraged to record her memories. From the beginning, Molly is an independent soul who plans to do things her own way and write in secret instead of how she has been told to: "I will write it all down every true thing in black and white upon the page, for evil or good it is my own true life and I WILL have it. I will" (Smith, *On* 8).

Determination and grit are the driving forces for Molly Petree. Molly, one of Smith's great characters, is strong and fearful but realistic and proud; she is wise beyond her years, but yet she is pragmatic. Like Ivy Rowe, she is a survivor. When life deals her blow after blow, she continues to move forward. Her story is a sad story because she thinks of herself as a ghost girl, a person with no substance. She goes unnoticed. Again Smith's message of "Live your life" (Smith, *On* 16) resonates loud and clear.

Lee Smith's career has grown, and as she has matured so have the women and characters she creates in her fiction. Her work often parallels her own life, at least in

time, place, and the age of her characters. And she certainly fills the pages of her work with details and stories from her own life. For Smith, telling a story is as natural as breathing, and like Ivy Rowe discovers, it is the writing that signifies.

CHAPTER 3: FORM, FIT, AND FUNCTION OF THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL

Fair and Tender Ladies is an epistolary novel set in the early 1900s in the hills of Appalachian Virginia. Its protagonist, Ivy Rowe, is a letter writer who writes her first letter when she is twelve years old. Encouraged by her teacher, Ivy writes to a young Dutch girl, Hanneke, in hopes that she will be her "pen friend." The only letter writer in the book is Ivy Rowe, and some of the letters are intended to be mailed, while others are not: "One of the conventions of epistolary novels is that many letters are written but never sent or are sent even though the writer does not expect a reply. No matter. Once the letters are begun, the writers seem to be speaking to themselves, and though the reader is ever-present, the writer becomes immersed in a discovery of herself" (E. Campbell 336). Such is the case with *Fair and Tender Ladies* as the book spans the life of Ivy Rowe from the time she is twelve years old until she is well into her seventies. Through the words of the young and hopeful Ivy Rowe, the reader watches as her dreams of becoming the kind of writer she visualizes are dashed one by one when the reality and harshness of life trap her in the mountains of Appalachia. Early in the novel, the young and innocent Ivy insinuates that a writer cannot balance a career and a family, but by the novel's end, the seasoned and mature Ivy writes her daughter that she "came to understand something in that moment, Joli, which I had never understood in all these years."

> The letters didn't mean anything.
>
> Not to the dead girl Silvaney, of course—<u>nor to me</u>.

> Nor did they ever.
>
> It was the writing of them, that signified. (Smith, *Fair* 313)

Ivy Rowe finally recognizes that even though she may not be a published writer she is a writer, even if only for herself. She chronicles her life and her world through a mélange of letters, and following a long, rich, and complex history, *Fair and Tender Ladies* is a perfect match for the form, fit, and function of the epistolary novel.

A. Form: Its History and Development

Lee Smith has always experimented with form, voice, and narrative. Although her primary goal is to tell a story that is as true as it can be, she likes to examine how different perspectives affect the story. She knew in the genesis of her novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* that she wanted to tell the story of an Appalachian woman's life, but she struggled with how to write that story without the book's becoming a mammoth production. How could she span the events of one woman's whole life within the confines of a book? Luckily for Smith, the form for *Fair and Tender Ladies* almost found her, and coincidentally, its function offers a unique approach for preserving the life and times of Ivy Rowe, the quintessential mountain woman.

The form for *Fair and Tender Ladies* occurred almost by accident. Lee Smith found herself at a yard sale where a woman's house was being cleaned out, and its contents were being sold. As Smith wandered around and looked at what was up for sale, she stumbled upon a bundle of letters. She bought the packet of letters, took them home, and began reading them. While finding the letters may have been accidental, her

purchase was certainly fortuitous because she knew she had found the form for *Fair and Tender Ladies:*

> I love the way we express ourselves in letters. And so when I saw all these letters I just scooped them up, and I brought them back and read them for an entire weekend. And it was amazing. One sister was writing to another. And the letters were not so hot, but what I realized was, once you've read thirty or forty letters, you really feel like you know these people.
>
> And I began to think of a collection of letters as a vehicle for a story or a novel, because what you end up with is something much greater than what is actually on the page. Because of people that are alluded to but that you don't have to put in your novel, because of time that has passed. And it just seemed to me like a great device. (Powell 285)

Intuitively, Smith knew that the epistolary novel would serve her purpose in many ways. Letters have long been the oldest means of communication, and *Fair and Tender Ladies* begins with Ivy Rowe sending a communication to Hanneke. However, Ivy never thought of her letters as significant except to herself, and she certainly never thought of them as a literary art form. She believed a writer must be like Mr. Brown—a sentimental and romantic person filled with ideas and notions that were not part of the world that Ivy was accustomed to.

However, Lee Smith recognized the value of the epistolary novel as the form for *Fair and Tender Ladies.* The epistolary novel is an old and complex literary form, and

Godfrey Frank Singer, in his work *The Epistolary Novel*, provides an in-depth analysis of its history and development. Tracing its roots to its beginnings is no small feat, and Singer says that "the letter writing impulse is among the oldest in the nature of man" (1). Letters began as a way to send messages then advanced as a way to tell stories and reveal personalities to the reader (Singer 3). The New Testament is full of epistles. However, it was not until the eighteenth century that epistolary fiction was fully recognized as a literary form: "The vogue of the English novel of manners commenced with Richardson's epistolary *Pamela* (1741), and an unbroken succession of novels in letters appeared for nearly a century before the form dropped into virtual disuse" (Black 1). Samuel Richardson is acknowledged as "not only the man who chiefly developed the epistolary novel, but the father largely of the modern English novel" (Singer 60).

Richardson's novels, *Pamela, Clarissa,* and *Sir Charles Grandison* develop the epistolary form, which "has advantages peculiar to itself. It places the reader in the position of a confidential friend, thus creating a connecting contact between writer and reader, a contact Richardson always strove to preserve without resorting to direct address" (Singer 84). As its popularity as a literary device rose, the epistolary novel became a widespread art form. Europe was not the only place where the epistolary novel was in use. Singer says that Richardson's *Pamela* was available in America as early as 1744, and "that what is acknowledged to be the first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy,* was in epistolary form. This is a rather weak and ineffectually sentimental piece of work [. . .] once attributed to Sarah Wentworth Morton, but now doubted to be hers at all. It was published in Boston in 1789" (195-96).

In the late eighteenth century, the epistolary novel reached its zenith, and "It is safe to say that between two-thirds and three-fourths of the total product from 1760 to 1790 was by ladies" (Black 8). Letter writing was the acceptable form of expression for women in America as well as abroad:

> any effort at self-expression by women in colonial America was limited to keeping journals and writing letters. For centuries, such writings of southern women were relegated to the domestic sphere and deemed of little or no historical or literary importance. [. . .] For many women, their journals and letters served as needed confidantes with whom they could share their most intimate thoughts and feelings. [. . .] The restrictions on women's self-expression in any literary effort during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries limited many women to writing letters and keeping journals as a means of expressing their ideas, observations, and feelings about their society and their role in it. (Perry and Weeks 17-19)

The popularity of the epistolary novel began to fade after 1800. Fewer and fewer epistolary novels were being published. An increased interest in romance and history, along with improvement in narrative techniques, is the reason that interest in epistolary fiction waned. What once had been the format for presenting the novel suddenly lost its appeal, and literary interest focused on the development of the modern novel (Black 110).

However, the form did not become entirely extinct. From its origins in the eighteenth century to present day, the epistolary form is one that is returned to often, and

has been used in more than one case since the late 1970s. Two of the better known examples are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986):

> The most common subject of epistolary novels in the past has been the love and/or seduction story. [. . .] The epistolary novel's affiliations with the modern novel are even more pronounced today as women experiment with ways of using the letter as they *re*member, *re*turn, *re*flect, and write and *re*write their lives. (E. Campbell 334, 335)

Using the form of the epistolary novel for *Fair and Tender Ladies* was a unique approach for Smith, and yet it seems that it was a logical choice because "the form dictates to the writer how to write and to the reader how to read" (E. Campbell 336). The novel is about writing; it is about Ivy's writing as her art form; and it is the only device available to Ivy Rowe in the early 1900s in rural Appalachia. The epistolary form was a perfect fit for Ivy Rowe to tell her stories. Besides, what better form could there be for a young girl who wanted to write about love than a format that was often sentimental and also served as a way "to interpret our own life to us"? (Black 27).

For Ivy Rowe, a young innocent, writing a letter to a pen pal was an exciting prospect. Her teacher, Mrs. Brown, probably found the girl Hanneke for her to begin writing to. Ivy begins innocently writing her letter to Hanneke using the guidelines of her life, her chores, and her culture that Mrs. Brown gave her in the hopes of having a confidante because "It seems like I can not talk to my Family they is so many of us here in the house" (Smith, *Fair* 31). Interestingly, Mrs. Brown both inspires and encourages

Ivy to write because the teacher thinks her student has a talent for it while, on the other hand, Ms. Brown censors Ivy's first letter, and subsequently, discourages Ivy's openness and frankness in letters Ivy knows might be read by others. Mrs. Brown's response to her first letter forces Ivy to re-evaluate her letter-writing skills, and she realizes at a very young age she has to be more careful about what she writes to others. Once the censorship occurs, Ivy is more apprehensive about the content of what she considers her public letters—those that could be read by someone other than the recipient—and ventures into the realm of private letters for her most intimate thoughts. Choosing the form of the epistolary novel is important not only because the book is about writing, but also because "Women's writing and the epistolary style are generally the responses of those who have been oppressed and silenced" (E. Campbell 335).

In addition, *Fair and Tender Ladies* adheres to Elizabeth Campbell's assertion that the form of the epistolary novel is one whose letters "determine, advance, and resolve the plot but more importantly act as psychological motivators on characters in the novels" (333). Ivy plunges into her letter writing with great detail and beautiful imagery for one so young. In her first letter, Ivy tells the story of her family, and through the details she provides, the personalities of the people she writes about emerge in a clear and succinct fashion. She confides to Hanneke that her heart's desire is to be a writer: "I take a intrest in Love because I want to be in Love one day and write poems about it, do you? [. . .] I want to be a writer, it is what I love the bestest in this world" (Smith, *Fair* 15).

Thus, the form of the epistolary novel works well in *Fair and Tender Ladies* to present writing that is both "subjective and emotional; it reaches out as it looks inward, opening up and presenting a consciousness to a specific sympathetic listener" (E. Campbell 336). Ivy's letters are her mouthpiece, and the epistolary novel is a perfect fit for her as she examines and explores her life. By choosing the epistolary form for *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Smith lends integrity to the form as art: "Although the epistolary novel reached its peak in eighteenth-century Europe . . . it has reemerged in the past decades as a significant American art form." Furthermore, "Letters have long been recognized for their 'potential as artistic form and narrative vehicle' [. . .] and Smith adapts these uses to the Appalachian setting of *Fair and Tender Ladies*" (Robbins 136). For Ivy Rowe, whose desire is to be a writer more than anything, the epistolary style is the vehicle for that achievement. Even though Ivy believes that she does not succeed as a writer, the reader knows that is simply not true. Ivy is a writer in every sense of the word because she is writing throughout her life. She is creating, and she is making art.

B. Fit of the Epistolary Novel and Appalachian Narrative

The epistolary novel was a perfect fit for *Fair and Tender Ladies* because the epistolary form could have one character tell her story through a series of letters instead of several narrators as some of Smith's previous works do. Smith knew immediately that she could control the story more easily using only one person's viewpoint, even though it is not the straightforward first-person narrative. With the purchase of the letters, Smith found the story of one woman's life in their pages, and she realized that the

epistolary novel creates an intimacy that is not easily replicated through other narrative voices. As she read letter after letter, she felt as if she knew the people in them—not only the authors of the letters, but the other people who were alluded to as well. Also, Smith knew she had to make the passage of time occur quickly, and she discovered that letter writing was just the vehicle to do that. After all, when there are great gaps in time between letters, the letter writer can fill in the gap in years in a very succinct manner in her next epistle. Then the reader feels as if nothing is lost in the passage of time. By returning to the roots of the modern novel, the epistolary form was a natural trip for Smith. Inspired by a fateful packet of letters at a yard sale, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, while a new literary style for Smith, relied on the oldest form of the British, and subsequently, American novel.

Another important way the epistolary novel fit *Fair and Tender Ladies* is that it serves to create intimacy with the reader, and the reader comes to know everyone to whom and about whom Ivy writes:

> There is also a face-to-face quality characteristic of oral storytelling in Ivy's written words as if Molly is sitting across from her in the Rowe cabin instead of in a state far away. The oral traditions and "illiteracy" of the region are not replaced or corrected by Ivy's words, but become the essence of her art. [. . .] Ivy's letters record the process of changing identities as well as passing life phases. (Robbins 137-140)

As Ivy writes her letters, the reader sees the changes and her particular understanding of the events shaping her life as she tells her stories. She begins hopefully

as she writes to Hanneke, and she acknowledges that by writing her stories, she is able to see and document what is happening around her more clearly: "Now I am glad I have set this all down for I can see my Momma and Daddy as young, and laghing. This is not how they are today. For I have to say they did not live haply ever after as in Mrs. Browns book" (Smith, *Fair* 14).

Even though Ivy Rowe dreams of one day becoming a writer, she does not consider her letter writing as a way to achieve that goal. Instead she envisions someone like Mr. Brown as the epitome of what a writer should be. However, the epistolary novel is a perfect fit for her. Although she never is able to complete her education, her letters help make sense of her world and provide the only method of writing available to someone who was too busy trying to cope with the responsibilities of her family and the harshness of mountain life.

C. Function of the Epistolary Novel

For Lee Smith, Ivy Rowe's creator, the function of letter writing is multi-faceted in *Fair and Tender Ladies.* First and foremost, it functions as the art form for Smith's protagonist: "In three generations, from the storytelling Christmas sisters through letter-writing Ivy Rowe to Ivy's daughter Joli, the novelist, Smith demonstrates in *Fair and Tender Ladies* how oral storytelling becomes epistolary writing and subsequently novels. In doing so she diagrams the transfer of a culture from a verbal to a written art form" (Robbins 141). Moreover, she offers an example for her reader that clearly shows that art can be found in numerous places. Creating is what makes art, and every time Ivy Rowe

sets her pen to paper she is creating, or re-creating if you will, her world: "Ivy's words capture the essence of storytelling while they preserve her culture's personal histories" (Robbins 136).

Part of the attraction for using the epistolary form is its function. The letter is often viewed as a mirror where letter writers can examine themselves, and "an important characteristic of epistolarity is the confidential nature of the letter as well as the confidence the writer must have in the addressee. Epistolary fiction is, therefore, very often confessional" (E. Campbell 336). In addition, trust occurs between the writer and the reader of the novel, which is otherwise not possible when there is an omniscient narrator:

> In epistolary fiction there are two readers, the reader of the letters/texts within the novel itself and the reader of the novel. The reader of the novel is conscious of the text as both oral and written discourse and is also conscious of the reader in the text as both reading the words and hearing the voice of the writer/speaker. The reader knows both the writer and the reader in the novel. (E. Campbell 337-38)

Furthermore, epistolary fiction supplies the reader of the novel with details that were never meant to be read by a third party. Rather than taking on the role of the omniscient narrator of the traditional novel, the reader of the epistolary novel is better described as an omniscient reader: one "who knows what is in the mind of the writer through the letters and what is in the mind of the reader who reads them" (E. Campbell 338). As Ivy Rowe writes letter after letter in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, the role of the

reader of the novel is the omniscient reader. Not only does the reader come to know Ivy as she shares her world in her letters, but also the reader often knows what the addressee thinks because of the way Ivy responds to her recipient. For example, Ivy's second letter is to Mrs. Brown, her teacher, and in the letter the reader knows that Mrs. Brown is not pleased with Ivy's first letter, written to Hanneke, because Ivy says, "I do not understand what you mean that my letter is too long and not appropriate. I did not know you wuld read my letter ether" (Smith, *Fair* 20). The reader knows that, while Mrs. Brown encourages Ivy to write to Hanneke, she does not think Ivy has the ability to correspond with a pen pal in a proper way—in the way that Mrs. Brown believes that Ivy should. It is clear then that Mrs. Brown thinks that because she has taken Ivy on as her project (she later sends Ivy writing paper, books, meal, flour, coffee, and other supplies for her family) or because she is her teacher, she has the right to censor Ivy's writing. Ivy learns a valuable lesson when this occurs: she realizes that her words are not her own unless they are written in a letter that she does not intend to send. Even though "Mrs. Brown says I [Ivy] have a true talent she thinks" (Smith, *Fair* 15), the reader knows that Mrs. Brown does not trust Ivy's ability enough not to censor her letters.

Therefore, the reader of the epistolary novel is placed in a unique position. Not only does the reader "become omniscient, [. . .] somewhere above the world of the original text, [but also, the reader] must simultaneously keep in mind what is being written, how it is being read, and how the reading affects the writer. The reader of the epistolary novel usually knows more than either the writer or reader in the text itself" (E. Campbell 338). Many of Ivy's letters in the beginning of *Fair and Tender Ladies* are

written innocently, and they reveal much. However, many times more is revealed in what is not said in Ivy's letters than what is said. Inasmuch as Mrs. Brown wants to help Ivy get an education, she also wants to save Ivy from the confining life of Appalachia. Sometimes Mrs. Brown exhibits an air of superiority about her, or class consciousness, which Ivy is not yet aware of. Ivy does reveal in one of her letters that while "I know I am telling to much Mrs. Brown, it may not be approprite nether" (Smith, *Fair* 28).

Mrs. Brown is an outsider to Ivy's Appalachian world, and it is obvious in Ivy's letters to Mrs. Brown that her family is a curiosity because Ivy provides answers to Mrs. Brown's questions over and over again in her letters. Ivy is the local colorist. In almost every letter to Mrs. Brown, Ivy says "to anser your questin" (Smith, *Fair* 23, 25, 26, 39, 51, 73). Ivy goes to stay with Mrs. Brown when her niece Molly comes and, quite innocently, sees the difference between her world and the world of Mrs. Brown and Molly. She writes to her family: "Please do not think I am fancy, nor spoilt, nor putting on Airs. It is not so" (51). Ivy trusts Mrs. Brown, yet the reader does not. The reader believes that Mrs. Brown's motives are not purely altruistic, and that she seems to look down on Ivy and her family: "She toled Molly that mountain girls do not dance ballay, nor swim in a bathing costume. But we have swum down at the swimmen hole in the bend of the Levisa many times when Daddy took us fishen, I said as much" (53). Also, Mr. Brown seems to look at Ivy as some sort of experiment: "Because sometimes when I say things, Mister Brown writes them down in his notebook and then I feel like whatever I have said isnt mine any more, its a funny feeling" (54). Unfortunately for Ivy, the recognition of the Browns' motives comes too late. They are the force that splits

Silvaney from Ivy, and they are responsible for having Doc Trout send Silvaney to the "Elizabeth Masters Home in Roanoke Va" (73). Ivy finally sees Mrs. Brown as she truly is: "So althogh you have done what you think is best, it is not best, it is wrong" (73).

Another important function for the epistolary form in *Fair and Tender Ladies* is that it captures the nuances and inflections of Appalachian dialogue in Ivy Rowe's letters while also serving as a vehicle to preserve the traditions and culture of Appalachia. Smith manages to capture the rich oral tradition of Appalachia in the novel, and as Ivy matures, so does her language: "the series of letters in *Fair and Tender Ladies* depicts a transition in which the richness of Ivy's oral heritage is not lost in the acquisition of written skills" (Robbins 136). Ivy's story is told through her own words in letters that she writes to several other people throughout the book. There are no explanations for why Ivy is saying what she is saying, there is no narrative to muddy up Ivy's story, and there is no omniscient narrator intruding in the book. There is only Ivy, plain and simple, writing her story, revealing her thoughts, and maturing right before her reader's eyes: "The letter [. . .] lies between speech and silence, between an oral tradition which has been women's cultural responsibility in the form of nursery rhymes and fairy tales passed down to children, and the silence women assume when men speak" (Herrman 165).

Ivy Rowe learns quickly that her letters, and subsequently her voice, can be censored or silenced if she does not follow the rules set forth by others. In fact, Ivy learns this lesson after she writes her first letter. She begins eagerly writing her letter to Hanneke with candor and abandonment as she colors her world through her words. Unfortunately, the excitement and abandonment with which she began writing change

after she realizes that her first attempt at writing to a pen pal was not good enough for her teacher, and mentor, Mrs. Brown. Ivy writes to Mrs. Brown and reveals her disappointment and surprise that her writing and simultaneously her voice have been censored. A tone of disappointment is evident in her letter to Mrs. Brown, and Ivy realizes early on that her letters to others will always be subject to censorship or criticism, and not private or personal. If she sends her letters to others, there is always the possibility that someone other than the intended recipient can possibly read them, and her correspondence may no longer be private.

Thus, Ivy faces the silence women have had to endure along with the oppression that is foisted upon them. Critic Elizabeth Campbell believes that the epistolary novel is proof that there was no place in society for a woman's voice to be heard and that ultimately, a woman had to write herself into being through letters. The letter serves as "a subversive and freeing agent and also as a mirror in which they not only seek themselves and/or another but attempt to change their lives to reflect the mirror image" (332). More importantly, in contemporary fiction, "women find their freedom and their selves in the act of writing" (333).

Even though in the past the epistolary novel focused on love or seduction, all of that changed in the modern era. During the second half of the twentieth century women are more concerned "with seeking their individual identity." Interestingly, Campbell goes on to say that the mirror has an important place in epistolary fiction as "Women seek themselves in mirrors, use the text as a mirror, question the validity of their reflections in the text. [. . .] [and] They dance in front of mirrors" (334, 335). Ivy Rowe

does all of these things, yet she does not know how to view herself until she sees herself reflected in a store window when she is a young girl or when she sees herself reflected in a mirror as she dances in Franklin Ransom's house. It seems that through the mirror, or her reflection, Ivy finally realizes she truly does exist.

Because *Fair and Tender Ladies* is a novel about writing, the epistolary novel is the perfect vehicle to display Ivy's art. No other literary device can provide a better way to tell her story, and as a result a bond or intimacy is created between her and her reader. As the reader reads each letter Ivy writes, her character and her world are slowly revealed. The innocence of her youth is evident in her early letters to Hanneke and Mrs. Brown, when she is full of hope and excitement for her future—when she believes that she might one day be a writer, which is what she wants most in the world. The reader feels like her confidante, and thus, as Ivy writes more and more letters, it becomes a privilege to read them, especially those letters she does not intend to send or those to her dead father. In these letters the reader sees Ivy begin to realize that the harsh world she is part of is inescapable for her. Her family depends on her too much for her ever to be able to leave them except for short periods of time. Ivy Rowe surprises her reader sometimes because of the complexity of her character: she is intuitive for her age, she is a realist but also a dreamer, she is honest and forthright, and she is a strong mountain woman forced into a role that she often longs to escape, and yet she simply writes to try and make sense of her world—a world she never strays far from.

The form of the epistolary novel fits *Fair and Tender Ladies* because the heart of the novel is writing. The function of the epistolary novel is to preserve letters, to

document events in both the life of the writer and the recipient of the letter, and to provide a means of communication for the writer when oftentimes one is not available. Even though Smith's protagonist is limited by her education, she still maintains an art form by writing. Writing is what makes Ivy whole: "Smith's protagonists often struggle to achieve wholeness in a culture that circumscribes rather than nurtures them" (Broadwell 247). For Ivy, writing is the catalyst for achieving that wholeness.

CHAPTER 4: DEFINING OF IVY ROWE SECTION BY SECTION

Ivy Rowe, in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, is the female protagonist Lee Smith has been writing toward throughout her career. Finally, as Ivy comes into being, and develops fully into a strong, independent, and determined woman, she embodies all of the qualities Smith has tried to champion in her other works. No longer does Smith offer an example of what not to be like in her protagonist; now, clearly and unabashedly, she offers a woman who, even though her circumstances are meager at best, lives an extraordinary life and works through her trials and triumphs by writing her way through them. As a result, Ivy emerges as a heroic ideal, a woman to be emulated, and more than that, a woman to be celebrated because she chooses to survive and live as best she can with what she has at hand. She also serves as an example of the female artist because she is creating art in the form of her letters: a woman who is "very heroic and totally non-public" (Personal Interview 161) and whose "creativity [is] being often expressed in ways that are not understood" (Personal Interview 162).

Every nuance and incident that defines and shapes Ivy Rowe unfolds section by section in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and Smith provides an insider's view of the hardships, and also the happiness, found in life in Appalachia. The letters begin when Ivy is twelve, are arranged chronologically, and divided into five separate sections. Ivy's letters end where they began, on Sugar Fork, and she has come full circle. However, unlike many of Smith's other characters, she has not stagnated, nor has she allowed herself to become

defined by others. Therefore, by carefully examining the letters, section by section, the reader sees how Ivy makes sense of her world, and through her letters the reader sees how she thinks, how she feels, and exactly how she deals with the reality of her life and circumstances. In the carefully chronicled life of Ivy Rowe, it is almost as if a roadmap, or a manual, is provided for ways to cope as different circumstances crop up in our lives. While Ivy's situations may be unique to her, they are nonetheless, familiar because each of us faces something similar.

Furthermore, to see the maxims and simple truths Ivy reveals in her letters, it is necessary to look closely at each section of the novel and watch as Ivy evolves and becomes the role model Lee Smith was looking for when she created her. As she writes each of her letters, she emerges as the quintessential mountain woman—an unsung hero—and the world Smith loves, including its folklore and traditions, is beautifully captured in Ivy's letters. As Ivy grows and matures in each section of the novel, it is apparent why Smith found her strength appealing and necessary to document: it is also apparent why she felt Ivy was the type of woman she needed to "sing about" (Personal Interview 162).

A. I Letters from Sugar Fork

All roads begin and end on Sugar Fork for Ivy because she "need[s] the pure high air, and a mountain to lay my eyes aginst" (81) just as her daddy did. In *Fair and Tender Ladies,* "I Letters from Sugar Fork," Ivy begins writing her letters when she is twelve years old. In her first letter to Hanneke, a potential pen friend, Ivy introduces her family.

Through Ivy's letter writing in the first section of the novel, the reader watches Ivy leave the innocence of youth and her dreams as well, when she comes face to face with the harsh and cold reality of life. Ivy sees that there is a force far bigger than she is, or far bigger than any member of the Rowe family for that matter, at work in their lives, and there is nothing she or anyone can do to stop the wheels of change that inevitably occur to them. What Ivy learns is that one way to cope and deal with what life throws in one's path is to write it all down so that a sense of order is created out of the chaos: "I do think there's something about, just when you're going through that difficult kind of time [. . .] just to order any thoughts at all and put them in an order, it's satisfying to you because you get to these points where you can't do that in your life" (Smith, Personal 154). Ivy recognizes that things are beyond her control, and after her father dies she realizes that nothing will ever be the same for her or her family: "It was like Garnie ringing that bell had switched on some big awful machine that started rolling and going and wuldnt quit nor slow down for nothing, it kept on rolling till things was finished and done with" (42).[4]

The Rowe family is shattered and slowly becomes increasingly fragmented after her father's death: Ivy's oldest brother, Victor, returns to the lumber company and then joins the service; another brother Babe is killed; Silvaney is sent to the Elizabeth Masters Home; Ethel goes to work for Stoney Branham in town; Beulah has a baby and marries Curtis Bostick; and finally, Ivy's little brother Danny dies. The only family members left on Sugar Fork are Ivy's mother, Maude, Garnie, Johnny, and Ivy, and, unfortunately, those few left cannot maintain the farm. As if that is not enough, Ivy's mother shuts

herself off from her family; she "has closed up her hart agin us all it seems" (64). She is not emotionally available to Ivy and her family because she "is tired of figting, and all the fire has gone out of her" (72). Ivy has to mature early to bring some sort of stability and order to her family, and so she finds solace in writing a letter to her deceased father. In what is the last letter in "I Letters from Sugar Fork," Ivy tries to accept the fact that she and her family have to move in order to survive, even though the move is painful: "I reckon this to be the lastest letter I will ever write you in this world. And it migt be the last letter I will ever write ether. For I feel we have come to the end of all things. We are picking up and moving on, Momma says we have to, I gess she is right but it pains me so, for all I have loved is here" (80). The end of an era occurs for Ivy, and the chapter of her life as an adolescent on Sugar Fork is closing. The circumstances and events that occur bring Ivy to the realization that she has no one other than herself to rely on. Therefore, she must write the last letter to her father even though he is dead because no one loves Sugar Fork as much as Ivy does, she has no one else to bare her soul to, and she needs to try to make sense of what is happening.

In addition, she has to mourn the passing of this time on Sugar Fork, and who better to write to than her deceased father whom she feels she is leaving: "Daddy Daddy I hate to leave you most of all. When I think of you laying up there in yor little gravehouse it hurts me almost past baring it" (80). Her innocence comes to an end as does "I Letters from Sugar Fork": "It is time to go now. Oh Daddy dont you rember how you took us up the mountain ever year about this time to gather birch sap, it was so sweet and tart on yor tonge, and you said, Slow down, slow down now, Ivy. This is the taste of

Spring." (82). This last letter is necessary to capture and document her memories from her early life on Sugar Fork, but also Ivy has a place where she expresses and grieves for her loss. However, Ivy is also a realist, and she recognizes the necessity of her family moving to Majestic so that they can survive.

B. II Letters from Majestic

In "II Letters from Majestic," Ivy Rowe is finding her place in the world and begins to establish her individuality. Up to this point, she has been so caught up in her family that she does not have any way to become an individual: "I have not hardly ever had a thing of my own, it is handmedowns and pitching in and sharing everything" (26). She knows there is more to her life, yet she cannot put a name to it: "I was all full up with wanting, wanting something so bad, I culd not of said what it was" (46). The move to Majestic is a turning point for Ivy. She is closing a chapter in her life, "I will dry my eyes up now and try to look on the brigt side as Geneva Hunt tells me to do," (86) and is moving into a new phase. Once she records the move from Sugar Fork to Majestic in her letter to Silvaney, she is able to face what lies ahead for her. Moving into Geneva Hunt's boarding house helps Ivy blossom. She finally has a room of her own, a first for Ivy. In this room, she finds her own place where "I can go to the winder and push back my gauzy curtin and look out over all the town. It is mine, I say to myself then. This town is mine, Majestic Virginia, U.S.A." (88).

The letters in "II Letters from Majestic" begin with a more mature Ivy. Her grit, determination, and strength of character are all tested in Majestic, and by the time she

leaves Majestic she emerges as the strongest protagonist yet in Smith's fiction. She is the kind of woman Smith champions, and she emerges as a role model instead of as a meek, passive, and unquestioning character like those Smith has been trying to warn her readers about in her earlier fiction. Clearly, Ivy is not going to sit around and wait for something to occur at this point in her life, as some of Smith's earlier more passive protagonists have. Rather, she is trying on the role of independence and asserting her rights as an individual. As a result, she rejects the roles many of the other characters in Smith's previous novels blindly accept, and she decides to take control of her own life and choose her own destiny instead of becoming a victim to her fate. Ivy Rowe is a proud young woman when she moves to Majestic, and when she leaves she is prouder still because she decides to participate in her life and face her challenges head on.

One of the first challenges she faces in Majestic is finding out Silvaney's address. The tenacious Ivy marches straight into Doc Trout's office and tells him, "I have come to get the adress of the Elizabeth Masters Home where you have sent my sister Silvaney wich I am still mad about" (86). Ivy gets what she wants, and her first letter from Majestic is to Silvaney. Her letter to Silvaney provides a place where she can say good-bye to her life on Sugar Fork and accept the move to Majestic. Ivy knows she has no choice but to look ahead, and through her writing she assimilates the changes happening to her.

Ivy's life begins to change in Geneva Hunt's boarding house in Majestic, Virginia. The world is a brand new place for Ivy, and she now sees endless possibilities for herself. Suddenly, she is exposed to many different types of women, and for the first

time she sees women who are strong, independent, and able to manage on their own. Even though her heart is on Sugar Fork, Majestic is exciting and new to Ivy; she longs to see other places now that she is settled in a new place and phase of her life: "how often I try to imagine the world beyond this town, I would love to go!" (101). In addition, what makes the letters in the second section of the novel different from those in the first section is that Ivy is maturing and realizing for the first time she is a sexual being. She is no longer a curious adolescent wondering what it is like to kiss someone as she did on Sugar Fork; she is a young woman experiencing an awakening of her sensuous nature.

In Geneva Hunt's boarding house not only is Ivy increasingly aware of her own sexuality, but she sees the sexuality of others as well. Now she sees that the men at the boardinghouse "star until it is like ther eyes are touching my boddy underneath my dress" (86). Even though the staring frightens her somewhat, she is evolving into a mature, sexual being. In addition, she also witnesses Geneva's and Ludie's sexuality: "I see all of it. [. . .] But I am watching" (103). And neither Geneva nor Ludie is aware that she knows what they are up to although Geneva is not ashamed of her lifestyle because she is very comfortable in her own skin and does not care what others think of her.

Ivy seems to better understand her mother once she has Geneva Hunt as a comparison. She recognizes that her mother is not a strong woman like Geneva, nor does her mother cope well with the challenges life throws her way. Ivy sees her mother more clearly and remembers a scene she describes in her first letter to Hanneke in "I Letters from Sugar Fork" where she, Silvaney, Beulah, and Ethel are drying their hair in front of

the fire, and her mother becomes upset for no apparent reason. The scene ends with Ivy's father trying to explain away what is happening:

> Momma come in last night when we was all drying our hair [. . .]. Momma just set to starring with her eyes as big as a plate and then she commences to weeping out loud.
>
> Now Maude whats the matter, Daddy said to her from his pallet up next to the fire [. . .]. Whatevers the matter now Maude, Daddy said.
>
> These girls is all so pretty she said theyd be better off ugly, these girls is all so pretty theyd be better off dead.
>
> Hush now Maude you just hush she don't mean it girls, shes just wore out, Daddy said to us. She is all wrought up don't pay her no mind now girls, Daddy said. (15)

It is clear to Ivy at her young age and on more than one occasion that her mother is not the role model she wants to mimic. Ivy loves her mother, but Ivy is also very practical and a realist. What her mother exhibits is frightening to Ivy, and she wants to be strong. In different letters Ivy is concerned for her mother: "my momma sits out in the snow and crys, she says shes a fool for love" (24); Ivy writes to her grandfather, Mister Castle, "Momma is not pretty no more but crys all the time now" (24); in comparison to Edith Fox, Ivy writes "my momma is hard as a rocky clift, and her eyes burns out in her head" (27), a description she uses later to describe Silvaney as she mentally moves further and further away. When the Cline sisters visit at Christmas, it seems to Ivy that she must be the hostess because her mother appears to slip further down inside herself, and she and

her mother switch roles because "I looked at Momma wich weren't no good, Momma was looking wild and she bit at her lip, she had bit it so much it was all ready bleeding. Her hair was all over her head. She clutched up her skirt in her hands" (33). When Ivy's family moves into Geneva Hunt's boardinghouse, Ivy sees the stark contrast between Geneva and her mother: "her face is still halfway hanted. Momma is like she is scarred of fun. It is hard to see how her and Geneva got to be such good frends as they are so different [. . .]. And I have read it in a book that opposites attrack, well Geneva is surely the oposit of our Momma!" (89). Geneva has far more to offer as a role model to Ivy than what she sees in her mother, and tales of Geneva's antics begin to fill the pages of Ivy's letters. In fact, Ivy talks about Geneva incessantly—her thoughts, her actions, her strength, her car ownership, her decision to remain single after three failed marriages, her independence, and her ability to take care of herself. Geneva lives according to her own rules, which Ivy admires and eventually decides to do as well.

Ivy also sees firsthand the freedom a man has versus the freedom a woman has as she watches the logs being gathered, the river rising, and the men and boys preparing to create rafts so they can hop on them for a ride down the river to Kentucky. She longs to experience the freedom men have and, in fact, at one point thinks about donning men's clothing so she can hop on one of the rafts and ride them down the river. She knows there is more that she wants to experience than what is usual for a woman's life, and what appeals to her most at the time is "not knowing what you migt find around any bend" (92). Ivy wants to live and experience as much as she can, and she recognizes at a young age what is expected of a woman is far different than what is expected of a man.

In "II Letters from Majestic," Ivy tries on many roles: she entertains the idea of disguising herself as a man so she can float away to parts unknown; she takes on the pseudo-role as head of the family as she advises and encourages her mother to sell the mineral rights to Sugar Fork because she is tired of her family's struggling; she comes to appreciate Geneva Hunt's spunk and independence; she becomes the news bearer for her family in her letters to her family, and she keeps her family connected by communicating with each member either in person or in her letters; she toys with the idea of going to Boston with Miss Torrington, and, finally, she loses her virginity to Lonnie Rash when she takes him to her room.

Lonnie has been after Ivy repeatedly to sneak him into her room, and she resists his pleas; she knows he is not her equal—Ethel and her teacher, Miss Torrington, tell her so. What finally drives Ivy to let Lonnie Rash enter her private sanctum are the homosexual advances (heretofore unseen in any of Lee Smith's fiction) by Miss Torrington: "And then, Silvaney, Miss Torrington kissed my neck! I froze. [. . .] I could not breth, I could not think what to do, but while I was still thinking it seemed, I found myself jumping up from there and in my haste I knocked over the chair [. . .]. I lit out of that room as fast as I could go" (111). Ivy heads to her room, and when she gets to the top of the stairs, Lonnie Rash is waiting for her. In her confused state, she lets him into her room to erase the "unnatural" (for emphasis) act of Miss Torrington's and to replace it with what she believes is a more natural act. That night she loses not only her virginity, but herself as well for a time. Once Ivy lets Lonnie Rash invade her room, her

space, and her body, she realizes that she has lost everything. Her one moment of passion, driven by a desire to erase Miss Torrington's kiss, costs her dearly:

> I looked out my window and felt so sad, and then all of a sudden I knew why, because I have lost it now, Majestic Virginia which used to be mine. And this room in Geneva Hunts boardinghouse is not my own ether, not any more, I have lost it too because of bringing Lonnie up here. I do not understand this Silvaney, but it is true. So I stayed awake awhile and looked out on the town but it aint mine any more Silvaney, it is not. I have lost it now. (112)

After that fateful night, Ivy's life is forever changed. Miss Torrington leaves Majestic and heads back to Boston. But the worst is yet to come for Ivy. When Lonnie pressures her to marry him before he heads off to war, she refuses. She writes to her sister Beulah, "I do not love Lonnie, believe me. There is a strong feeling I get when I am with him, it is true, but when I am not with him I do not have this feeling, and if it was love, I would" (113). Ivy is no fool; what she feels is nothing more than a physical attraction, not something worth marrying for. One thing that surprises Ivy most is Geneva's reaction to her refusal to marry Lonnie. She tells Ivy that marriage just might be her ticket because "love don't last long anyway, and I may as well get me a nice one while the getting is good" (114).

Geneva lets Ivy down by suggesting that she marry Lonnie Rash despite the fact that she does not love him. She thinks her mother has already let her down because she is not emotionally fit to help her: "she [Ivy's mother] looks out at the mountains and smiles

a little and says Well Ivy, you certainly have got yourself in a stew now but I must say you have got a mind of your own. [. . .] But it is like Momma is talking to somebody else, not her own daughter, it is like she moves farther and farther beyond us in her mind" (114). Lastly, her relationship with Lonnie marks her as a ruined woman when the local school mistress, Mabel Maynard, sees him leaving down the steps from her room. Judge Brack tells Miss Maynard that Ivy is not "ruint my dear but merely compromised" (114) Ivy realizes once again that she has only herself to depend on, but she wants it this way for now.

As Lonnie Rash leaves to join the army, Ivy exerts her right for freedom. She may not be able to hop on a log and head down a river as some of the men and boys in Majestic do, but she knows she is in control of her own destiny, and she decides on independence. Ivy's emotions are mixed and confusing to her, so she writes to Silvaney to sort through what she is feeling: she is sad because she will miss Lonnie, but at the same time she is relieved to see him go because the pressure he has been exerting on her to marry him is gone with him. She knows marrying him would be a big mistake, but she also knows marriage is expected of a woman in her time when others know she is sleeping with her boyfriend. However, Lonnie's departure gives Ivy the opportunity to choose freedom over marriage. With his departure, Ivy regains a sense of self and looks at the world differently. Suddenly, Miss Torrington's offer to come to Boston looms larger than ever before as a real possibility, and Ivy sees it as her ticket to freedom—her chance to jump on a log at last: "I will go, I will go, and if I do not like it there I can

come back, I can always do that for I am grown up now even though I am compromised and no lady [. . .]. I am free to come and go as I please" (120).

Unfortunately, Ivy's plans go awry when she discovers that she is pregnant. The sense of freedom that she experiences with Lonnie's departure is gone: "I can not go to Boston, or have a new life, or do anything ever again" (121). Geneva has Doc Trout examine Ivy to be sure she is pregnant, and he offers to terminate the pregnancy if she would like. However, Ivy never makes that choice because somehow her mother stands up to Geneva and Doc Trout and insists that Ivy have her baby. Her mother tells her then that they will do whatever is necessary to take care of her baby. Even though she is pregnant, Ivy still refuses to consider marrying Lonnie Rash.

The importance of Ivy's stay in Majestic, Virginia, is that here she begins really to think about the ideas and opinions of others and develop her own code to live by. Also in Majestic, Ivy begins writing letters to her sister Silvaney, who she knows cannot read them and certainly cannot respond to them, and uses the letters as a place to reflect, record, and reorganize her thoughts, so she clearly sees the importance of events that occur. Her letters to Silvaney are the only place where she is totally open and honest and able to bare her soul:

> I feel I am bursting with news but I can not tell it to a sole, I have no one to talk to. It is hard to say. But I feel that things are happening two times always, there is the thing that is happening, which you can say, and see, and there is another thing happening too inside it, and this is the most important thing but its so hard to say. For an instance, I have just

> written a letter to Beulah, and every word I said was true, but there is so much I dare not say. Oh Silvaney my love and my hart, I can talk to you for you do not understand, I can write you this letter too and tell you all the deep things, the things in my hart. For sometimes, as Geneva says, a girl has just got to let down her hair! And it is like you are part of me Silvaney, in some way. So I can tell you things I would not tell another sole. (102)

By writing her letters, she arrives at decisions about how to live and how to think because without writing it all out none of it would probably make much sense, and she might simply go through the motions of living. However, writing it all down in a letter to a familiar recipient whom she seems to ask for advice or for an opinion helps Ivy to define and clearly identify what is important to her and helps her decide how she will live her life. She is developing a more defined and stronger sense of herself in Majestic. For example, when she writes to her sister Beulah and asks, "I do NOT believe that if you make your bed, you have to sleep in it for ever. Do you?" (116), she is not expecting a reply. The question is merely rhetorical, for Ivy knows, and has already stated, what she believes. In a letter to Silvaney she asks, "Must we always tell the truth, even if it hurts another very much?" (118). Ivy's letters to Silvaney are different because she uses them to express her thoughts for she knows that Silvaney is incapable of answering her: "Expressing herself through writing is as necessary for Ivy as breathing, measuring the validity of each experience by her ability to retell it, mostly in letters to Silvaney" (Byrd ,

"Sexuality" 213). And through her letters she is able to develop her own code to live by; she is also able to fulfill her childhood dream of becoming a writer:

> With the discovery of Ivy's first pregnancy, she believed she had to choose between becoming a mother and pursuing an education and career; therefore, at her mother's insistence, she resigned herself to a domestic, uneducated life and believed she was forfeiting her dream of becoming a writer. However, in pursuing her artistic talent through writing letters, without realizing it, Ivy actually experiences firsthand the inspiration for her art. (Byrd, "Sexuality" 213)

Ivy's pregnancy does indeed change her life, but at least she sees her mother exhibit strength at a time when Ivy needs it most. The act is significant because Ivy's mother rises from a state of depression, or apathy (we are never sure which), and cares for her family. Ivy will mimic her mother's actions later in her own life when she needs the strength to escape the darkness threatening to engulf her and care for her family also. The difference between Ivy and her mother is that her mother dies shortly afterwards, and Ivy discovers her strength at a much younger age than her mother and decides to live instead of waiting too late to find the strength and courage she needs to face what life offers. In the meantime, Ivy mother tells her they will find a way to care for and raise the baby. Not long after her mother's death, Ivy leaves Majestic and heads to Diamond, Virginia, where she moves in with her sister Beulah and her husband, Curtis Bostick.

C. III Letters from Diamond

A new phase of Ivy's life begins with her move to Diamond, Virginia. In her first letter, written to Silvaney, she is optimistic: "Here I am over on Diamond Fork with Beulah and Curtis having a new life" (133). She hopes the move is a chance for a new beginning, a new start. On the day she arrives, Beulah gives birth to another son and asks the doctor afterwards to fix her so she cannot have more children. Ivy hears a frighteningly familiar sound of desperation in Beulah's voice reminiscent of their mother. Furthermore, Beulah is "acting real funny" (133), and when the doctor refuses, Beulah begins crying and does not stop for three days. When she begins writing down the events surrounding the birth of Beulah and Curtis's son, a clear contrast between Ivy and Beulah is apparent: Beulah acts funny (probably a sign that she suffers from postpartum depression); Beulah "hates Sugar Fork when she thinks of it, and yet I love it, now isn't this odd" (134); and Beulah puts on airs. In addition, Beulah is a very unhappy person who longs for more. She even tells Ivy, "We will have more" (134). On the other hand, Ivy is none of these things and is very happy. She does not see any reason for Beulah's incessant crying, and her sister's behavior is funny or strange to Ivy. She is excited about the possibilities of a new place, and the tone of her letter indicates a sense of wonder and appreciation for her surroundings. Ivy knows that Beulah will never be satisfied, that she will always be reaching for something she cannot quite seem to get, and that she will never be happy with what she has—clearly the opposite of Ivy. Beulah views Sugar Fork as an empty world whereas Ivy thinks of it as the place dearest to her

heart, and while it creates a void in Beulah, it fills Ivy up. The contrast between the two is clearer the more Ivy writes, and as a result, Ivy is more clearly defined.

In Diamond, Virginia, Ivy's world becomes a little larger as she experiences new and exciting things, and her letters are like seeing a film or documentary about Diamond as she describes it in fine detail. Too much is available, and she has to write about it so she can digest everything this new place has to offer. The world of Diamond is a coal mining world, and the town is a company town centered on the mine and its workers. Ivy learns quickly there is a hierarchy in Diamond, and she writes that the more important people are the higher up Company Hill their houses are. At the top of the hill is the superintendent's home, originally built as a summer home by the owner, and "There is not a house in Majestic that can hold a candle to it, nor anywhere else even France" (137). The company store where Curtis works "is the heart of this town, it is the heart of the world it seems, it is very important, and so is Big Curtis" (135). Ivy continues to read and borrows books from the local schoolhouse. The Company also provides the entertainment and relaxation for its citizens. An employee baseball team is started; box suppers and cakewalks are regular activities; a bunkhouse is available for men who are there to work in the mines, both single men and those men whose families have not yet joined them; and a "movie house" (136) is a treat for Ivy. The town is modern to Ivy, and the excitement she feels is evident in the words she uses to describe it: "fantastic," "paradise" (137), "exciting and fast" (138). The only negative factor in the town Ivy points out is how dirty one gets from all the coal dust.

While Ivy is living with Beulah and Curtis, she begins to form what will be a lifelong friendship with Violet Gayheart, who is a neighbor and whose husband is as important in the company as Curtis is because their homes are next door to each other. Beulah looks down her nose at Violet because she thinks she "is too rough" (140), but Ivy thinks, "Rough! Well I don't care a fig for rough since I am ruint anyway which is worse, but I held my tongue. For Beulah has got good intentions I know, and her and Curtis are so nice to take me in" (140). Ivy finds herself remembering her father's firm belief in not being beholden to anyone, and now she understands why he felt the way he did: "it is a funny thing about being beholden, once you get beholden to somebody you are likely to hate them a little bit although this does not make a bit of sense as they are just being nice" (140). For now Ivy feels this way about Beulah, and she realizes there is almost always a price to pay.

As Ivy begins to prepare both physically and emotionally for the birth of her baby in Diamond, the more she writes, the more excited she gets. She picks out a name, yet she tells no one except Silvaney in her letter, and she chooses the name because it reminds her of Mrs. Brown, who offered Ivy a view of a world she did not know. In the midst of her excitement and preparation, she tells Silvaney that one of the reasons she is looking forward to the birth of her daughter is that she is lonely: "So many many people, yet I am lonesome, and cant explain it. There is nobody for me to talk to here but when Joli comes, I will talk to her. And I cant wait!" (141). Ivy's daughter, Joli Rowe, is finally born on September 10, 1918.

Much happens in the short time between when Joli is born and when Ivy provides the details of her birth in a letter to Silvaney dated November 20, 1918, but in the interim it becomes easier to see how Ivy is maturing and evolving into what she believes a strong, fair, and independent woman should be. What becomes evident is that as Ivy writes her letters and tells about the people and events, she also provides examples of what or how she is choosing not to be. For example, in a letter to Geneva Hunt she tells her she is surprised by the news about Lois Branham (Stoney Branham's wife, proprietor of the store in Majestic that Ethel, Ivy's sister, works for). She is a woman who chooses to lie in bed all the time, and what surprises Ivy is that Lois commits suicide because it would "take a really wild and dramatic person to do something like that" (142). What is important is what Ivy does not say because the real tragedy to her is not the final act of the suicide itself; the death is, after all, merely anticlimactic. The real tragedy to Ivy is that Lois Branham stopped living years before when she decided to stay in her bed and have "Ethel to bring her some prunes for constipation" (142). The act of suicide almost seems like an afterthought. In a similar fashion, Mabel Maynard has a nervous breakdown, which is no real surprise to Ivy, and she tells Geneva that Ms. Maynard had already shown signs of her inability to cope with the normal course of life because she chose to go to bed when Ivy's mother died and her body was in the sitting room. Ivy has no real sympathy for either of these women because she thinks they chose only to exist instead of to live.

As an antithesis to the lives of Lois Branham and Mabel Maynard, Ivy tells Geneva about the beginning of a new life—the birth of her first child, Joli, which also

exemplifies how the circle of life continues. Even when things change, they still remain the same. Life is important to Ivy as is tradition, and she needs to tell Geneva about what happened when Joli was born: "Did you know that old Granny Rowe and Tenessee came over here when she was born and stayed two days?" (143). Relying on the age-old belief that lunar cycles affect labor, Granny Rowe arrives on Curtis and Beulah's doorstep on the eve of a full moon. Granny Rowe's sudden appearance has a twofold purpose for Ivy. First is her disdain for Beulah's reaction to Granny's uninvited arrival: "I almost hear Beulah thinking, Oh no, here they are and they will stay until this baby comes which might be weeks. [. . .] Oh no, Beulah was thinking" (143). Nothing is more important to Ivy Rowe than family, and for Beulah to be embarrassed or ashamed of her family and where she came from is far worse to Ivy than Beulah's feelings, which are both foreign and unacceptable to Ivy. Beulah is everything Ivy is not, but, more importantly, she is everything that Ivy does not want to be, and all of this is clear to Ivy as she writes. Second, an awakening, or reawakening, occurs for Ivy when Granny Rowe shows up. Ivy realizes how fast life passes—how it cycles in and out, and she also realizes she is caught up in the material world of Diamond and has forgotten how to enjoy the natural world: "It is funny how in a town like this [. . .] that you forget to notice things like the moon. I looked up at it that night and it was like I had never seen it before" (143). Ivy needs this reminder because she is too much a part of the natural world to forget it by being caught up in the trappings of the modern material world, and she knows it. The link to the moon and the natural world with its connection to childbirth serves as a reminder that childbirth is one of nature's most natural events. The birth of Joli fills a

void in Ivy's life. She writes to Geneva: "You know we were short on play-prettys, growing up—I do not recall but one doll-baby ever, and Silvaney used to grab her and run off. Well now I have got a doll-baby all my own, and nobody can take her away" (144). But Joli was more to Ivy than merely a play-pretty: "You know I have lost so many that I love, I am determined to watch over this one good" (144).

More and more of Ivy's belief system is revealed in letter after letter. When Ivy replies to a letter she apparently receives from her sister Ethel with news of her marriage to Stoney Branham, Ivy tells her that all she wants is what Ethel wants: "Anything that makes you happy makes me happy too. I want what you want for yourself" (144-145). From what Ivy says in the letter, it is evident that there is gossip in Majestic surrounding Ethel's marriage to Stoney Branham so soon after his wife's suicide. Basically, what Ivy believes and tells Ethel is that there are many more important issues for people to concern themselves with, and she should pay no attention to what folks are saying. Gossip soon fades and is forgotten, something Ivy will soon learn firsthand. Ivy also tells Ethel not to worry about what Beulah thinks "because she will get over it" (145). Beulah is perhaps the perfect foil for Ivy.

Life in Diamond is fast, and Ivy's letters reflect that pace as she shows us how rapidly her world is changing. The railroad comes in and leaves quickly. The town is bursting at the seams, and men have resorted to living in the woods because the number of people is growing faster than are the facilities for them to live in. Likewise, Ivy's world outside of Diamond is changing too. She realizes this when she receives news of

Lonnie Rash's death, which happened in France, in addition to all of the other changes taking place as well.

Once again, however, she writes a letter to Silvaney in order to make sense of all that is happening and to find solace because she needs a place to go to where she can rethink, record, and reorganize events as well as her thoughts. Besides sorting through the emotions she feels, one of the most important reasons she writes her letter to Silvaney is so she can remember the birth of her daughter, Joli: "I will write it down plain for I want to remember it always, and I can tell I am forgetting it already, the way I am afraid I am forgetting some things about Sugar Fork and even Majestic. I think this is one reason I write so many letters to you, Silvaney, to hold onto what is passing" (147). When Ivy writes her letters to Silvaney, she is able to step back from what is happening with the perspective of an onlooker rather than a participant, which is what helps bring her readers into the world she creates in her letters. Even though Ivy knows Silvaney will never read the letter, she knows what is happening to her is far too important to let it become a mere memory because it can be blurred or forgotten as time passes. She knows she needs to create a permanent record because "This is important, I want to remember this, it is all so important, this is happening to me. And I am so glad to write it down lest I forget" (149).

What Ivy once thought was paradise changes, and Diamond, Virginia, loses the appeal it once had for her: "this place is not paradise by a long shot. I used to think it was" (150). As World War I ends the economy declines; people are being laid off and owe more than they earn while a flu epidemic rages through the town as well resulting in a large number of deaths. During this time, Ivy is cementing her relationships with

Violet Gayheart and Oakley Fox. However, Beulah has her own plans for Ivy and thinks she is too good for the likes of the Violet and Oakley. She has her heart set on Ivy marrying up in the world, and her idea of "up" comes in the person of Franklin Ransom, the superintendent's son, who is "no good" (156). Beulah is one of the unhappiest characters in the novel because she always wants more, is never satisfied, and is also a very jealous and self-serving person. She tells Ivy, "Oh if I was you . . . if I was educated like you . . . if I'd had the chances you have—well, if he does come back, if he comes up here again, you be nice to him, you hear me?" (156). The irony in Beulah's accusations is Ivy has no more opportunity than Beulah. The difference between them is Ivy makes opportunities occur while Beulah does not.

In a letter to Geneva Hunt, Ivy paints a very dark and foreboding picture of Diamond to reiterate that this place is not the paradise she once thought it was. In fact, it is the complete opposite: "It is every man for himself and so much of the neighborness is gone" (160). The "mine has come to look like a big old mouth, swallowing boys whole" (160). Men are fighting, drinking, gambling, and swapping wives while the children have no supervision and are out of control as well. It is almost utter chaos. However, in the midst of all of this deterioration, Ivy finds good times. She spends a lot of time with Violet Gayheart, whom she admires for her forthrightness and tenacity because Violet reminds her of Geneva and Ethel, and "She will call a spade a spade" (161). Oakley Fox frequently stops by to see Ivy and always brings something to either her or Joli. He continues even when Ivy is seeing Franklin Ransom.

Once again, Ivy writes to Silvaney in order to sort out and record the details of all that is happening: "So much, so much has happened! And there is so much I can not tell to a living soul, I will write it to you instead" ((164). Interestingly, Ivy chooses to write down what happens much in the same way Joli colors outlining her pictures first and then filling them in with color. In a similar fashion, Ivy says simply, "The mine fell in, and I got married. I will fill it in later" (164). She will come back and provide details. First, she needs to think and write about her affair with Franklin Ransom because "there is no place on the page here for me to put him, no black lines I can color him into. It was always like that. I never could see his outline clear" (164). Franklin is another sad character in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, but he is quite the ladies' man. He is a lot of fun for Ivy, and with him, she is able fully to embrace her sexuality and see her beauty:

> Later he took me in his parents bedroom and laid me down across the pale green satin bed. And later still, he turned on the bedside light and got me to look in the mirror door. I had never seen a mirror door before. I had never looked at my whole body all at one time.
>
> And Silvaney, oh Silvaney, I am beautiful! Beulah said we look good in red but we look even better in nothing. I <u>am</u> beautiful! (167).

As Ivy continues to see Franklin on a fairly regular basis, people begin to treat her differently because, as Violet tries to tell her, "A man like that, he's not like usuns" (171). Ivy already knows that Franklin is different, yet not in the way Violet means. Something is definitely wrong with him; however, Ivy chooses to continue to spend time with him because she likes having fun, she likes the temporary escape he offers her when she is

with him, and she likes the sexual freedom she is able to experience with him: "Because it is a fact that if you are ruint, like I am, it frees you up somehow" (167).

On September 20, 1926, things changed again for Ivy. An explosion occurs at the mine in the morning, and as Ivy writes about her daily activities on the fateful day, she recognizes how precarious and dangerous life is for the mineworker and his family and how precious yet uncertain life is. She sends Violet on to the mine since the explosion happens on her husband's shift; she babysits Joli and Martha, Violet's daughter; she bakes and cooks and cleans; and when she cannot stand it any longer she goes to the mine. Everything in Diamond halts with all of the focus on rescuing the miners who are in the mine when the explosion occurs. Ivy describes her mind as fluttering, and she does not know why immediately:

> My mind fluttered and fluttered and finally landed, and then I knew who I was waiting for. [. . .]
>
> Oakley Fox!
>
> I jerked the girls along crying down the hill, almost fell through the lanterns lined up like a ring of fire. The mine gaped. I didn't know if he'd come out dead or alive, covered up or walking. [. . .] The huge black mouth of the mine yawned smoky and wide before me, and three men came walking out. One of them was Oakley. [. . .] It was like the mouth of the mine had opened up and let him go, like he had been spared, or like he had just been born. (176)

A total of nineteen men are killed on that day in September of 1926, including Oakley's brother, Ray, and Violet's husband, Rush. After that day, Ivy marries Oakley, and they decide to leave Diamond, Virginia, and move back to Sugar Fork.

D. IV Letters from Sugar Fork

In April, 1927 Ivy writes her first letter after her return to Sugar Fork to her brother Victor to thank him for coming to Sugar Fork, for helping them clear the land, and for readying the place for habitation. However, she also writes to him to tell him that she is still mad at him because of the way he told her about Silvaney's death. She knows she should not be angry at him, and tells him so, but it seems she cannot help it because of the grief she is feeling. She tries to explain what she feels in her letter:

> Whatever I was doing, whatever befell, I always thought Silvaney was right there looking over my shoulder some way, I can't explain it, and that one day I would go get her and bring her home. I have felt like I was split off from a part of myself all these years, and now it is like that part of me has died, since I know she will never come. (181-82)

Ivy realizes that she is wrong to be mad at Victor, yet she needs to vent her anger, and once she does, she then apologizes. Even though Silvaney's death saddens Ivy tremendously, she tells Victor, "I am back where I have longed to be, where I belong. The garden is coming up now, so in spite of myself almost I am the happiest that I have ever been" (182). Thus, her return to Sugar Fork is bittersweet, but she settles into her new life with Oakley, Joli, and Martha, Violet Gayheart's daughter.

Two months later, in June, 1927, Ivy writes to Violet to assure her there is plenty of room for Martha in their home on Sugar Fork, and she and Oakley are happy for her to be a part of their family. Her letter to Violet is fairly short, yet she is still able to provide a snapshot of her home, her life, the mountains, and her marriage. She also offers more insight into why writing is so important to her: "Sometimes I despair of ever understanding anything right when it happens to me, it seems like I have to tell it in a letter to see what it was, even though I was right there all along" (183). Even though this may be true, Ivy never has any problem in deciding how to live. She is a strong woman with strong convictions who tries to live as true to herself as she knows how, and she easily acknowledges she makes a lot of mistakes. For example, she tells Violet that she does not know why she was with Franklin as long as she was except that he "was like a sickness that came over me and stayed" (183). Again, Ivy needs to write it all down so she can better understand what drives her to do some of the things she does and why she behaves as she does.

In one of the few letters Ivy writes to her sister Beulah, Ivy makes a gentle appeal to her not to lose touch. After all, family is very important to Ivy. In a way, she tries to offer an apology, or at least an explanation, to Beulah for marrying Oakley and moving back to Sugar Fork because these are two things Beulah would never approve of: she has never liked Oakley and she hates Sugar Fork. However, Ivy describes a beautiful, natural setting and asks Beulah to "Try to think of me like this, in all these flowers, and don't be mad at me or disappointed because I failed to marry Franklin Ransom as you hoped, or make a schoolteacher either as Mrs. Brown and Miss Torrington wished" (184). In Ivy's

detailed description to Beulah of her return to Sugar Fork, she tells her how everything seems smaller than she remembers, as is the case with most adults when they return to a childhood home or some other place they remember from their childhood. The home on Sugar Fork still has reminders from days past: there is a "twist of tobacco that must have been Granny Rowe's, as dry as a piece of rope, and some several old gourds full of seed that was never planted" (188); there is a chest in the attic where Ivy finds her mother's burying quilt, which she decides to use on hers and Oakley's bed; and there is an "old bull-tongue plow that Oakley found out by the orchard" (189), which was originally used by Ivy's father. The past gives way to the present as the burying quilt is placed on Ivy and Oakley's marriage bed, and the plow helps prepare the fields for the new crops and new life on Sugar Fork. Ivy sees how the past helps create the present, and she embraces both by the end of her letter to Beulah.

The letters are becoming more infrequent as Ivy begins to have children, and she is too busy to write. She writes Miss Torrington in January 1931 to thank her for clothes she has sent for Ivy's twin boys, Bill and Danny Ray, who were born in 1929. She begins a letter to Miss Torrington that she never completes in 1935, and her next short letter to Miss Torrington is in January, 1937. Ivy had another daughter, Lulda in 1935, which is probably the reason the letter in 1935 is never finished. Maudy is born during the summer of 1936, so Ivy's time is spent having children and caring for them, and somewhere in the middle of all this, Ivy has two babies who die. There is not time to write her letters, which is obvious by their sparseness and infrequency.

Even though Ivy always knew Silvaney could not read or understand her letters, and they are almost like diary entries, she writes her first letter to a deceased Silvaney in June, 1937. Many years have passed since Ivy has done any real writing:

> Silvaney. Silvaney. I have missed you so. For years I could not get over the fact that you will never come to us here, I had sulled up about it, you know how mad I can get! My mind could not move around this fact, to write you a letter. You or anybody else. But now all of a sudden this time is past, I can not say how or why, and again I am dying to write. (193)

Suddenly, Ivy needs to write to Silvaney because a change is occurring, and she has no one else to talk to. Her letters provide her with an audience, and in her letters to Silvaney she has an imaginary audience to whom she can express her innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires. Ivy finds and keeps her sanity by writing. She realizes she has been trapped in a state of depression for a long time, "a great soft darkness, a blackness so deep and so soft that you can fall in there and get comfortable and never know you are falling in at all, and never land, just keep on falling" (194-95). And she wonders if that is what was wrong with her mother. Now, however, she is emerging from the darkness, and she writes because suddenly the lights come on both literally and figuratively for Ivy. The literal lights come on because of a "rural electrification project" (194), which put lights all over the mountains lighting up the hillsides. The lights coming on also figuratively reflect that Ivy is coming out of the darkness. One of the first steps is when she realizes, "this is your life, this is your real life, and you are living it. Your life is not going to start

later. This is it, it is now. It's funny how a person can be so busy living that they forget this is it. This is my life" (195).

Inasmuch as Ivy needs to write because she is coming out of a period of depression, she also needs to write so she can understand how she got there and how she can avoid returning. She also needs a place where she can express what she dare not say aloud because she knows her responsibilities as wife and mother are "sucking my life right out of me" (195). Ivy is only thirty-seven, but the darkness takes a toll on her, and she feels as if she has been "leeched out by hard work and babies" (195). She rarely sees anyone outside of her family, so she loses interest in everything including her reading and her letter writing. The moments that stand out in her mind are what she refers to as her statues, moments she wishes to freeze in her memory. The image comes from a game she, Silvaney, Beulah, and Victor played when they were children. Victor would spin them around and where they landed is where they had to stay. She says, "Now I feel like I've been playing Statues and got flung down into darkness, frozen there. I see myself frozen this way, frozen that way. I look down in my mind and see my statues" (196). However, the statues she describes in her letter are of special times that she remembers, and they are also moments in time that Ivy feels she must hang onto or they will be lost forever.

The first of these memories is when Granny Rowe came not long before she died and took Ivy up in the mountains to find herbs and "sallet greens. You have got to purify your blood, Granny said, and get your strength back." (197) She taught Ivy how to boil the herbs and greens together, which preserved an age-old mountain remedy that Ivy

continues to do every spring, and she says "The sharp bitey taste of the greens takes me straight back to that sunny blowing day by Sugar Fork when we sat on the rock ledge and Granny said, Ivy. Remember. And I have remembered. I remember everything" (193). By writing down the "statue" she has of Granny Rowe, Ivy is able to remember the details of the special day with her and see it as she writes it down; she also is creating more permanence by creating a written account. Granny Rowe dies, and Ivy learns about it when Tenessee shows up in the middle of the night, drenched from a rain storm, which is the statue that Ivy remembers of Tenessee "standing still in the rainy door with the lightning branching out behind her head" (199).

The next statue is one of Joli and a day when Ivy takes her up on Hell Mountain to visit where the Cline sisters lived. This is an important day to Ivy because it is right before Joli is going to leave and stay with Ethel so she can go to school and get an education, which is very important to her mother. Ivy feels compelled to take Joli up to the Cline sisters' home: "Before she left, before she went down off the mountain for good—for when Joli comes back she will be all different. I know" (200). Ivy wants Joli to know about the stories before the world changes her because they, the Cline sisters and stories alike, are an important part of Ivy, her memories, and are a vital piece of Appalachian mountain lore. She wants Joli to understand all of the aspects of Appalachia so perhaps she will not forget them, but also so she might understand her mother. Ivy wants to give Joli something valuable, and there is nothing more valuable to Ivy than a good story, so she "started telling her some of the old stories. It's funny how clear I can recall them. It is like they sit in a clear calm place in my head that I never even knew was

in there. I told Mutsmag, Old Dry Fry, and how Jack fooled the smart red fox" (201). Now Joli can take a part of her world with her as she prepares to leave Sugar Fork. Ivy also provides a link between the past, the present, and the future as she hands down the stories to the next generation.

Oakley's statue "is always working. Its back is always bent, its face is always turned away" (201). He has lost all of his love for farming, and the times are hard for him and his family. In fact, most of the fire has gone out of Oakley, and Ivy describes him over and over again with his "face turned away" (203). The economy is bad, and he has to supplement the farming by hunting and trapping; he also looks for sang (American ginseng) to sell and does carpentry work as well. When Ivy describes Oakley, and his statue, she begins to think perhaps she might well understand what has happened to him. It is through her writing it all down that it begins to make sense:

> And you know, now as I am writing all this down, I wonder if this is what has made Oakley turn his face away, him going off by himself so much up in the mountains after hides and sang. For a man can lose the habit of talk and the habit of looking at you. Oakley looks down at his hands, whittling. A man can work so hard he gets caught way down inside of himself. (205).

Ivy is never critical of Oakley; she just misses him and the way he once was, before he became burdened down by his responsibilities. She says, "I feel like Oakley works so hard, and stays so busy, that he has not got time for me! If he's not working, he's going to church. Ever time they crack the door now, there goes Oakley" (205). He asks Ivy to

go with him, but she has no interest in church and gets nothing from it. The most religious thing about Ivy is her bedtime prayers, which are the same ones she learned when she was a child.

In her letters, Ivy mourns the passage of time, the loss of family, and the isolation and depression she feels. She knows her writing helps to sort everything out, but sometimes she is simply too tired to write. Now, however, she thinks she is coming out of her depression. She ends her letter to Silvaney on an excited note: "I feel like there's a big change coming on somehow, when I look down this holler and see light. It makes me feel all electrified, myself! But it ain't got up here yet" (207). Ivy's statement is more prophetic than she knows, and it sets the stage for what is about to come.

In the meantime, Joli goes off to college, and Ivy writes to Ethel to thank her for letting Joli live with her and Stoney so she can go to high school. Her letter also serves a multitude of purposes because Ethel is practical, so Ivy finds it easy to explore her life pragmatically. She needs to write about the love she has for her children because her previous letter describes the toll her children have taken her, and she is feeling guilty: "Ethel, I guess you would think that when a woman has a lot of children, then each one means a little less. It is not so. Children will swell up your heart" (208). However, Ivy is worn out from having so many children and caring for them. She also needs to express the sorrow she feels about Beulah's choice to sever her ties with her and Ethel. More than this, she needs the practicality Ethel offers, so she writes to Ethel to try and grasp what is happening to her. When she is making butter one day, she breaks a piece of her churn, gets upset, and as a result "went in and laid down on the bed in the middle of the

day!" (208). Her reaction unnerves her because it is similar to what Lois Branham did, and Ethel surely knows how paralyzing it could be for Ivy. She writes to Ethel, "May be I am having the Change of Life early" (209).

Three years later, in July 1940, she writes to Silvaney about a cataclysmic event that changes her forever. It all begins when Oakley builds a beehive. Ivy readily admits, "What is going to happen is all my fault, but I can't help it. I can't be no better. I can't do no different, either, I swear it" (213). In her letter, she tries to understand what is happening to her and to her body. She is frightened she might end up like other family members who have a wild light in their eyes or that "somebody I don't know with my body took up by something wild I can not name" (209). Ivy is worried because she has gone from one emotional extreme to another, which reeks of instability—a family trait that frightens her more. Perhaps she thinks she can write away the madness. Part of her problem is her relationship, or the lack of one, with Oakley. Suddenly, by building the new beehive, he seems revived, and he begins to pay Ivy attention, which he has not shown her in years. Ivy says, now it is like "he had come outside of himself" (211). But it is a bit too late for Ivy because Oakley's attention is just sex with no affection, and she needs more. They are mere habits to each other.

Then Honey Breeding shows up. When Ivy meets him the first time, her daughter Lulda is with her, and Honey "somehow spooked her" (213), a warning Ivy misses. Every minute detail of their first meeting is captured in Ivy's letter. Her physical description of him is "curly gold hair [. . .] and hair all over him like spun gold. [. . .] He seemed more like a woods creature fetched up somehow from the forest" (214). He

is real though, and he is trouble for Ivy Rowe Fox. Nevertheless, "he certainly is one of the most symbolic, metaphorical and spiritual figures in the book. He's mystical. [. . .] He's Pan" (R. Anderson, Appendix B 185). When he comes back to check the bees, Ivy goes off with him to the creek without thinking twice. She says, "it was like I had known him. For ever, for always, years and years and years. We were old hat, him and me. [. . .] It's like he is me, some way, or I am him. All he did was look at me, nobody has ever looked at me like that before or will again. I know this. Nobody" (217-18).

The final letter in the fourth part of the book is a letter of reckoning for Ivy, and is written, not surprisingly, to Silvaney because Ivy needs to write like never before; she needs to look at what she has done, to think about her actions, and what happens as a result of those actions. She needs to write about Honey Breeding's final return, and the chain of events that begin and somehow seem inevitable. Ivy makes a choice to go off with Honey, but at the time she seems to have no control over herself, nor does she seem to have any desire to stop what is happening. When Honey shows up and asks Ivy to go for a walk with him, she just gets up and goes with him without knowing where they are going or how long they will be gone. She says, "I did it all like a dream" (223), which lends itself to all sort of interpretations including a lack of control. The only way she can probably account for her behavior is to depict her choice to go off with him as somehow beyond her control. Otherwise, there is no rational explanation for what she does.

Because Ivy simply exists up to this point, which is something she abhors in others, when she meets Honey the attraction she has for him serves as the cataclysmic

event, which finally awakens her and places her firmly in the present. She now has the desire to start living once again—a mantra Ivy has always lived by until the burdens of her world became almost too much to bear. All of her memories of times when she was fully alive come flooding back as she walks with Honey. She begins by telling him about her family as they walk by the places that spark memories for her: "I couldn't believe I was talking so much, to a perfect stranger! My own voice sounded funny in my ears. It sounded rusty. I felt like I hadn't used it in such a long time" (224). Suddenly Ivy is climbing the mountain with a man she barely knows, yet with a renewed energy she has not had in quite some time, and now, the farther up the mountain she climbs, the easier it is for her to shed her burdens:

> I felt giddy and crazy, climbing the mountain, I felt like a girl again. It seemed I was dropping the years as I went, letting them fall there beside the trace, leaving them all behind me. I felt again like I had as a girl, light-headed, light-footed, running all over town. When I thought of my babies, I could see them real plain in my mind, their bright little faces like flowers, but it seemed to me that they were somebody else's babies, not mine. I was too young to have them. (224-225)

Ivy also finds herself climbing higher up the mountain than she ever has before. With Honey she makes it to the top of the mountain, a symbolic journey Ivy must make in order to recover the part of her self in danger of being lost. Once she is fully awakened and revitalized, she asks Honey to "Tell me a story. [. . .] I am starved for stories" (226). Stories feed Ivy's soul, and it has been a long time since she has heard a story—so long

in fact she does not even care if Honey tells the truth or not because "It seemed like years since I'd heard a story" (227).

Ivy's trip up the mountain with Honey replenishes her spirit and returns to her the part of herself she had almost lost, those parts of her that were once so important, like stories or poems: "It was like they were all still there someplace, they had just been waiting. I felt I had got a part of myself back that I had lost without even knowing it was gone. Honey had given me back my very soul" (224). Ironically, while Ivy is on top of Blue Star Mountain, she realizes she could have made it to the top by herself if she had just taken a notion to rather than listen to everyone else tell her it was something meant for boys or men to do. She knows she has the strength. Even though Ivy does climb to the top of the mountain with a man, he is unlike any man she has ever known.

Ivy knew that her fling with Honey would not last, "But he was the last thing left to happen to me" (233). At the end of the day, she refuses to go back home and instead tells him she is not ready to go until she has had enough time with him. She thinks she knows what she is doing and says as much to Honey. He is quick to admonish her, and she admits "he was right, but it did not signify. Nothing did. For I had to stay with him awhile. It could not be long. I knew that. [. . .] But right then I didn't care" (235). What matters is right now, and Ivy wants to bask in the moment and enjoy the time they are in. She wants it to last as long as is possible even though she knows it will soon end.

There is no exact way to know exactly how long Ivy and Honey were gone, but it is longer than three days because that amount of time is accounted for in her letter. Honey is the one who decides that it is time to go back down the mountain. Even though

she is not yet ready, she knows that for Honey their time together has already ended, and she has nothing left to do except to accept it. The harsh reality, which she writes in her letter, is that she "would of stayed up there. I would of stayed with him until I starved to death and died, I reckon, living on love" (236). As Ivy writes about her feelings, she writes that she does not regret what she has done even if there is a terrible price to pay because she is forever changed. For a long time Ivy stands on the edge of an abyss, which threatens to suck her deeper into its darkness, and suddenly she finds a lightness restored to her being. Perhaps Honey is a midlife crisis; she is, after all, forty. She says that "now it felt natural to me to be here, to have come up this mountain with this man. I guess that the seeds of what we will do are in us all along" (237). Whatever the reason, her spirit is renewed by her trip up the mountain, and it is a catalyst for change that she will need to sustain her for the remainder of her life.

Ivy's memory of the trip back down the mountain is not clear; one thing that is clear to her, though, is "Oakley, whose face came clear in my mind for the first time since I had been gone" (237). Honey sees that she gets to Majestic and to Victor and Ethel, who take her back to Sugar Fork. Of her trip back, she says it felt "like I was with them but not with them, that morning. I felt like I had been gone for years" (238). Ivy is unaware of the price she will pay yet, even though it waits at home to smack her clearly in the face. First, Ivy must realize that Sugar Fork is where she belongs before everything comes into focus for her. When she finally realizes she is home, she sees that her home is full of people, and until Victor asks what is going on, she does not know LuIda, her daughter, died while she was gone. When Ivy finally comprehends that LuIda

is dead, she slips into her grief and is unable to visit the grave for some time. She is filled with remorse and guilt and spends a long time by herself crying. The last letter in section four ends with Oakley's first words to Ivy upon her return. After he thinks she has had enough time to cry and take in all that has happened, he tells her to "Get up, Ivy, and take care of your children, and I did. I am still doing so. I will continue. I will not be writing any more letters for a while though, as my heart is too heavy, too full. But somehow I had to write this letter to you Silvaney, to set it all down. I am still in pain and sorrow" (240). The letter to Silvaney ends a phase in Ivy's life on Sugar Fork in a period of great sorrow. Ivy thinks LuIda's death is somehow her punishment for going off with Honey, and she knows her actions cannot go unpunished. So as a form of self-induced punishment, she decides to take away one of the things she loves most—her writing. It will be two years before Ivy writes another letter.

E. V Letters from Sugar Fork

Up to this section of the novel, each division is preceded by a physical change in Ivy's home, a move to another town. The reason a division occurs when there is no such move is because of the life-changing events that have taken place. The Ivy who begins to write now is different from the old Ivy. She is a grieving mother and will always struggle with what she believes is her role in LuIda's death, "For I know LuIda's dying is all my fault and if I had not run off with Honey Breeding it would not have happened, LuIda would be alive today" (244). In "V Letters from Sugar Fork," Ivy ends her self-induced punishment of not writing, and her first letter in the last section of the novel is to Silvaney

on August 2, 1942. The reason Ivy writes her first letter to Silvaney is because of how she has changed, along with the realization that, if she had to do it all over again, she still would go off with Honey. A visit from Geneva helps clear Ivy's perspective, and she comes to understand that even if she believes herself to be scandalous "folks are so wrapped up in themselves that they will forget before you know it. It won't be long. Nobody cares what you do. Not really. You'll see" (244). The sentiment is almost identical to what Ivy had written to her sister Ethel when she married Stoney Branham so soon after his wife's suicide. Ivy already knows that what Geneva is telling her is true; she just needs someone to remind her. And so she writes to Silvaney, her deceased sister, and tries to make some sense out of all that she is thinking and feeling. She knows she thinks too much, and that she also holds onto the past too long: "I reckon this is my problem or one of them—I can't give up a thing! Nothing. I can't forget. I can't move on" (245). But she does. She begins finally to live, and her world is real. When Ivy begins to write again, she moves the people from the past to the present: Geneva has a new boyfriend; Judge Brack still eats at the boardinghouse; Doc Trout is dead; and Sam Russell Sage is also dead. She begins to write about her children and Oakley, who finally "is paying attention. He is looking at me dead-on" (246). Ivy's writing brings her up to the present moment, and when she thinks of her time with Honey she says it is almost surreal, "like I made him up out of thin air because I needed him so bad. I can't think of him as <u>real,</u> somehow. I know he came, and I know I went off with him, and Lulda died because of it. I remember those moments with Honey as flashes of light" (247). Ivy knows she is different because of the "flashes of light," and they really have nothing to

do with anyone other than herself. The significant change occurs on Sugar Fork and is symbolized by the division between the last two sections of the novel. Now, in "V Letters from Sugar Fork" Ivy embraces her life once again:

> Life goes on, and I reckon now that I've got to live it.
>
> But sometimes I think I am the only one that remembers from one day to the next what happens, may be because I am writing it all to you. It is true that time softens things. I feel now as I write that I am better than I was, even if Oakley will always be circling around me, and watching, and waiting. I don't know what he is waiting for. At least I am alive now, since I ran off with Honey, there is that, come what may. And I do have all these children to take care of. (248).

She no longer feels burdened by the life that caused her to sink into the consuming darkness she describes in "IV Letters from Sugar Fork." She is restored and reborn by her trip to the top of Blue Star Mountain, even if she chose the wrong way to get there. She never abandons her family or Oakley again, and she embraces the many roles of her life with renewed vigor and acceptance. She is firmly rooted in her life and is back to living in the present. Ivy finally seems to arrive at a moment of reconciliation in a very simple ceremony of preparing her family's Sunday breakfast. While everyone was eating, she says, "I felt like church. I mean I think I felt the way you are supposed to feel in church" (248). Contentment, peace, and acceptance fill Ivy at last, and by the end of her letter she realizes that "however much I may have wanted to die, I am stuck smack in the middle of this life" (249).

In the final section of the book, Ivy returns to writing her letters to others with more regularity. Ivy's younger brother, Garnie, is coming to Majestic and bringing his religious crusade with him. She has not seen him since he was a young boy, and she is anxious to reconnect with him because family is very important to her. However, his trip to Majestic is still some time away.

Around Christmas Ivy begins to recall fond memories she has, and she writes to Joli, her oldest daughter, to foster the connection they share. Ivy has a dual purpose in her letter: she not only wants to reinforce Joli's ties to her family, but she also wants to give Joli some advice about marrying in haste. Ivy chooses a simple radio to remind Joli of their connection: "The radio plays A White Christmas, by Irving Berlin. [. . .] I will bet you have heard it too. The radio makes me feel closer to you" (251). Ivy offers advice to Joli because she is considering marriage to a young soldier who is headed to war—a similar dilemma to the one Ivy faced when she considered marrying Joli's father, Lonnie Rash, before he left for war. Ivy, the pragmatist, chose not to marry Lonnie simply because of the odds that he might not return; she knew there was also an equal possibility that he would. Ivy also has learned that the real mistakes come when hasty decisions are made. As history repeats itself, Joli decides, like her mother, not to marry her soldier. Suddenly, Ivy's advice to Joli to take her time is resoundingly familiar. When Ivy was a young girl her father told her, "Slow down, slow down now, Ivy" (82), and his words are as hauntingly relevant for Joli as they were for Ivy.

Not long afterwards, Garnie arrives, and when he does Ivy's hopes are dashed because he has not grown into the man she hoped he would be. As is always the case

with Ivy, when she needs to vent or sort out what she is feeling, she writes to Silvaney: "I have to write to you, for I can tell no one. This is the story of how I was not saved" (253). Garnie, the epitome of everything wrong with religion, returns to Majestic and then revisits Sugar Fork, and Ivy is furious. She believes a person has to be authentic, and Garnie is not. She knows, while she has never been religious in her life, if Garnie is a representative of organized religion, then she wants no part of it. Ivy needs a place to go to voice her anger and frustration with him, and she goes where she knows she can do this freely and without judgment—in her writing. She also uses the letter as a place where she can chastise herself for not seeing Garnie as he truly is: "I should of known then that something was wrong with him. But the fact is that I set such store by family, and I was so happy to see him after this long a time, that I did not" (254)—that is, not until Garnie turns on her. And when he does, he comes after her with a vengeance, thinking in his convoluted mind he is the hand of God.

When Ivy learns Garnie is coming to Sugar Fork for a visit, she thinks she might be willing to have another go at religion because Oakley seems to want it, and she decides she will at least be open to what Garnie has to say. When he arrives, she is all alone hanging her laundry, and she remembers thinking "This could be it, after all these years. It could be God speaking out through your fat little brother Garnie, and why not? Stranger things have happened" (258), but this is not to be the time or the place that Ivy is saved, at least not in the religious sense. Ivy is saved that day, but she is saved from Garnie rather than because of him, and Oakley is her savior. But before Oakley arrives on the scene, Garnie starts "getting all worked up" (259) and starts preaching at Ivy. He

has come to Sugar Fork because Ivy is "a whore and an abomination" (259), and he believes he has been sent to judge her and punish her. While reading from the Bible, he gets more and more worked up. Everything happens next in lightening speed. Garnie is taking off his belt as if he is about to whip Ivy when suddenly Oakley appears out of nowhere. Then it is Oakley's turn to come after Garnie, and he does. Garnie gets the beating he had hoped to give Ivy, and afterwards he stumbles "off down the hill like a fat little drunk, with mud on the back of his pants" (261). Ivy finally recognizes her prince in Oakley, the prince she dreamed of when she was a young girl.

Ivy realizes Garnie is a mockery of what he represents, and she states emphatically: "I will not go to any Heaven that has got a place in it for Garnie Rowe. Little Garnie, as they call him. Ha! For he is not little at all, he is a pig, and looks like a pig, and does not take after any of the rest of us" (253). Her frustration and disappointment seethe beneath the surface of her words, seemingly ready to explode because she is as angry with herself as she is with Garnie. However, when she writes her letter, her vision is clear, and she sees that Garnie is so full of himself he is blinded by his own lust for power: "this is Garnie's power, mind you" (254). Ivy's words paint a dire picture of Garnie Rowe, who is "at best a hypocrite and at worst a traitor" (256). Ironically, Ivy finds "Garnie's little white Bible, that he lost in the fight, and I am studying it. It is pretty good. You know how I have always loved a story. I will write more later" (262).

Ivy continues her tradition of writing to her family to keep the connection between them strong. She writes to Joli and tells her what is happening to Martha, which

she believes is a result of her leaving "that time four years ago" (263). Ivy is proud of Martha, who stepped up and took over out of sheer necessity when Ivy left with Honey. As a result, Ivy wonders and asks Joli, "if you treat somebody as simple, does it make them simple? For that is how we treated Martha for so long. And if you love somebody, as Rufus loves her, does that bring them out?" (263). Again, Ivy asks a question she does not expect an answer to. Writing is, and always has been, a way for Ivy to digest the events shaping her and her world; it is a coping device, and many times it is the only place where she can find shelter from life's storms. Writing is also where Ivy explores her truths—her maxims—which she passes on to her family and her readers. She wants them to understand that life goes on, history can repeat itself, and generations will come and generations will go: "it all goes on, I reckon" (264).

The many examples Ivy uses in her letters are often didactic. For example, she has an important message to tell Joli, and she shows her what she needs to know through a story she tells about what happened at Martha's wedding when the minister quoted Shakespeare. She says:

> It was like an old rusty door swung open in my mind. [. . .] I have been so many people. And yet I think the most important thing is Don't forget. Don't ever forget. I tell you this now, in particular. A person can not afford to forget who they are or where they came from, or so I think, even when the remembering brings pain. (265)

Katie Cocker, another of Lee's Smith strong female characters, expresses the same sentiment in the opening of *A Devil's Dream.*

Writing is where Ivy seeks shelter from her pain, and almost one year later, Ivy is hurt because she thinks Joli is ashamed of her family. After a brief letter to Joli to explain that she and Oakley cannot come to her wedding because Oakley is not well, Ivy turns to writing to Silvaney, or to herself. She believes she has to hide her hurt from Joli, but in a letter to Silvaney she expresses what she feels. It is hard for her to imagine that perhaps Joli or her fiancé might not want her and Oakley at the wedding because Ivy thinks her family is very important. Interestingly, during the writing, when she is describing her current relationship with Oakley, she comes to another realization: "it is a funny thing, but that time I ran off with Honey Breeding helped not hurt, with me and Oakley. He has been new for me ever since, some way, and me for him, and even though I am way too old now to think on such things, I blush to say they come to mind often, they do!" (269). Ivy and Oakley have rediscovered each other, and life is good again.

Ivy writes to Silvaney so that she can reconcile her physical world with her spiritual world because she helps feed her soul by writing. Writing also helps to heal her soul, for when she is able to put her hurt into words, she begins to heal. She has to first acknowledge the hurt before the healing process can begin so she writes how "Joli has broken my heart. For she is the child of my childhood, and in losing her, I have lost my youth. I can not say it better than that. I wanted her gone, I wished her godspeed, but now I am about to die because she has took me up on it!" (271). Ivy lets go of Joli because she knows she must, and the letter ends in a beautiful symbolic gesture of her letting loose a jar of lightning bugs so they can have their freedom.

Just as Ivy has to turn loose of Joli, she soon has to turn loose of Oakley. He dies and she writes to Joli about Oakley's death. Up to the point where she begins her letter to Joli written on August 8, 1947, Ivy says Oakley's death does not seem real, but "It does now, for I am writing you this letter" (273). Writing makes everything real for Ivy, and she also writes to remember. The tone of her letter to Joli is one of sadness, acceptance, and awe. She is overwhelmed by how many people loved and respected Oakley and came to his funeral and to the burying ground as well: "But yet they came, all the folks from church and town and Home Creek, more besides. You would not think a quiet man would know so many, nor be so loved. [. . .] I believe your daddy was the best man in the county bar none. If there is a heaven, your daddy is right there" (273-74). Oakley is placed next to Ivy's father in a high spot because he deserves to be at the same, or even higher, level than her father since Oakley's importance to her at least equals, if not surpasses, her father's. As much as the beginning of her letter to Joli reminds her how real Oakley's death is, writing about why he is buried where he is makes her grief tangible, and she writes: "I have to stop now. Because I have written this letter to you, it is real now" (274).

A month later, she writes to Silvaney this time to validate her life and Oakley's. Fall has begun and the world is changing, especially Ivy's since "Oakley was too young to die" (274). She writes that she walks the hills over and over in her grief returning to the spots where she has memories of Oakley. Now there is no one to walk with her and share her feelings, so she writes to remember him, to acknowledge him, and to grieve for

him. Ivy speaks universal truths as she tries to understand death and accept the permanence of the loss of a loved one:

> I never knowed how much I loved him until I left him, and that's a fact. And now I have lost him again and this time it is for good. No it is not for good. It is for ever. Life seems contrary to me, as contrary as I am. I feel like you never say what you ought to, nor do as you should, and then it is too late. It is all over. I have spent half of my life wanting and the other half grieving, and most often I have been wanting and grieving the same thing. There has been precious little in between. (274-75)

Ivy recognizes life is full of extremes, which only come to one who is fully alive. Life comes with no guarantees, so what matters are the memories we create in our relationships. Memories are very important to Ivy and part of the reason she writes, and her letters also provide a chronicle of her life even though she is not aware of this at the moment she is writing. Another reason Ivy writes is so she does not forget. Writing to Silvaney about Oakley helps preserve his memory and bring him into focus. It is important to her not to forget the little things about Oakley. She grieves for Oakley, and she writes to remember him, yet she says she "will not be lonely. Even if it is just me sitting on this porch, I will not be lonely. Although I know that not one hour for the rest of my life will go by without me missing Oakley and that's a fact" (276-77). Ivy also knows she must go on living because she has no other choice. Nothing or no one will ever take Oakley's place, but she realizes she has to face the cold reality that he is dead and, with the realization, comes a new dawning that she is "not beholden to a soul" (277).

She can write her own life if she so chooses, she can read anything she wants, she can act like she wants, and she can eat whatever she wants when she wakes up every day because there is no one to please anymore but herself. Ivy is able at last to live for herself.

Ivy's solitude is interrupted by her family when Joli asks her mother if her son, David, can stay with her for a while because she is getting divorced. Family is everything to Ivy, so she readily agrees to let him live with her for a while. During Joli's divorce, apparently because her husband had an extramarital affair, Ivy tries to explain why people sometimes act as they do:

> The true nature will come out whether or no, we have all got a true nature and we cant hide it, it will pop out when you least expect it. I never thought I would walk up the mountain my dear with Honey Breeding, and once I got up there, I never thought I would come back down. Nor that I would turn into an old mountain woman like I have, and proud to be so. (279)

Almost two years pass when Ivy writes to Joli and insists she stay in school. Apparently she is having a financial crisis of some sort, and Ivy tells her to "buck up" (280) and not to accept money from her ex-mother-in-law—that way she will not be beholden to her. Ivy hopes that Joli will remain in school and become the writer she thinks she never was. It is also important to Ivy that Joli understand she cannot come back Sugar Fork: "It is too late for you to turn back, honey. You have got past the point where you can do that, past the point where you could ever come back here and live. I know it and you know it. So you have got to keep on keeping on" (280). No one knows

better than Ivy that once the wheels are set in motion, one must move forward, or she ceases to be. So Ivy tells Joli all about David so that she will continue to move forward and not have him as a reason to come back to Sugar Fork. He is thriving with Ivy because "The thing about a grandchild is, you do not feel like you have got to raise them up so careful for you know it will not do that much good anyway (Ha). So you get a real bang out of them instead" (281). Ivy continues to tell Joli about all that is happening and how the world and people in and around Majestic are progressing. Modernization brings change, and when a franchised business moves in to compete with Ethel's store, she decides to sell it so she and Victor can move to Florida. Ivy admits to Joli that she did consider moving with Ethel and Victor, but she knows where her heart is and she writes, "I belong right here, [. . .] I've got things to do! (282).

Time is moving rapidly now, and Ivy's next letter is in September, 1956, and it is to Ethel. She writes to her to tell her Beulah is dead. Curtis Bostick comes to see Ivy to tell her Beulah has been dead for a year. He tells Ivy what she already knew; Beulah was unhappy, he could not give her enough, and she always wanted more. Because of Beulah's unhappiness and loneliness "Her nerves went bad" (284), and she started drinking, which no one but the cook knew until it was too late. Beulah died from "Sirrosis of the liver primarily" (284). However, Curtis also has another reason for visiting Ivy, which is to tell her he has always wanted her. Now, with Beulah dead, he wants to know if she will give him a chance. Of course, she tells him they are too old even though she says she was tempted to go back to West Virginia with him since he

begged her to. Ivy Rowe knows she is where she belongs, and she will live out the rest of her life right where she is.

David eventually leaves Sugar Fork and goes back to live with his mother. The date is not told. However, in 1961 Ivy tells Joli to send David to her since he has gotten himself into some sort of trouble, and she will straighten him out. By this time Joli has written a book. She sends Ivy a copy; Ivy, in a letter to Joli, critiques it even if she does not mean to. She is simply being a mother. She tells her that she "could of used more of a love interest. Or may be that is just me! Anyway it was real good even if they do just think an awful lot. You might put more plot in it next time, for an awful lot does happen in this world" (290). Ivy also suggests to Joli that she change the location to a place where Joli has lived like Norfolk or New York rather than the mountains.

Ivy then proceeds to fill Joli in on the latest family news. Ethel is remarried, but has not changed one bit; she is as practical as ever. Victor is in the VA Hospital in Florida, where he is happy since he can be waited on and has a lot of other men he can talk to. Geneva is dead, and Ruthie (Garnie's ex-wife) is running what used to be the boarding house but is now Ruthie's hotel. The landscape is changing too as everything builds up around Majestic and makes everything seem tacky. Some progress is good, however, and Ivy tells Joli that "Those birth control pills are great. They are the greatest thing since drip dry" (292).

Surprisingly, Ivy hears from Molly, Mr. and Mrs. Brown's niece whom she spent so much time with when she was fourteen, which to Ivy "seems like not time at all since we jumped rope together and mined for gold. In another way it seems like more than

years. It seems like lifetimes and lifetimes ago" (293). Ivy writes to Molly to tell her she will help her with the settlement school. She also tells Molly that many of her grandchildren want to stay with her because she does not meddle too much. Ivy says that "I have got plenty of thinking saved up to do when I get the time" (293).

Ivy says much of the same thing to her son Danny Ray when she writes him to vent her anger because she is mad at him because he decides to go into politics in a county other than Buchanan County. She tells him that the only place she can sleep anymore is on Sugar Fork, and she does not sleep much anyway: "It seems like I have got too many things to think about, to sleep good. I have got a lot on my mind! When you get old, the time draws shorter and shorter for you to figure it all out" (294). A sense of urgency seems to lie just beneath Ivy's words because she knows her time is running out. However, she also revels in the freedom she has to say whatever she wants, and she takes the opportunity to tell Danny Ray what is happening in Buchanan County since he is a politician. Everything is gone and "Everybody has took everything out of here now—first the trees, then the coal, then the children. We have been robbed and left for dead" (295). People are out of work, and the young people are leaving as soon as possible because there is no future for them there. The only person she knows who plans to come back is her grandson David, who plans to farm. Majestic is practically a ghost town. Ivy paints one bleak picture after another in her letter to Danny Ray so that he, and the reader, understand just how depressed the economy is in Appalachia. People are selling everything they can just to feed their families. They are too destitute even to buy clothes or shoes so their children can go to school, so the cycle of poverty is destined to

continue. Molly is planning to "start a foundation, and maybe an orphanage" (298) to help the destitute families in the area, and Ivy writes to Danny that she wants him to tell others about it.

In 1965, Ivy writes her first letter to her youngest daughter Maudy, whose daughter, Maureen, is "little Miss Tri-City" (299). She is full of motherly advice and writes to Maudy that maybe Maureen should not be entered into more contests since she appears so frail and it might be "too much of a strain" (299). The reader never knows if there is anything wrong with Maureen or if Ivy is just worried because Maureen is more like Silvaney than any of her other grandchildren. She offers more of her motherly advice to Maudy and tells her to think about what she is doing before she leaves "a perfectly nice husband and a redwood ranch house just because my husband looked funny to me all of a sudden. [. . .] a person can not just go through world doing whatever the hell they want to whenever they want to do it. I know this better than anybody" (300). Ivy advises her to go back to school or go shopping or open a business, but the important thing is to do something.

It is a long time before Ivy writes again to Silvaney, but when she does it is so she can settle in at Sugar Fork as her life is heading toward its end. She has left the settlement school and says she has "a need to be up here on this mountain again and sit looking out" (301). She has taken up reading Garnie's Bible that he lost in his fight with Oakley, and her favorite part of the Bible is Ecclesiastes 3, and somehow when she reads it and touches one of Oakley's carvings of a deer, she feels "close to him" (302). She says, "it makes sense. [. . .] Lord knows I have had my time to dance and my time to

mourn. Now I think it is the time for me to cast away, and get about my business" (302). It also makes sense that it is her favorite book of the bible because it embodies many of Ivy's beliefs about the natural order of things. Ecclesiastes is also located between Proverbs and Song of Solomon, and she says, "I do not like Proverbs which is what Garnie quoted to me, all those years ago. The proverbs are mean-spirited which is probably why Garnie liked them! And the Song of Solomon is dirty. It reminds me of Honey Breeding who I have not thought about in years, and how it was with him" (301). Ivy is getting sick and losing a lot of weight, but she is remembering. Both of her friends Molly and Violet have done well and become successful business women, and Joli is the writer Ivy always dreamed of being. She is filled with pride for these women, but she is not envious because "this is not for me. I have got things to think on, and letters to write" (303).

In the meantime, she has to battle the Peabody Coal Company in 1974 when they try to exercise the rights they have from when Ivy's mother sold the mineral rights to their land. If the Peabody Coal Company had their way "they would of mined out that whole clift right up beyond Pilgrim Knob, and left us just sitting in a watershed. Come the first spring rain, this whole place would of washed right down the mountain!" (306). So Ivy decides she has to save Sugar Fork for David because he plans to return when he gets back from Vietnam, and he is the only one in Ivy's family who shows any desire for her to keep the place. When the first bulldozer comes up the mountain, Ivy runs the driver off with Oakley's old shotgun. The next time they come she is ready. She puts on red lipstick and a new pantsuit because someone will take pictures. She stands firm

against the coal company, and they leave when they see the reporters. As a result, Ivy writes, "This land will be here waiting for David when he gets back" (308).

As the novel concludes, Ivy is sick and her life is ending. Her last few letters are short. She writes to her granddaughter Maureen to encourage her to write to her because, as she tells her "I am a fool for letters" (308). Ivy writes to Joli and tells her she gave her mother's "burying quilt" (309) to Martha when she got married, so it is not available for Joli to use in her exhibit. Apparently, Maudy thinks Ivy is a bad influence on Maureen because Ivy writes a short note to her and tells her that "it will do her more harm to be in the Little Miss Gatlinburg Christmas Contest than it will to hear a good story" (311). One thing becomes clearer as Ivy writes: in each letter she writes she is not well, and she finally has to go to the hospital where she writes Ethel. Ivy tells her that she is going back home to die, and she writes "I hope you will be on my side. I have lived like I wanted by God, I will die that way too" (311).

The last two letters are the most important in the book because they are the heart and soul of Ivy Rowe Fox. The first of the two is to Joli, and Ivy writes to her that she must stop worrying about her being at home alone because "there does come a time when a person has got to be by theirselves" (312). However, she finds herself trying to convince Joli of her sanity, which is being questioned because Maudy and her son's companion discover her letters and read them when she was in the hospital. She writes that she knew Silvaney was dead, but "it didn't <u>matter.</u> Silvaney, you see, was a part of me, my other side, my other half, my heart" (312). She tells Joli how she took her letters from the chest where she had kept them for all these years "and burned the letters

every one" (313). What Ivy writes next is perhaps the most important message in the book: what matters most is nothing tangible, or of material value. What matters is that during the process of her letter writing she finds sustenance and fortitude to live her life the way she has chosen to live it:

> With every one I burned, my soul grew lighter, lighter, as if it rose too with the smoke. [. . .] For I came to understand something in that moment, Joli, which I had never understood in all these years.
>
> The letters didn't mean anything.
>
> Not to the dead girl Silvaney, of course—nor to me.
>
> Nor had they ever.
>
> It was the writing of them, that signified. (313)

The last letter in the book, to Silvaney, is written as Ivy is dying. She has been sick up to this point, but gets a burst of energy often associated with imminent death: "Today I am better thogh" (313). Her letter begins as she describes the world outside her window when she looks out on the place she loves best—Sugar Fork. Hawks are circling overhead as they did on the day her mother first came to Sugar Fork. Reconciliation occurs for her and Dreama Fox when Dreama exhibits forgiveness by coming to care for Ivy after she gets home from the hospital. Dreama still does not speak to Ivy after all these years, which Ivy is glad of "because I have got so much on my mind these days, and not time to waste on talking" (314). Ivy gets weaker and weaker as she writes her letter, and the present gives way to her past. Life will continue on and on after Ivy is gone, and what she remembers in her final moments are some of her fondest memories of

the most important people in her life. She writes exactly what she is thinking as she dies, and interspersed throughout the letter are verses from Ecclesiastes 3. She also writes, "I used to think I would be a writer. I thought then I would write of love (Ha!) but how little we know, we spend our years as a tale that is told I have spent my years so. I never became a writer atall. Instead I have loved, and loved, and loved. I am fair wore out with it" (315). Sadly, Ivy never thinks of herself as a writer even though she knows it is only the writing that matters. As Lee Smith says, "there are many reasons to write and publishing may be the last, the least" (Smith, Personal 151). Even though Ivy knows writing is what is important, she believes that for a writer to be truly successful, she must be published. The reader knows differently though, which quite possibly might be another important lesson the book offers, because Ivy is definitely a writer. Her letters begin on Sugar Fork and end on Sugar Fork as "The hawk flys round and round" (315) in both her first and last letters symbolizing the continuity of life. Among the last words Ivy writes are that she hears the bell calling her now, ringing as Garnie rang it all those years ago when her daddy died. It is Ivy's time to die, for "there is a time for every purpose under heaven" (314-15). Ivy has always known the universal truths she found in her favorite book of the bible, Ecclesiastes, and she has written them over and over in her letters: "All things are wearisome, more than one can say, The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (1:8-9). Like others before her, Ivy says she has "loved, and loved, and loved. I am fair wore out with it" (315). Along

the way, Ivy maintains her dignity, so the last words she writes become a celebration of her life: "oh I was young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen" (316).

Ivy Rowe Fox is a Queen like no other. She makes mistakes along the way, but she takes them in stride and learns from them as she goes. Ivy is Everywoman because she is an ordinary woman facing life in the same way all of us do:

> She's supposed to be this symbol, but it's not a hero in the conventional sense of somebody perfect. She's a very flawed character. She's a very human character, and that's part of her wonderfulness, her strength. She makes mistakes, and she needs other people. [. . .] Ivy is always an individual and a real person. (R. Anderson, Appendix B 186)

Ivy's personal maxim is to live, to fully embrace life, and to be authentic. Her wisdom is not new, but something she discovers as she writes. Even though Ivy may be an ordinary woman, the way she chooses to live her life makes her an extraordinary person. When life throws its worst at her, she may falter, but she never fails. She celebrates her family, her friends, her home, and her simple existence when others might instead choose to complain. She knows the value of her life and recognizes its value when she writes. After all, as she says, it is the writing that signifies.

EPILOGUE

It took Lee Smith approximately twenty years to find Ivy Rowe. She began her search in 1966 when she started her first novel while a student at Hollins College. During one of the low points in her life, a time fraught with family crises, Ivy Rowe came calling, and Smith finally encountered a character worth her mettle. Needing a place where she could find solace, Smith sought comfort in her writing and began *Fair and Tender Ladies,* which gave her strength to endure circumstances beyond her control. Smith needed to create Ivy Rowe because she needed to find a role model, a woman who could take blow after blow and keep going. Up until Ivy Rowe appears in her work, most of Smith's protagonists lack the fortitude and resilience to stand and face whatever comes their way, so much so that sometimes they miss the high points by focusing too intensely on the low ones. But when she met Ivy, Smith found a woman of superior strength, the kind of strength she was looking for at the time—a strength that will endure.

In Ivy Rowe, Smith unearthed a woman who is proud, brave, and determined. She is more than simply a survivor; she lives, and lives superbly, but by her own design, even when her decisions are not sound. She makes mistakes just as surely as everyone else does, but she takes the time to look at her mistakes and learn from them, not to become crippled by them. Like Lee Smith, Ivy has her writing, and there she finds a place to explore and understand her world and her place in it. In her letters, she offers sage advice and universal truths, and in her letters she nourishes not only her soul, but also her readers. She is Everywoman, and her worth is incalculable because of the lives she

touches—her family, her friends, her readers, and her creator. Even though she is not a woman of material wealth, her spiritual wealth is immeasurable, and her gentle acceptance of life belies her indomitable spirit. She knows life is not permanent, but it does go on.

Thus, it is no wonder then that Ecclesiastes, lodged firmly between Proverbs (the book she calls "mean") and the Song of Solomon (the book she calls "dirty"), is her favorite book in the Bible, and it is no wonder that the first chapter of Ecclesiastes clearly states what Ivy knows is true: "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets [. . .] round and round it goes [. . .]. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again, there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:1-9). Even though life passes away, Ivy knows the present moment is all one is guaranteed, and what counts most for her is her love for her family, her home, and her world.

Fair and Tender Ladies begins on Sugar Fork and ends on Sugar Fork because life ends where it begins for Ivy—she comes from nothing and she returns to nothing. What matters is what happens in the middle and how she copes with it as it happens as she moves from the beginning to the end of her life. She knows it might be easier to go to bed, like Lois Branham did, and wait complacently for the end to come to her instead of getting up, going out and meeting it, but instead Ivy chooses to exert what little control she has and actively moves forward into the path of whatever is headed her way. Whether what happens to her is fate, or divinity, Ivy does not care. She knows that to survive, and survive well, she must celebrate life's treasures as they come and turn loose

and grieve for her losses as they go. In order to do both, Ivy has to escape to a place of her own where she can digest life's ups and downs. Writing is Ivy's inner sanctum, and she finds solace in the only source she can because she has no other place or person to offer guidance, support, or wisdom. Through her writing Ivy comes to know herself, and at the same time, her readers come to know her in much the same way.

The first time Ivy admits to wanting to be a writer is when she is twelve years old. Innocently and longingly, Ivy thinks nothing better can happen to her than to write about love and tell all the stories she knows and loves so well. Words are necessary for Ivy, as are stories, and when she writes she nourishes her soul:

> she is this immensely bright and artistic and feeling spirit caught in very stringent circumstances, in very limited circumstances, caught by time and place and shaped by them in ways that don't let her find the outlets that she might have found if she'd, say, grown up in Paris, in the elite, or upper crust, and so her only outlet is the letters. It is an artistic, aesthetic outlet, and it is also her window to the world. (R. Anderson, Appendix B 177)

When life gets in the way of her writing, Ivy plunges into darkness and is in danger of being like many of Smith's other characters who wait for life to come to them and simply exist instead of living. But when Ivy takes her pen in hand, she faces the darkness and writes it away much as a soldier does in battle when he takes up his sword.

When a reader encounters Ivy Rowe for the first time, oftentimes her mountain dialect is hard to understand, but when the reader gets to know Ivy, the dialect is one of her unique attributes and helps color her character. As Ivy grows older and matures, so

does the language in her letters. By reading her letters, the reader knows Ivy intimately, and almost always, the reader thinks of Ivy as a friend. She is as real as real can be, and from her meager and ordinary existence, she creates an extraordinary life for herself.

With Ivy Rowe, Smith creates a woman who does not follow a path of materialism, but instead chooses to follow the path of her heart even if it brings sorrow. Along the way, the reader shares in her joy and her sorrows as Ivy reveals her hopes, her dreams, her concerns, and her cares in her letters. Her route is not an easy one, but it is one worth taking because when she reaches the end she leaves the world saying, "I walked in my body like a Queen" (316).

None of Smith's other protagonists ever makes it as far as Ivy quite possibly because their stories are much shorter and also because some of them merely exist. More than likely, though, the reason is simply because Smith wrote *Fair and Tender Ladies* for many reasons: she needed a woman to show her how to survive when life is almost unbearably cruel, and she also needed to celebrate the strong, mountain women she knew from growing up in Appalachia. Smith's creation of Ivy Rowe provides her with both, and when asked if Ivy ever let her down, she emphatically replies, "NEVER" (Personal Interview 156).

Ivy's letters provide an accurate account of the hard life mountain women face, and they also provide the answers for surviving life in all of its complexity. Ivy's answer is simple—just get up and live and be as genuine as one can be. Life comes and it goes; we are not measured by what we leave behind but by what we do while we are here. She also knows that if a person spends an entire life doing for others, then one's soul is in

danger of undernourishment. Every effort must be made to help sustain us during the good and bad times. Letter writing provides the sustenance Ivy needs just as writing novels or short stories does for Lee Smith. Ivy knows the value of her life is not measured in tangible letters, but because of her writing she is able to see her worth clearly and the value of all that surrounds her. Ivy's legacy is in the simple truths she unfolds as she writes letter after letter.

Smith experimented for a long time trying to find Ivy Rowe. Sometimes in a few of her short stories or later novels , she may have created an abbreviated version of Ivy, but none of her characters is as fully developed or explored as Ivy. Ivy knows that life comes with no guarantees, and while *Fair and Tender Ladies* offers universal truths and explores the questions of mankind's existence and purpose, no straightforward answers are given. The only answer in *Fair and Tender Ladies* is found in the example of a life well-lived, of a life that treasures the sanctity of relationships, and of a life filled with the knowledge that the only promise we are given is the present. What makes Ivy Rowe Fox unique is her determination to choose direction in her life instead of passively accepting it, to choose to stand up to whatever comes as a result of her choices, and to choose to accept, understand, forgive, and love not only the other people in her life but also herself. She knows one's worth cannot be measured; it can only be felt. Ivy's proof is simple and uncomplicated: "It was the writing [. . .] that signified" (Smith, *Fair* 313).

CONTENT ENDNOTES

[1]To make the reading of the Prologue easier, and the parenthetical citations less intrusive, only page numbers from the Personal Interview with Lee Smith, Appendix A, are used.

[2]Personal Interview with Lee Smith conducted in Hillsborough, North Carolina on February 18, 2006. All future references will be cited as Personal Interview with a page number referring to Appendix A in this text.

[3]Rather than cite each interview separately from Conversations with Lee Smith, edited by Linda Tate on Working Bibliography, the compilation is the only citation listed for reference. Parenthetical references for an interview from the book will be cited by the interviewer's last name, in Tate, followed by page number, e.g., (Virginia Smith in Tate 72).

[4]Because of frequent references to *Fair and Tender Ladies* itself, in this chapter all citations will be by page number only.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW WITH LEE SMITH
Saturday, February 18, 2006

In February 2006, I had the pleasure of interviewing Lee Smith at her home in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Accompanied by my friend and thesis director, Professor Nancy Anderson, the interview was informative and almost magical on Saturday morning, February 16.

Funding for the trip was provided by a Graduate Student Research Grant-in-Aid Fellowship from Auburn University Montgomery. Since the interview was pre-arranged for Saturday morning at 10:00, we had to arrive on Friday because the drive from Montgomery is a little over 6 hours. After having to re-schedule the trip because of a medical emergency, I was accompanied by Professor Nancy Anderson, and her husband, Dr. Rick Anderson. We arrived in Hillsborough on Friday afternoon. I called Lee as she had asked me to do when we arrived, and she and her husband, Hal Crowther, invited the three of us to their house on Friday afternoon for refreshments. There was somewhat of a celebratory air that afternoon because she had just mailed her completed manuscript for *On Agate Hill* to her publisher that day. After visiting with them in their home for an hour or two, and enjoying their wonderful and relaxed hospitality, they took us to dinner at Akai Hana Japanese Restaurant in Carrboro, North Carolina, a restaurant they share in the ownership of. Lee explained that one of the reasons that they had invested in the restaurant was because her son, Joshua Seay, had worked there as a sous chef and also played the piano and entertained the customers prior to his death in October 2003. The food was delicious, and the night was unforgettable.

Because we visited with Lee and Hal on Friday night, the interview on Saturday morning was relaxed and went off without a hitch. Lee and Hal live in a beautiful old pre-Civil War home on the main street that runs through Hillsborough. When Professor Anderson and I arrived at 10:00 a.m. on Saturday morning, a light snow was beginning to cover the area, and the interview took on an almost surreal quality as we looked out on the grounds that surrounded Smith's home. The first thing Lee did was to pull out her southern hospitality and charm and offer us coffee or tea or whatever we wanted. She treated us as old friends (which she and Professor Anderson are), and not once were we made to feel as if we had intruded on her Saturday morning.

We began with a tour of her office, located on the second floor of her home. She generously showed us how she worked, and she has numerous yellow legal pads with notes and ideas and research. The walls are lined with book after book, and there is a window that faces the street where she can look out over the town almost in the same way she did when she was a child in her father's dime store when she sat upstairs looking down on the aisles from a one-way mirror.

We moved from her office to a cottage adjacent to her home on the property. The cottage is laid out much like an efficiency apartment: the main room has a sitting area, a bed, a small kitchen-like area, and a writing desk as well. A bathroom is the only other room in the cottage. As we settled in to begin our interview, Lee sat down on a small sofa, which was framed by a large window that provided a view of the grounds and Lee's home just a few feet away. As I looked out the window over Lee's head, I remember thinking that this day would be magical and the interview would provide me with insight into Lee Smith, the writer of my favorite book, *Fair and Tender Ladies.* Nothing prepared me though for the spirit that embodies Lee Smith. I had read over and over again how she is the epitome of southern graciousness and hospitality; I had met her a few years before the interview at a book festival in Nashville; I have on several occasions seen her through the years at book fairs, at book signings, and at places where she was being recognized for her contributions to literature, especially Appalachian and Southern literature. However, nothing prepared me for the generosity of her spirit, nor her hospitality. She made me feel as if I were doing her a favor instead of the other way around.

As I sat in a chair facing Lee, the world outside this cottage took on an ethereal quality, and the large snowflakes outside began falling at a rapid pace. Inside that cottage sat Lee Smith, Nancy Anderson, and I, and while the world outside provided a captivating and unforgettable view, the world inside that cottage was enchanting. Nothing had prepared me for the person that Lee Smith truly is. She is as she seems: funny, animated, generous, and sincere, a born story-teller, and genuinely one of the nicest people I have ever met.

As we began the interview, which lasted for a little over an hour, I found what I had been hoping for: a writer who can spin a yarn better than most, and someone who sincerely and generously believes that her posterity will not be in her body of work, but rather in the lives of those that she can encourage and touch by giving back to others and the area that she loves with abandon.

The following interview is just as it appears on the tape except for one small section that was a personal story of Smith's that she asked for me not to include in the transcribed copy. For ease of reference, Lee Smith is listed as LS; Nancy Anderson is listed as NA; and I am listed as RF.

RF: We'll start with the big question. Why write?

LS: Well, for me that was never a question, "Why write?" It was just what I did as a child, and it came totally, naturally to me. Primarily, it is an outgrowth of reading I think. I was an only child and I was a reader, and I couldn't bear for my little books to end so I would write more onto them—you know, onto the ends. More chapters onto *Heidi* or whatever, and it just seemed to me to be the most pleasurable activity that I knew. And so then it was just one little step to writing my own stuff, and it was just what I loved to

do. Of course, I illustrated lavishly too [laughs]. I did a lot of that. But it was really the most fun thing. I always enjoyed it more than anything else and then there's the other—the negative factor, which is just that I was really bad at everything else [laughs]. I mean, for instance, when I went to college, I had the lowest College Board scores in math I think of anybody who ever was admitted to any college.

I mean, it [writing] was what I could do; it was what I loved, and it was what I could do. As an only child, I did have time to read. I mean, I noticed the difference with my own boys because they were so close in age. They were seventeen months apart, and they were always there to entertain each other. I loved to play with other children in town, but there's a lot of time when there wasn't any other children to play with so that's when I'd read and write. It just got to be an early habit; it wasn't even a choice; it was just a habit.

RF: I hoped you would say that—I kind of thought you might.

LS: Well, Flannery O'Connor, the name of that collection of her letters is Habit of Being, and I think that's the way I've always felt about writing.

RF: One thing I was fascinated with, in reading some of your biographies, is the mirror in your father's dime store.

LS: Oh, yeah.

RF: And your view of the way you looked, of being the outsider looking in, and how you've talked about your mother, and that she was the outsider.

LS: Yeah. Oh that's true. I haven't really connected those two things.

RF: And how it gave you her view.

LS: Yeah.

RF: But I've also read—did it help you? I think that I've read that it helped you develop your omniscient narrator.

LS: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I mean, to sit up there, and I would sit up there. I spent a great deal of time in the dime store with Daddy down there, and I would just sit up there for hours, and it was a one-way window, you know, and I could see out, but when they looked up, they just saw a mirror. And I could see everything. It was like watching a pinball machine because you could see all the aisles and people would come up and down, and go out—you know, have fights, and kiss, and I think just every kind of thing. And it was just fascinating.

RF: Could you hear them?

LS: No, I couldn't hear them, so I just made up what they might be talking about. And you could see them fuss and fight and slap children and then look around to see if anybody had seen it and all that kind of stuff. You really got to see a lot. And you know it's funny. I thought about that—um, I hadn't thought about it in a long time, and I thought about it when we moved into this house because it has that window that kind of looks out on the main street of town. And it just kind of—I know I'm always looking across there and seeing funerals and revivals. I don't know. There is something omniscient about having a room to write in with a window that looks out on the town.

RF: Have you ever thought about the window being a metaphor for your life?

LS: Uhn-uh.

RF: Being part of something but not. You know, like Appalachia.

LS: No, but I really—Yeah.

RF: Because you talk so much about not going up into the hills.

LS: Yeah

RF: And you were a town girl.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

RF: You were privileged.

LS: Yeah, right.

RF: You write a lot about Appalachia. You were a part of it, but you really weren't a part of it.

LS: Exactly.

RF: I thought that was a great little . . . .

LS: And I always wanted to see—but, I admit, you have to be honest, unlike James Frye—the recent memoirs. But yeah, that's true, that is a good metaphor. I think also any writer needs some aesthetic distance from her material in order to be able to really turn it into fiction. When you mentioned *The Light in the Piazza* [reference to the Broadway play discussed in a previous conversation] and Elizabeth Spencer is someone I really admire and a friend of mine.

RF: I just read the article you wrote about her.

LS: Yeah. I think the time that she spent abroad, when she left Mississippi, and she went to Italy, and then she and her husband, that's whom she met in Italy, lived in Montreal for a year, and I think that was really important to her ability to write about Mississippi. She was writing about Mississippi so much of the time, and then she came back to the United States and wrote about Italy. I think a lot of people have done that. They've found it very helpful to be expatriates. It's very hard to write about the world that you are still so much a part of, which is one reason I find Silas House so interesting because he lives right there and hasn't left. And really doesn't want to while the children are little and in school and so on. His grandmamma lives here and the other one lives here, you know, and that's quite unusual. Most writers or artists have to make a little escape.

RF: I think you might often need a different view of the world in order to see yours more clearly, don't you? That's what you are saying basically.

LS: Yeah, yeah. Especially if you are a writer to whom place matters. It's hard to be immersed in it and see it objectively enough to make fiction or create something out of it.

RF: Okay, another question. I hope I'm not saying something I shouldn't.

LS: No

RF: I've read that you say you've never, that being an Appalachian writer, you don't suffer from the racial guilt of other southern writers. But have you ever thought you suffer from guilt of privilege?

LS: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I did always.

RF: Even when you were a child?

LS: Oh yeah. Always I did. Even though when I was growing up, you know when my dad started his dime store he had absolutely nothing when he came home after the war. Nothing. And my Uncle Curt and Uncle Vaughn, his uncles I guess, put him in business, you know, helped him start up. So it wasn't like it was enormous privilege.

RF: But compared to--

LS: But it was the owner of the dime store.

RF: Right.

LS: And to other children that I was going to school with, that's the most privileged you could be, to have a daddy that owns a dime store that is full of things they don't have.

RF: That they would love to go in. They probably thought you got anything.

LS: Yeah. They thought I got everything free. And I didn't get anything free. But that was a huge factor because I did feel, I did feel, enormously privileged because of that. I mean, if he'd been something like worked in the Post Office, which would have been an equivalent job or something, I don't think I would have felt like that. But it was the image of the dime store, which just represented so many things that other little children were not able to have or had a hard time having.

RF: Does that motivate you like in a sense of atonement?

LS: Yeah, it just makes me want to give back. And it's one reason that I always have. I have had now, what, a thirty-year, twenty-five year involvement with the Hindman Settlement School in eastern Kentucky and continue to, and continue to teach there. I'm such a supporter of the Appalachian School of Law in Grundy. I think this is wonderful, and you know, other things like that. I mean I feel very strongly that these are the kinds of literacy programs and so on—these are the kinds of issues that I really would choose to be involved with rather than a real fancy school. If you're able to make a donation, I like to try.

RF: Try to do . . . .

LS: Yeah, try to pick up the slack.

RF: Because the privileged can take care of the privileged.

LS: Um-huh, Um-huh

RF: I mean to a point.

LS: I mean that's the biggest; that's the most wonderful. There have been so many wonderful changes in the Appalachian region since I grew up. And to me one of the main ones is the community college system, which has been so amazing to bring education into southwest Virginia. It has just made this enormous amount of difference.

RF: Oh yeah.

LS: I did feel I knew growing up—I mean my parents told me from the time I was tiny that I would go to college. They'd say, "Well now, you're gonna go to college." My dad had never graduated from college—he went one year. And it was really important to them. And yet I was, of course, in school with people who were so smart, children who

were so smart, who were going to have to find a way to go to college. Somebody wasn't going to just send them. They weren't growing up with that certainty. So while it wasn't privilege as it would have been considered had I been living in Richmond or something. It's just symbolically—yeah, it was.

RF: Yeah, that's what I really meant—suffering the guilt.

LS: Well, just even living in town instead of up the holler [hollow]. There was that wonderful autobiography that the woman from, oh shoot, I think I've got it up there, that the woman from Pikeville, Kentucky, wrote, and she was from Pikeville [Derosier, Linda Scott. Creeker. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1999]. Then she became such a wonderful educator. It's such a good book. And it won Appalachian awards when it came out about five years ago. I'll go up and see if I can find it. But anyway, it was just the difference between, and she was the winner of every scholarship and everything in the world. But she was, it was this sense of being up the holler [hollow] and coming to town.

RF: Yeah, Uh-huh.

LS: If you live in that part of the world, that's the difference. And I was sort of, I was keenly aware of that.

RF: That's interesting. Your Appalachian writing group, and I may say this out of order, out of turn, but they seem to be a very tight knit group and very supportive of each other

LS: They are.

RF: That I don't see in other areas of the south. I don't know if that's true, but when I was Nashville, Silas House, Ron Rash, Jean—the poet who does the cover of the quilt on her book.

LS: Oh Hicks, Jane Hicks.

RF: Yeah.

LS: She's great.

RF: Yes, I loved her, and one other writer. But Silas talked about how generous you were to other writers.

LS: Well I think that, I think southern writers as a whole are supportive of each other. And it's been important because there still is a prejudice that exists within publishing and sort of within the country. I mean, it's crazy. But there still is. It's a, they're so dang surprised that we can write—at all. I mean, I'm serious. You still, you still run into this.

Somebody was talking to me recently about running into it on the highest level. You know, being out with the head of one of the major publishing houses, and they asked him what southern writers have you read? "None." "Could you name any?" "No, Fanny Flagg, that's it." They published her. But that was it, it period. Since Faulkner, we're talking. Not Eudora Welty. So it's like, except the stuff that we're familiar with, but people are not. So I think that's true of southern writing and it's even real true of Appalachian writing. As John Shelton Reed has said, "Appalachia is the south's south" you see. So I think it's been good to have, but when I began writing, there was no such thing as Appalachian literature. And I mean when Hindman, when the Appalachian writer's workshop started over there, it was really the first one of its kind. And Jim Wayne Miller, and the people that were starting it, they were the first people to really, Curtis Williams, they were the first people to begin to think of this. And it's changed now so radically, it is really considered something.

NA: Have you seen the new Mississippi tourism theme?

LS: Un-uh. No.

NA: Huge billboard that says, "Yes, we can read, and some of us can really write." And it has Baldwin, Grisham, Faulkner, Welty. It has two rows of pictures.

LS: That's great.

NA: "Yes, we wear shoes, and some of us even wear cleats." And it has all the major athletes.

LS: That's great.

NA: They go through every single....

LS: That's brilliant.

NA: Yeah, there's an undercurrent of defensiveness, but it's in your face. It's a wonderful campaign.

LS: That is wonderful.

NA: Yes, we can read, but some of us can really write.

LS: That is so good.

RF: Okay, next question. When did you know you wanted to be a writer? Not when you started to write, but when did you know?

LS: I guess at Hollins College when I was there because we did have creative writing, which was again quite unusual to have undergraduate courses in creative writing. And they did bring actual live writers to campus, and also the people we were studying with were real live writers, and they were publishing books, and so it seems possible, like this is a possible thing to do.

RF: In your film, the short film about Grundy—

LS: Oh yeah.

RF: —we see your office in the backyard. Was the building solely a place where you went to write and use only for yourself? Does that make sense?

LS: Yeah, well actually the one that's in there is the second one because the first one had washed away in the flood.

RF: Oh.

LS: And the first one was smaller. It was more child-size. And yeah, that was just my writing house. It was called my "writing house" that Daddy built on the river bank, and it washed away first, and then they put the one that's in there, which is more like a tool-shed size. But yeah, it was my little house that I would go out there and do. And then once I went away to school, tools started appearing in the writing house.

RF: Okay, I know you wrote the book about Adlai Stevenson and Jane Russell going west, and one of the websites has copies of it in your handwriting.

LS: Yeah, Yeah.

RF: But then there's another place I read that you went around Grundy selling your work for a quarter.

LS: That's true, I did. I did.

RF: How old were you?

LS: I don't know—nine, eight. I had a—my friend Martha Sue Owens and I had a newspaper that we printed out every week by hand. And I made Russell Belcher help us too. It was named *The Small Review*. All the copies were printed by hand and tied together with embroidery thread. And we had like hole punches, and we would have news—it was all about us. Like "Lee Smith and Martha Sue Owens went to Bristol to buy school shoes."

RF: Oh, so it was a feature column.

LS: Right. It was just what we'd been doing lately basically. And it was anything we saw or heard about. Then we would have editorials. And I remember getting in so much trouble because I wrote an editorial named—and this is the man that lived across the street from us—the editorial was named "George McGuire is Too Grumpy." And we had to go apologize. But we said, "Every day he walks to town, he never smiles, and he won't speak to us."

RF: I bet he didn't afterwards, did he?

LS: He really didn't afterwards. No.

RF: So do you still have any of them around?

LS: *The Small Review?* Yes. Yes. There are some of them. They're over in the—I've got a whole bunch of old stuff over at North Carolina State in the library, which is great because then I don't have to worry about it or anything.

RF: What's your favorite childhood memory?

LS: Mmmm. That is hard. Probably hanging out at the dime store.

RF: What about your saddest?

LS: Uhmmmmm. My saddest one would have to do with times, I think. Both of my parents suffered from anxiety, more my mother, and depression, more my father. I think some of the saddest times would be when one or the other of them was really sick because it is hard to understand as a child when they're just sort of unresponsive—you know, lying in bed and then go off to the hospital or something. It is very hard to understand that kind of thing when you're a child.

RF: I'm sure.

LS: Although in my family it wasn't a big deal. You know, it's like Earnest is kindly nervous. He's gone up to Charlottesville, or gone to Duke. He would always go to Duke and my mother was in Charlottesville and various other places. And it wasn't so . . . . My father was in business always with other relatives, and they would run the dime store. I lived with my cousins, Randy and Melissa, or I would go up and stay with my Aunt Millie, or whatever. And it wasn't hidden or shameful or anything, but it was sad to see somebody that you love so much be really unresponsive. I mean, Daddy would never go into the hospital until he literally couldn't move. I mean he was really, really depressed and needed shock treatments and so on. I guess that was the most, but again as I say, usually it was one was sick when the other wasn't. Only one time were they both hospitalized at the same time.

RF: Didn't I read somewhere that you were sick a lot somewhere.

LS: Well, just like with bronchitis.

RF: I don't mean to say . . . .

LS: Yeah, yeah. I was a sickly, sort of stay-at-home kind of child. And I was absolutely crazy about my parents and our whole family. They were wonderful. And as I say, it was such a large family at that time although I didn't have brothers and sisters. There was a lot of affection there and people that would take up the slack.

RF: That's great. I know you were really fascinated with local religion.

LS: I was.

RF: And you kept going around and getting saved. Were you getting saved from something? Or was it high drama?

LS: I think it was high drama.

RF: I thought that too, but I hated to say . . . .

LS: You know, I was a very imaginative little girl, sort of a theatrical little girl. I mean, the other thing we did in my neighborhood is we wrote plays and put them on all the time. All the kids. Remember breezeways in houses? At Martha Sue's house there was a breezeway, and we would make a curtain. And I would write these plays, and everybody, all the other kids, would be in them. So we were all into this kind of thing. I remember one time we got in so much trouble because I wrote a play named "The Drunken Saloon" and everybody was just drunk, and just falling on the floor. So you know, I was sort of highly impressionable and that was a part of it. There was also a real religious thing though. My parents really were very—you know my momma was a really good Methodist, and I went to MYF and church camp and all that stuff. I had a sincere belief, but this went beyond that.

RF: I love "Tongues of Fire."

LS: Thank you. Thank you.

RF: I really enjoyed reading that. Did you truly hear God speaking to you?

LS: At Camp Allegany. They put me in the infirmary. And my mother told me that if I would stay they would buy me a dog. It's really true because I wanted to come home. And she said no. She said, "I think you should stay, and if you'll quit hearing these voices, we'll buy you a dog." And they did. My dog Missy.

RF: In talking about your mother

LS: She was darling. She was so cute.

RF: And you said, and I keep seeing stuff about her being this outsider. Were you aware of that and was she treated differently?

LS: No. She was not treated differently. I tell you people in Grundy really were, and still are, the nicest people in the world. And they don't let anybody be an outsider. They don't treat you as an outsider. *She* was the one who emphasized that to me.

RF: Oh.

LS: This is why I was aware of it. Everybody **loved** her. And she was in every group there was—the Women's Club, everything.

RF: Why do you think she did that?

LS: Because she had a sense of, as she would say, "the finer things in life." And she had come from a family that was sort of aristocracy that had come down kind of in the world in her opinion. And she really, like she was the one. I was sent to prep school. And it was absolutely always in her mind. I mean I didn't know about prep school. But first they sent me to a couple of camps where some of the girls were maybe going to prep school and talked about it, you know, this kind of thing. And some of Mother, and Momma (I was a very late-in-life child) and so some of their friends who lived in other places had children who had gone to prep school. You see, this was the kind of thing she was interested in and aware of. That she really . . . . And also, she did not want me to grow up and live in Grundy. And I don't know if it's because she had had such hard times with depression and you know, sometimes herself, but she just felt like she wanted me to live elsewhere. And this was very clear. Mike Mullins at the Hindman Settlement School used a phrase that I have since used, but I hadn't heard it then. He said, "Well, you were just being raised to leave," which is a great phrase. And that's true and she, they were always, as I say, talking about college, and this and that, working on my grammar because I always tend to speak like whoever I am around, you know and so on. And I always wanted to be a part of whatever was happening. I mean I loved Grundy. I loved growing up there. And I was really, later on as a young teenager, had this boyfriend that I was *crazy* about, and I couldn't think of anything better than marrying him and living in Grundy. You know, why not? I mean I'm really serious. And so my mother was the one who was—

RF: She was determined?

LS: —yeah, who was pushing this.

RF: In fact, the next question is you were a cheerleader, and elected Miss Grundy High, and you were getting too enmeshed in the lives there?

LS: According to her.

RF: They sent you away, and that's why?

LS: That's why. But it was always part of a plan that she had. I mean she—her family had had sort of, I guess, pretentions, or whatever, and had lived in Chincoteague on Chincoteague Island. Momma was one of six, in a really kind of lovely Victorian home, and her father was sort of a high roller and oyster man and raised trotting horses and bet on them and stuff and killed himself in a very spectacular way.

RF: Really?

LS: Yeah, my mother was only 3 or 4. He went out into the bay behind their house in a boat with an ax—this was on Sunday, and a lot of people were having Sunday dinner and were looking out on the water—and chopped a hole in the bottom and shot himself. They had no way of making a living and so on. And so they suffered, and had to go to school and had some very nice friends who helped them and so on. But it was very much a sense of gentility that my mother thought she was born to and kind of had left, had gotten away from, and this is what she saw and what she wanted me to aspire to. And then when I went and got off into all this writing, it was puzzling for her. It was really puzzling.

RF: That wasn't what she expected?

LS: No, she would have really loved for me to become a society lady or her vision of one which was almost outmoded by that time entirely anyway in Richmond or Williamsburg or something.

RF: But you went to Birmingham to learn how to be a lady?

LS: Yeah, from my Aunt Gay-Gay, who was married to Momma's brother and Gay-Gay was—yeah, she would've liked for me to have lived Gay-Gay's life. But then, of course Gay-Gay's husband, Momma's brother, killed himself too. He hanged himself in the closet. I mean there's been . . . .

RF: Oh wow, tragedy.

LS: A lot of that, on that side of the family. And another brother was, I understand now, schizophrenic, who lived always with the mother. So there was a lot of illness in Momma's family, but yet she persisted. She had this image of a life that she thought would be a desirable life for a girl, for a woman.

RF: Uh huh, Uh huh. You went away to St. Catherine's.

LS: Which I loved actually.

RF: You did like it?

LS: I really did.

RF: Okay. I read somewhere that at the time you were wanting to leave because you felt hemmed in by the mountains, and now it seems to me that you left because of that?

LS: I just kind of left because they wanted me to do it, and I'd always also liked camp. I mean I liked stuff like that, and I think now, I think perhaps in retrospect, there was also something in the fact that my parents were so fragile, and they were so very attentive to me and interested in every single thing I was doing at home and everything, and I think maybe I needed to get away from that closeness of that love. You know, the little feeling a little suffocated perhaps I think, and I really liked, I mean I liked, I liked the girls' school. I liked, I always wanted sisters, and I was writing these big families of sisters, so I liked it when I got there actually. And people would ask me later, "Well, wasn't it really snooty?" because it was Richmond and so on. And now all these girls that I went to St. Catherine's with have these hysterical stories about me. About stuff I would wear and so on. One of them I remember, you know all these things were in that were almost like a little uniform like little McMullen dresses and things. And one of them said to me, "Well, why don't we just go shopping and buy you some clothes?" And I said, "Well, like what?" And she said, "Well, like this dress." And I said, "That looks like an old wash dress." You know that buttoned up the back. But I just didn't care. And I liked them. They were really nice to me. I didn't experience that sense of stuff.

RF: My second part of that question was that you were trying to get out and that you've been trying to write your way back into those mountains?

LS: Well, I think that's true. I think that's true. I did feel smothered. I had so many close, you know—relatives lived literally in houses on either side of us. And I was really ready to go when I went. But then, later I just, you know, realized how wonderful it was and what wonderful stories I always heard there.

RF: I asked my class the other night, I think. Something came up about leaving. And I have an afternoon class and an evening class, and I have older students in my evening class. So I asked them how many of them were planning to move away and in the afternoon class all of them raised their hands, and in the evening class only the young ones raised it and the older ones didn't. It was just very interesting. You know everybody has that "I have to leave." I said though that, if you're southerners, chances are you won't be going very far.

LS: Yeah, that's true.

RF: Okay, let's see. I read somewhere that when you were at St. Catherine's it was a different world, but it was a world that hemmed women in also.

LS: Well, it was complicated. In a certain way, it seemed to hem women in, in that it was a place where very privileged girls were attending school, and I think there were certain expectations for them and the way they would behave and the lives they would probably live. On the other hand, they were giving us an absolutely excellent education, you know. And so the fact is that the girls that went to St. Catherine's, many of them have had remarkable careers in all sorts of ways. And so it was that, in terms of manners, we were being educated in how we should do this and how we should do that. But, on the other hand, we're reading *Les Miserables* in French. You know, we're being encouraged to travel. We're all taking, everybody is taking higher math; everybody is being urged to go to really good schools. You know, and stuff like that.

RF: Giving you the means to get out of it?

LS: Yeah, exactly. And giving you the means to understand that you would make a living.

RF: That's good, because you write a lot about women that are hemmed in.

LS: But still, I think some of the women that I wanted to, and actually know them. In fact, there's a call. One of their husbands just died, one of my good friends from St. Catherine's. And I'm maybe gonna go if the weather's not too bad up there for the funeral. But some of them are sort of living their mothers' lives, you know. But others are not. If you stay in Richmond and you live in the west end kind of where St. Catherine's was and where they are, it's hard not to. But those are comfortable lives too. It's all just very complicated.

RF: Yeah. I have a two-part question now. What do you think is your best book—in form and style and correctness, I guess?

LS: Oh Lord, I don't know. I don't think any of them have been very correct. My favorite book is *Fair and Tender Ladies.*

RF: Yeah, that's was my next question. Still today?

LS: Yeah, yeah. It is. It is.

RF: Okay. What is writing to you? I think we've already asked that question. I was gonna say and how has it evolved? Okay. Now I want to talk about *Fair and Tender Ladies.* Why does Ivy Rowe write?

LS: Well, I think for the same reason I have written some of what I've written; for the same reason that I wrote *Fair and Tender Ladies,* which just is a way to make it through the night. I mean a way to – as I said, I was in a period of a lot of hard times in my own life and having a book to write is a wonderful solace. I mean, it's a wonderful way to escape your own mind at least for a few hours a day when you're writing it. And I mean I just had an identical experience with this book I just finished.

RF: Really?

LS: Yeah.

RF: I wondered.

LS: Because I was, I had begun to, I had become fascinated with history of Reconstruction and so on. And I had begun to think about a novel about a young girl during Reconstruction, and then my son died and I was entirely, I was just, um, in such pain and such grief, and I was also just truly, mentally, really disorganized. I mean I couldn't remember how to drive to Chapel Hill, and I was seeing a psychiatrist twice a week. And at a certain point—because I just needed to go in and scream and carry on—and at a certain point, he listened to me for a while go on and on. This was actually, this was maybe a couple of months after Josh had died, like three or four, when everybody had decided that now I should be doing better, you know, and I wasn't. And so I began to see him and it was great because I could really just go like this and I couldn't do that so much anymore with my friends and with Hal, and I felt like I had try to be a little more restrained, which I wasn't. But anyway, he said an interesting thing. We were sitting there—his name is Dr. Bill Gunn, Dr. Gunn—and he was writing on his prescription pad. He said, "All right, I've got a prescription for you to take" after listening to me for another session. And I thought, "Oh great. I want drugs. I want more drugs." And he handed me the prescription, and it said "Write every day." And I just looked at it. And he said, "After listening to you" he said, "I realize that you are very lucky because you do have the possibility to enter into a narrative not your own. I think very few people have that possibility." He said, "I want you to do it." I said, "I can't even concentrate." I said, "I can't even write these notes back to people who have written me about Josh." And he said, "I don't care. I don't care what you write. Just start." He said "You do this." He knew that I had had an idea for this book and had done some research. And he said, "Just start. Do it. Do it for two hours everyday, or three hours everyday." And I started. And while the book that is going to be coming out in October is not at all about Josh in any way, I think it's so much in this completely other time period and everything else, it was really helpful for me to write. And it's very intense. It's a very intense book, just like *Fair and Tender Ladies* for that same reason I think. And I just realized, "Oh yeah, I've done this before." You know. And so I think there are many reasons to write and publishing may be the last, the least. But this was just really very helpful. And with *Fair and Tender Ladies* I had already started when all the other things started happening in my

life. I think the intensity of what was happening got into it, and I think Ivy developed as a wonderful, strong character who was so helpful to me at a time when I needed her most.

RF: That's kind of the approach I want to take in my paper is writing as salvation of the spirit, not salvation as religion but you know. And it does that, I think on four levels. This is my opinion.

LS: No, I want to know.

RF: For you, for Ivy, for your mother, and for the reader.

LS: Yeah.

RF: I'm gonna jump way ahead in my questions. Well, I'll tell you my experience as I read it. You know I told you that my husband died.

LS: Yeah.

RF: I think that anytime someone dies, we, the griever, I mean I found myself questioning what had I done wrong to be punished. You get to that point I'm thinking.

LS: Oh, yeah.

RF: I must be a horrible person, and I'm being punished. Why didn't I die? You know all those things. And when I read when Ivy came back and Lulda had died, her reaction, even though she felt guilty and everything, there was something about that that made me let go of that guilt.

LS: Oh, I'm so glad. I'm so glad.

RF: I don't know what it was. Because I don't think underneath it all she knew it wasn't punishment.

LS: Right.

RF: But it was outwardly. I don't know if I can explain it exactly, and since that time I've let go of it because I did everything I could beforehand so I wouldn't feel guilt, but you still feel like you've done something that you're being punished for it.

LS: Oh. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Absolutely.

RF: And I think that it helped me in that respect. Now my sister, who read it, who is not a reader, she's twelve years younger than me. My other sister and I were talking about one time at Christmas. And she told me, after she read it, that she went home and said, "I

have to read this book that Maxie and Rhonda have been talking about." She said that she read it, and the first page she couldn't get into it. She put it down. She said, "Okay. I'm going to do this." So she sat back down, and she said it didn't take her but a few words and she was in it and she was hooked. And I said, "Well, what is your opinion?" She said, "It saved my life."

LS: Well, that's so, I have no idea why, I mean a lot of people have actually written me that. And I think there are maybe six little Ivy's I know about.

NA: Not considering the animals we don't know about.

LS: Well, I don't know why, and with the LuIda thing. And then, I went one time, several times I have been where people were furious about that. Furious that LuIda died. I don't know why anything happens in that book. I just kept writing. It wasn't like it was thought out intellectually. It was very different from writing a book like *The Last Girls* where it was really planned and a job of work and I was consciously working, and putting pieces together and so on. It was very different from that. But I have gone several places and encountered people who were just furious because they think that I felt it necessary to punish Ivy for that. I really wasn't thinking on that sort of an abstract.

RF: Of punishment?

LS: No. It's just like okay, she came home and this happened and that happened and it's like I'm just transcribing what happened in the writing process, and I wasn't really articulating in my mind. I mean I wasn't taking it apart and thinking about it intellectually or abstractly like I do when I teach a novel written by somebody else. It's very different.

RF: I just thought it was some sort, of course, of life; it's just one of the things that happens.

LS: Yeah, and it's one of the kinds of things that happened in those days in real life so much, you know. But then I've had people furious about that. And then I've had a lot of people, women, who would write me and say, "I loved the book, and I just loved it until she ran off with that Honey Breeding. And I closed it up. My whole book club threw it in the fire." Whatever. This has been interesting too.

RF: My mother (I'm gonna do this and get back to you). My mother said it is the best book she ever read. She told me recently that when she was younger that she wrote. Like, it must have been like a journal. And I asked her why. And she said, "Well, it's when your dad and I were having some trouble. I didn't really have anybody to talk to."

LS: Oh, how wonderful.

RF: I said, "Where is it?" and she said, "I burned it." I was just, you talk about chills. I said, "Why?" And she said, "Well, I was free of it. She said I was free."

LS: Isn't that interesting?

RF: I mean I never knew that about my mother. Of course, I'm sure I was little.

LS: That's just fascinating.

RF: It is. It just fascinates me some of the things that this book brings together.

LS: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. But I think the reason, one thing that writing, I've been very interested recently in this whole notion of writing and why people write, and of course, why Ivy was writing that kind of brings us to your purpose today. I was very interested in reading Joan Didion and we are going to see her. I'm very interested in hearing her read from this book in New York. But she's one of the ones at the things Hal is gonna do. But *The Year of Magical Thinking* [Knopf, 2005], which is the book she wrote after her husband's death. And she kept a journal the whole time of his death and everything during the year later, so this book is really a distillation, and it's based upon that journal that she kept. And that's really interesting to me because I think, I mean because I've been for the last couple of years writing fiction, but it clearly somehow has a great deal to do with Josh's death. When I was doing *Fair and Tender Ladies* I was going through a hard period. And I do think there's something about, just when you're going through that difficult kind of time like your mother was, just to order any thoughts at all and put them in an order, it's satisfying to you because you get to these points where you can't do that in your life.

RF: Is it control?

LS: I don't know. It just seems like life is chaotic which, what you do when you write is to put events in some sort of order. Yeah, I guess it is control that you can't in your life. And that is somehow very therapeutic. It's very satisfying. I mean even if you're like Joan Didion and you're transcribing, I mean you're telling the worst thing that could ever happen to you, I mean the saddest thing. But still your ability to say it and to cast it the way that you see it and somehow it's, I think, helpful. I remember I was reading and this lady who was next to me in the book store said, "I read that book, and I don't see how she could possibly write." And I said, "Well, this is what she has done all her life. Everything she does she has written about it." I said, "I don't see how she possibly could not." So it is, it is an interesting thing to think about writing. And of course, *Fair and Tender Ladies* is a lot about writing itself.

RF: And to find research about writing for any reason, like in *Fair and Tender Ladies,* as therapeutic, as art. I've tried to find it.

LS: I don't think there is any.

RF: There's not. I've tried looking. And why not? You have a piece of art that is preserved, and the book?

LS: I'm looking at Nancy to see if she knows.

NA: There is Richard Marius' line, "I write because I am going to die."

LS: Yeah.

NA: And it's his reach for immortality.

LS: And Peter Taylor said, "I never know what I think until I read what I've written."

RF: But see, that's not altogether, and if you don't know that, how can you put an ending?

LS: I don't know. I don't know. It's interesting. It really is.

RF: I think it as. I'm fascinated with it actually. I like teaching writing. I really enjoy it.

LS: Well, here's another thing that is neither here nor there, but I'll just throw out is something that is very characteristic of schizophrenia and the manic phase of bi-polar is writing lots and lots and lots and lots. They call it "logorrhea," which means like too many words. It's a diagnostic symptom. And it's very interesting, and also the journals that I have upstairs that Josh kept, all that writing that he would go into at certain periods is very difficult. It's very difficult of what people do. I have a young student, Meg, who was our house sitter, who has a boyfriend who had a psychotic break while at Oxford in England and just the letters that she was getting and the emails that go on and on and on. Of course, he's brilliant—USC, Morehead, USC—before he, he's actually dropped out now. The writing is on a completely different level, of course, from Josh, whose illness started so much earlier. It's interesting. It is a way of trying to order somehow even when somebody is really ill. It's very interesting.

RF: Did Ivy Rowe—I know you wrote that book to help you. I think your mother was ill at the time?

LS: Yeah. My mother was ill. Also, Josh was having his first psychotic break and he was in the mental hospital, and Page, the other son, was in drug rehab.

RF: Oh wow.

LS: Everybody was in a different hospital. And my father was in and out because he was really depressed. I mean there was a lot going on. But you know, we all have these periods in our family when there is a lot going on. You know, a couple of people that are sick at once, and their house burns down or just whatever. Everybody goes through these periods. They really do. And it does seem to come in clumps.

RF: You are fortunate you have the writing.

LS: I have a really good friend who had an amazing bunch of things happen to her just like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. She's having three eye operations this month. It's like everything at once.

RF: It happens. That's life. That's life.

LS: Yeah, it really is. It really is.

RF: Did Ivy let you down in any way?

LS: NEVER. She surprised me. For instance, I didn't have Honey Breeding in my outline.

RF: Oh. He just showed up.

LS: I knew I wanted her to have too many children and to fall into depression after some and then I wanted her to be able to come out of that. And I did have in mind the lights coming on because I had an old man had told me just how wonderful it was when they got, when the power came up the holler [hollow], and how it looked, and so I really knew that would be sort of the symbol. But as far as the bee, the bee man, I don't know, and I'm still not sure where all that came from. I'm not sure exactly. I think I had wanted her to have an infatuation but I didn't ever, and I thought that it would have to be somebody that came from outside because it couldn't be somebody she had known forever and who would come, besides an evangelist which I don't think she would take up with.

RF: No. No.

LS: And so, I don't know. Then it just kind of really took off at that point.

RF: Why did you choose a mountain woman when there was illness with your mother? Why did you not choose a woman more like your mother? An outsider?

LS: Oh, because I really wanted, it wasn't like I was, I didn't really need as the main character. Well, because I had already started thinking about and planning the book and what I wanted to do in that book was to really write about the lives of mountain women that I had known growing up. And women that Momma admired too.

RF: Okay, Okay.

LS: Women in our family, my Aunt Kate for instance, who was really a great aunt, and my grandmother, my grandmother's family, my daddy's whole family, I mean all these women I knew in the county that I knew growing up. That's what I wanted to write about was that kind of a life

RF: That was first. Then you found the letters, and you realized the form.

LS: Yeah. Then I found the letters and I thought of the form. Yeah. And then as Momma was getting sicker and sicker, I think I was just really, it wasn't really about her life. It was just about how do you bear these kind of things.

RF: I knew it wasn't your mother. Ivy was a role model, a strong person who just went through and as life hit her she just kept plodding and plodding.

LS: And Momma did not do that. She had breakdowns and had to take a lot of medicine and stuff. And I think I was looking, trying to find another way perhaps, which I've only lately realized I think. I mean I think I was looking for another model.

RF: Because you didn't think your mother's way worked?

LS: Well, no. I think that she, you know. . . .

RF: Well, I don't mean. . . .

LS: Well, no. That's right. It was just to be overwhelmed by life and to feel there were ladies' roles, and she definitely started off as a lady.

RF: And you need to know that you can get through to the end, up to the top of that mountain, or whatever it was, you would survive. That's what Ivy is to me.

LS: That's right. Yeah, yeah. I needed a model, I think I needed a model of a woman who was a survivor, you know, because I certainly wanted to take good care, and yeah, deal with it, and take really good care of her and figure out what was the absolute best thing to do for these things. You know what I mean. It's just kind of not be, not just lie down on the sofa, you know, in a seersucker dress. [laughs] Momma's not the only one in her family that would just lie down. My aunt Millie, I mean this whole family is something. I mean my aunt Millie, and I was in charge of Millie, Momma's younger sister. Of course Gay-Gay was a trip, but Aunt Millie, she just kind of laid down at a certain point. And she was in Delray, FL, and I would have to go down and she had arranged—before she lay down, she would have—and her husband had made a lot of money, and he died first, and she took care of him, and she just got in the bed. You know, he died down there. He had a long illness, and she had nurses around the clock

and he died, and I swear to God she just got in the bed and kept the nurses. And I couldn't do anything, and I would go down with a couple of the other nieces and we, but we couldn't talk her into like moving somewhere where people would get up and going and involved. She just wanted to lie in bed by herself. Their sister, Marion, who was in Salem, Virginia, at a certain point had just gotten in bed and turned her face to the wall, according to Momma. [. . . Personal story omitted at Lee Smith's request.]

LS: All of the women in this family did have a history of going to bed. And that was always really scary to me.

RF: I will read this part, if you don't mind.

LS: Okay.

RF: You said that Ivy's affair with Honey Breeding gave her back part of her life that was gone, so she was a much fuller person afterwards, and she could respond to her husband. It gave her back a sense of herself, in a sense. Would you explain the male midlife crisis in the same way?

LS: [laughs] Possibly.

RF: Really?

LS: No, I do think, I do think, you know, there are periods of time whether men or women go into slumps of depression and need something, and it need not be an affair. But something.

RF: Whatever?

LS: Yeah, take a course. I have to say that there was the funniest thing that happened once. A whole lot of high schools in Virginia, the gifted and talented program—what do you call it when you are taking college courses in high school? Anyway, a whole lot of them all at once required *Fair and Tender Ladies*, or decided they were going to read it together, every county in Virginia. So they had me come to Richmond, and I was on this radio hook up with one classroom in each county, and they would ask questions, and it was like an interview kind of thing. The only county that didn't participate was Buchanan County. And it was because this woman on Pilgrim Knob in Buchanan County said that *Fair and Tender Ladies* promotes adultery.

RF: Oh no!

LS: And everybody told me, and I was very amused. But everybody told me and said you should have a little press conference and say something about it. And I said, "un-uh"

RF: The risk is not worth it.

LS: Well, no. And it would also be just like making them seem dumb, which is the last thing I would want to do. Of course you could get a lot of publicity I would think.

NA: But the irony of saying you're only punished. She had to sacrifice a child. And think what that would get you.

LS: I know, I know. That would get me in lots of trouble too, so I just didn't say anything. The only county in Virginia, which was very interesting.

NA: The wages of adultery is death of child.

LS: That's right.

RF: Have you considered writing a book with a male protagonist?

LS: You know, I swear I am never going to write another novel. I'm just going to write stories. So yeah, I will try something with a male protagonist.

NA: Boo, boo, boo.

LS: I don't know if I can, there is something about, I don't know, I think—this one just racked me out, and it might be because of the subject and the intensity of it and so on. And I love, also something I love and I was talking to my neighbor about this—he and I share this—I love really long stories. I love novella length things, and I think I may think about several of those linked or not instead of a novel, but it's just, it's a haul. You know, when you get into the end and you're just kind of worn out, and then, but you owe to the rest of the, you know you owe it to those characters to finish them up in a way, in a way they want. It's just kind of, it's a haul, so I'm probably not ever going to write another long novel, I don't think. I don't think I can put my head around it adequately.

RF: Do you think you've written the best book you can write?

LS: No. I don't think, I don't even, you know, best is, I don't even like. You know I don't even think these books are necessarily what I wish I would have written.

RF: Really?

LS: Yeah.

RF: Even with *Fair and Tender Ladies?*

LS: Well, I love it for me, you know, for me but I'm sure they're. . . . I don't think I have enough emotional control and conscience. I don't think I am as conscious a writer as a person is who is a really first rate writer, you know. I mean, I think for me, it's so much more, been a much more personal involvement, and I think to be able to write novels which are more just fully created out of whole thoughts, you know is perhaps—I don't know.

RF: You like to piece together a quilt?

LS: I do, I do, I do, I do. I like to piece together a quilt and a lot of those pieces have a lot to do with me at least emotionally, and therefore when I'm writing it's more like being enthralled in a certain way than having real control. So I don't know. I mean it's been wonderful for me – in a sense, a lot to me. I don't know that I've been able to control the material enough to feel like it's a conscious creation. I've never been able to feel like, it's more like, the way I write I think is more like people paint than like crafting. I feel like I haven't been a crafts person. I don't know, it seems like if it is lucky rather than necessarily deserving.

RF: That's just how you feel?

LS: That's how I feel.

RF: Regardless of how your readers feel?

LS: Well, I just, you know, I, each, each separate thing has meant so much to me. In particular, *Fair and Tender Ladies* and this most recent book. And it's hard for me to separate it and see it as something that somebody would read in school. It still is.

RF: But you might be compelled to write something.

LS: Well, I don't know.

RF: You just never know. You might be. You just don't know what's out there.

LS: Yeah, I might be. I just feel like, I feel like maybe with the stories I can control them a little bit better.

RF: Craft them.

LS: Yeah, yeah. Craft them. They're short enough.

RF: So you want to write something to go into an anthology to be taught in college?

LS: Not necessarily.

RF: I mean, I don't want it to sound the way it came out, but you're talking like teaching the novel.

LS: No, I like it. But I do feel like the novel has really become such a part and parcel of me. I mean when you are writing a novel you are living with it for three or four years, and it just becomes such a bodily part of you. I mean it just becomes such a complete emotional part of me. And I think with the stories I am able to feel more like I am crafting them and so on and really doing something that seems to me more like a real aesthetic at work rather than just

RF: But if you take your body of work and you start with Crystal, you can clearly see the evolution of the female.

LS: And that's real interesting to see, but that was not conscious.

RF: Well, I know, but I. . . .

LS: Well, I'm glad, I'm glad.

RF: I think, don't you think every female protagonist evolves?

LS: I think that's true. I certainly think that's true.

RF: And would that be because of you? As you grow older?

LS: I think so. Yes, I think so.

RF: Your life experience?

LS: Yeah. Because I think there's at the beginning, a very passive—you know, nobody is more passive and unable to determine her own future or actions than Crystal. And then, by the end, you have Ivy who is really, totally becoming her own, or being her own. Women who are characters like Katie Cocker in *Devil's Dream* or whatever. That's true.

RF: I think you could make a good argument that Ivy Rowe is "Everywoman."

LS: Well, I would hope so. I would hope so.

RF: Or that she's the archetype for the heroic female.

LS: I would hope so. That's exactly, those are the kinds of lives of the women I had known that I felt were heroic—that was my—that was in my outline—was these women who I felt like had lived and had too many children by and large and lived lives that I felt were very heroic and totally non-public.

RF: Right.

LS: By and large. And this was. They were unsung heroes, and I wanted to sing about them. That's what that book was intended to be about. And then, as I say, it got into something more personal as well, but that is what it was intended to be.

RF: And Ivy takes an ordinary life and makes—it's extraordinary.

LS: I think everybody's life is extraordinary if we knew enough about them.

RF: Exactly. Or if we accepted ourselves.

LS: Yeah, yeah. Because the more you learn the deeper you go into any person's life, the more extraordinary I think that person is.

RF: That's the beauty of that book. It lets—I mean you read that book, and it validates us as creative beings.

LS: Well, that's what I wanted and that's something I've been really interested in—always, always, always—and have written about a lot is the women's creativity being often expressed in ways that are not understood. Well, like in *Family Linen*, the, Candy, who runs the beauty shop, and is an artist, and she's the one who really shapes, she's the one who runs every public event, marking the passing of time and what is important in the community.

RF: Look at Granny Rowe.

LS: Yeah—I mean I think all these are just incredibly creative women.

RF: And necessary to survive. I was watching this morning briefly a royal family taping, and they were talking about Prince William, and I thought, you know, his role has been foisted on him just like Ivy's was done for her. She had no choice, like he doesn't.

LS: No.

RF: They were talking about all he's done and how proud of him they are, but aren't their lives the same, in ways?

LS: Yeah, oh yeah.

RF: I think that's what when we read that book, I think we go, "I do matter. What I do is important."

LS: Oh, I'm so glad. It is.

RF: Even if it's raising children, or canning vegetables, or making a quilt, or whatever, it's important to the existence of others. And we do make, oftentimes, a much bigger impact than a real heroic figure—a superstar.

LS: Oh yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely.

RF: And I think after my husband died, if it hadn't been for my children, I may not have made it through that.

LS: Um hum.

RF: But I had to go through the motions of living to make sure they were okay.

LS: Um hum, Um hum, Um hum.

RF: So I think we do do heroic things.

LS: Oh yeah.

RF: I think a woman more than a man. You know, I mean, well, maybe not.

LS: Well, I think the men's are often, at least traditionally, have been more, there the kinds of heroic things they do have been more public things such as would have to do with a job or with a something whereas with women has often been within the family—less so now—but traditionally and certainly in terms of *Fair and Tender Ladies* and in Ivy Rowe's life within the family.

RF: And men are goal oriented.

LS: Yes, that's right.

RF: There's a grail at the end of their quest, you know a holy grail they're after, or to get home.

LS: Yeah. That's a big burden for them.

RF: I think so.

LS: I mean, you know, there's expectations that they have for themselves too.

RF: And we have to stay home and manage with what we have, and either lay down or get up and go straight through it.

LS: Right.

RF: Okay, let's see. I have that about the letter. Oh, I love this part, where after Lulda dies and she's not written for 2 years. She writes to Silvaney and she says she realizes "This is your life Ivy, and you're right in the middle of it."

LS: Yeah, yeah.

RF: You know. I mean that's the old adage of the biblical thing. I know it's not a religious book. But live today for today.

LS: Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

RF: And get through each day. And so many people don't do that, do they?

LS: Well, no, unh uh. That's right. Cause it always does seem like you're waiting for something that's gonna, that's right out there, that's gonna happen and then everything clicks in, or if you had such and such, then this certain thing would happen. We all, it's like, I just remember thinking for so long that okay, then I'll go away to school and then my life will start from then on.

RF: Yeah.

LS: Graduate from school and my life will start from then on. You've decided that your life is out there somewhere, and it hasn't started. And when you do realize that you're living it, it's a big shock.

RF: I remember thinking that if I ever get to 30, I'll be set. I'll be there.

LS: Right, exactly. And I always thought that when I got to be this age, I would know something, and that's even less true. And wisdom would set in, and instead that's totally, totally not the case.

RF: Which one of your characters is most you? The one in "Live Bottomless?"

LS: Well, as a child maybe. I don't know that anybody is most me. Um, yeah, I guess so, I guess that child is. And "Tongues of Fire" is. Those are the two really most autobiographical things that I ever wrote. So I would suppose so. In terms of, as an adult, I don't really write autobiographical fiction. I mean all the women in *Last Girls* were sort of me, but they weren't.

RF: There was a little of you?

LS: Right, right. There is a little touch.

RF: Any talk of a movie? I think that would make a great movie.

LS: No. There's always a lot of interest and you think, "Oh, this is exciting. I have a phone call from Goldie Hawn." Which I did. But you know, it's all kind of disappearing. You get so that there's lots of possibilities and it gets kind of. . . .

RF: I read somewhere else that you said that a writer, that serious writers don't write about comfort, you want to do it. Let's see, about writing, you don't want it for comfort, but for insight.

LS: Yeah.

RF: Insight into self or into humanity?

LS: Well, I think both. I think both. But I think, I think it's interesting in terms of forms of fiction because I think generic fiction is for comforting because when you read a mystery you know it's will be solved. And you are going to be intrigued and then comforted—satisfied. Or a romance novel, you know. These are, the generic forms are for comfort in a certain way. But with the books that are more aimed to be more literary that's not necessarily the case. The questions are raised, but they are not necessarily answered.

RF: And you want to pursue literary writing now? I mean, is that what we would call it?

LS: I guess so. Mainly because I can't ever seem to answer the questions. It's not so much insight as choice. I mean I would love to be able to. There were several periods of time in my younger years that I was really broke and really tried to write. I have a novel, a mystery novel that I really tried to write because I wanted to sell it to make money. And I also thought I could write romance fiction on the side and try that too. It's all really hard. It's really hard to fit a form. I've never been able to do it. I was really unable to do it. I mean, why not? I just thought, I could knock a few of these off and make a little money. That's not the case. It's really hard.

RF: Yeah, you're not really a conformist, are you?

LS: Well, as I say once I start with a novel, it takes on a thing of its own, and it's very hard to make it conform to a set of ideals or the way someone has the visions of how this kind of novel should go.

NA: Three of us collaborated on a romance novel.

LS: Did you?

NA: And the rejection letter was that it was too well written.

LS: Yeah, well my friend, I have a friend who was in graduate school at UNC, and she wrote one that I thought was just wonderful and her rejection letter was that they did not permit, I can't remember, but one thing was semi-colons.

NA: They sent us a form back with the letter, which was not a form letter, saying you hit some of the characteristics you have to have: the heroine must be an orphan; she has a sibling who is in someway handicapped or impaired, whatever. And we hit a bunch of them coincidentally because we had never read one of them. We opened it with her standing at her father's grave, so we had her orphaned.

LS: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Well this one was set on Pawley's Island and the girl had inherited an inn that was in disrepair. I did a thing, I did a joke thing of it. But my friend Kathy wrote a really serious one. I thought it was great, and they said it was too good. Then she sent it off to a literary press, and they said it was too much like a romance novel. So they're dangerous in trying to . . . .

RF: They need a middle ground.

LS: That's right.

NA: I used "Desire on Domino Island" with a teacher's workshop. I gave it them over the weekend and said, "Read this and come in with your own on Monday." I literally gave them a weekend.

LS: Oh, great. That's so funny.

NA: They were funny, clever, with twists and turns.

LS: We had, at the Appalachian Writer's workshop, not last year but the year before, we had everybody write the trite Appalachian novel. It was so funny. I mean it was great. If somebody had said—a friend of ours had published this essay saying if it's Southern fiction, it has to have a mule in it [Mills, Jerry Leath. "Equine Gothic: The Dead Mule as Generic Signifier in Southern Literature of the Twentieth Century." Southern Literary Journal 29 (Fall 1996): 2 – 17.] We decided if it was Appalachian fiction it had to have a possum. And they wrote these short things—everybody—hysterical! It was like who could write the most little short Appalachian stories. It was hysterical.

RF: Okay, next to last question. What part of your life have you enjoyed most: writer, teacher, or mentor?

LS: Uhmmmmm. Well, I think probably mentor because that's totally enjoyable. You know, it's just totally enjoyable. I mean it's wonderful; it's pure pleasure to come upon somebody with talent. You know, it's just great pleasure to read their work, particularly to get other books for them to read. I think a lot of times a good teacher or mentor is

mainly a matchmaker saying, "Well, it would be good for you to read because they've had a similar life experience and see what they did and just kind of—because you know what books are made of. I mean you're older. And that's true of being a teacher too. I think being a teacher—well, I don't know. Teacher was also a totally pleasant, pleasant experience. Being a writer is a mixed bag. It's been more of a compulsion than—I mean a lot of it has been really intense pleasure, but it's also, I mean, the fact of it is, it does throw one into a more public place than I would choose to live in. I'm not really a public person. I mean I'm a ham and I kind of enjoy some of, you know, I like to give readings at different kinds of things, but, as I say, a lot of my fiction has really been very personal in a way that is not automatically apparent, I hope, to people and to throw it out there is always risky.

RF: Pressure.

LS: Pressure. Well, it's risky. I mean you don't know what anybody's going to think of it, and I've gotten plenty of bad reviews too, just like anybody else. You know, it's a sense of exposure, and it seems like the older you get the more used to that you'd be, but that's not really the case.

RF: You're tired of it now, and you want to get out of it?

LS: Well, I don't know. I thought when I got to this age I'd really be able to judge things better. I have no idea. I mean I just finished this novel—I have no idea how it would be reviewed or what anybody would think. None. It's just really—I'm just not able to have judgment. I mean I can talk about *Fair and Tender Ladies* now because I wrote it a long time ago, but that's always true. When I finished *The Last Girls*, which was the one I wrote before this, I just didn't have a clue. You know, so there's a little too much risk involved I think in the writer thing. I mean the writing of them is very pleasurable to me. It's interesting; I'm discovering things; I never know quite where it's going or what's going to happen. It's intensely interesting and pleasurable and a great privilege to be able to do this, and then to get these books published. The publishing thing is just awful. I mean, it just feels really. . . .

RF: If it's rejection, it's a personal rejection?

LS: Yeah, rejection is obviously painful, and you do take it as a personal rejection, but even just throwing it out there, you know.

RF: Exposing yourself.

LS: Yeah. And then you always hear from a lot of nuts.

RF: Like the drunk woman at the thing that said when are you going to write about us?

LS: Yeah, or just whatever. I mean it's just kind of, that part of it, the publishing part, I don't like so much. I love the writing part and living with it for the years you are writing it. All that kind of things. But the publishing part is not so hot. That's what I would think. It's funny. There's a wonderfully funny quote by Flannery O'Connor who said once, she'd been to some lawyer's conference, and somebody was asking her what it was like and they asked her were there any good writers there. And she said, "No. Lots of them don't want to write. They want to have written." Which I love. But that's not me. I don't want to have written. I really like the writing itself and. . . .

RF: the process?

LS: Yeah, the process.

RF: Just like Ivy.

LS: Yeah, I do. That's what I like. But I don't like the having written part.

RF: You like to write it and burn it?

LS: Well, I was okay—but yeah, it's the process that's so pleasurable.

RF: Okay Nancy, the last question I asked Nancy was, "Have you got anything that you recommend?" and it was, "In the interview process, you've been interviewed so many times, is there something you've not been asked that you would like to say?"

LS: Well, I never know. I mean no, I don't think so. I mean I am not like a person that has a message. I don't really write with a strong theme in mind most of the time. I mean, the general message has to do exactly with what you were talking about, was becoming a fully realized person and trying to do that, in particularly women, you know finding rights in their lives to do that so generally. But, no, sometimes if it's a really good interviewer, like you, and I don't do this very much anymore, or I haven't done it in forever, in fact, if it's a really good interviewer like you, you will ask me something that will make me realize something that I really didn't realize before, which is about my mother lying down, and you know, the difference in that and having me choosing a very active mountain woman to write about instead you know, just kind of, thing. And I really hadn't connected that so much. It's just interesting.

NA: Is there anything about Ivy Rowe, the process of writing, or creating, or the novel, or your thoughts now back this many years?

LS: Well, I feel like she, I feel like Ivy Rowe herself has long since stepped out of her novel. I mean like she is just this friend who continues to. . . .

RF: walk among us. . . .

LS: walk among us, and also to have new life, the possibility right now. You know, it's a whole, I mean it's just really interesting, and I get really interesting letters from people all the time who have read that novel for the first time. I really do.

RF: Going back to my sister, she is now taking an interior decorating course online, and loves it. She said she really thought that reading that book spurred her on to do this.

LS: I'm so glad.

RF: I mean, that's the neatest thing.

LS: It is, it is. And I have, no, and I really don't, and as I say, I wasn't thinking of writing anything that would be in any way inspirational. It was just something I needed I think, you know, that I needed to create a character like that, and didn't even know that I needed it at the time. I was just doing it. It is really interesting, because it does seem that of everything I've written, it does seem to be the thing that has had the most personal, has brought me into contact with so many people that are wonderful, like ya'll, Karren [Pell], Tom [House], and Tommy [Goldsmith][the three composers of the score for *Fair and Tender Ladies*]; Barbara Smith, who did the first Ivy Rowe thing and is still really a close friend of mine retired now in western North Carolina.

RF: Did you know Greta [Lambert]?

LS: Well. no, well I didn't before, but it's just brought me into contact with these wonderful people and possibilities. It's been great.

RF: I was thinking we need to say this. I'm going to ask this question, and you may not can answer it. You say that you don't write with any purpose, I mean no great thematics.

LS: Well, every now and then I'll have a theme, like with *Black Mountain Breakdown.* I really wanted to say something about passivity, and I had a very hard time writing that book because I did start sort of with a theme and my characters seemed very cardboardy. And I had to rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.

RF: But do you think because you are so well educated and well read—and that's one of your pieces of advice, to read, read, read—but do you think that all the things you know and read creep into the theme, and I don't mean the type of theme, but the knowledge of what it takes to achieve this?

LS: Oh sure, sure. I think anytime. Well anytime you sit down to write, everything you are is brought to bear upon whatever it is. I mean everything you know, everything you've read, everything that's ever meant anything to you.

RF: So all those literary devices, I mean you've even got the fairy tale in there, the old folk tales, and folklore.

LS: I love all that stuff. But you're not conscious of it. I think you have to forget it all. I do, I have to forget it all. I have to walk in, and when I sit down, just let the writing go and do it. As I say, I am a less conscious writer than some, and would like to be a little more conscious.

RF: But I think it comes through in some of your work because it's so much a part of you.

LS: Well, I'm glad, I'm glad.

RF: At least for me, *Fair and Tender Ladies* and a few of your short stories.

LS: Well, I'm so glad. I don't know why. I've just gotten really interested in short stories again, so I'm looking forward trying my hand at some of those.

RF: Well, you can craft those so much easier.

LS: Yes, that's it.

RF: Because there are not as many pages!

LS: That's it. No, that's it.

RF: They're easy to teach.

LS: I had just a great, wonderful evening this week. I went over to NC State where I used to teach for a long time. When I retired they were raising money—used to be when I was there we made so that we could get a, semesters in English could be a concentration in creative writing and your major could be a collection of stories in a novel. Now they have started an MFA program, which I had always encouraged them to do, and they have done that, and when I retired, which was coincidentally the start of that, someone gave them a bunch of money, and they have now this Lee Smith visiting professorship, which is very nice, and the first person, it's just started, and the first person who's over there just for a little while now is my student, Jill McCorkle, so she's like my little sister. We're just really close, and I went over see her—it was the first residency—to hear her reading. And she read this story that she had just finished, and I swear to God, it's one of the best stories I ever ever read in my life. I mean, it is so good. I'm just very excited, and not like anybody else's. She's become an incredible short story writer in the last ten years. So it was just so exciting. And it makes me just want to write stories. It's like a little novel in that story because it's fabulous.

RF: I talk about you a lot in my class, about writing what you know, the voice. I believe you have a wonderful voice—it's so natural.

LS: Well thank you, but again, you know, I'm tired of that too. This new book relies heavily on voice too. Yeah, you just get tired of yourself. I think I want to write some stories where they're not relying as much on voice as on, I don't know.

RF: Well, do you want to take it out of Appalachia?

LS: I don't know. I don't know.

RF: You just don't know where it's going to be.

LS: I don't know. But I was talking to Tony Early, who I think is just fun, and he said he was going to write an essay on why I don't want to live at the P.O. It's gonna be the no-no because I'm tired of hearing these women go on and on and on, and I feel like one of those women, you know what I mean?

NA: Uh, huh.

LS: So you just get to where you're ready for something new, something new.

NA: Is there a novel anywhere from 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th century that you wish you had written or that really just speaks to you?

LS: Oh, *To the Lighthouse.*

RF: Really?

LS: Absolutely. Yeah, *To the Lighthouse.*

RF: Then why isn't Hillary [Lee and Hal's dog] named Virginia Woolf?

LS: I know. You know what, we thought about that later. She was a wild dog in the mountains originally. She was wild. She just showed up out of the forest as a puppy. And I wanted to keep her and Hal didn't, and we went through this for a while, and then he said he got to name her if I was going to keep her, and I said what are you going to name her and he said, Hillary Rodham [laughs]. But I think later we wished we had named her Virginia Woolf—we thought about that. You do something when you are young.

RF: The Virginia Wolves?

LS: Oh yeah, we had, yeah a rock band in college. I am so tone deaf. I wasn't a singer. I was a go-go girl for the Virginia Wolves.

NA: This one is going to really put you on the spot. Is there a contemporary writer whose books you just cannot wait for them to get out?

LS: Alice Munro. Carol Shields too, but Alice Munro. I cannot ever wait.

NA: For the next one.

LS: Yeah, for the next one. There are a lot of good writers that I like though. There are a lot of good writers out there.

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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW WITH RICK ANDERSON
Friday, February 17, 2006

On February 17, 2006, three of us left Montgomery, Alabama headed to Hillsborough, North Carolina for my interview with Lee Smith. I was accompanied on the trip by Professor Nancy Anderson, my friend and thesis director, and her husband, Professor Richard Anderson. Professor Richard Anderson was on the trip for two reasons: he graciously offered to help with the driving since the trip would take about seven or eight hours one way, and he had agreed to allow me to interview him for my thesis project on *Fair and Tender Ladies.*

Since I knew that Lee Smith was sometimes criticized for her portrayal of men in her work, I wanted to interview a male reader who had read *Fair and Tender Ladies.* I did not care if he had read any of Lee Smith's other works, and it did not matter to me what sort of opinion he had about *Fair and Tender Ladies.* I knew that I needed a male's perspective on the novel, in my mind, to help give my thesis project credibility, for in all honesty, the only readers of the novel I knew were all female. Of course, I have not been in any course where the novel was taught, nor did my immediate circle of reading friends include men.

Luckily for me, I had a captive male in my car on the trip to Hillsborough, North Carolina. Professor Richard Anderson retired from Huntingdon College in 2001 where he had taught American Literature for 30 years. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to interview him since he had much expertise and knowledge about American literature, Southern literature, and Appalachia as well. He also was very familiar with *Fair and Tender Ladies,* and as I learned in the interview, he liked the book immensely and knew a lot about Lee Smith's body of work as well.

I can never thank him enough for his enthusiasm for *Fair and Tender Ladies,* his readiness to share his knowledge, and his insight into the book and its characters. I got more than I had hoped for when I interviewed him.

RF: Give me an overview of your opinion of *Fair and Tender Ladies.*

RA: Wow, that's a toughy. I thought you were going to be more specific. You mean like a ranking of some kind?

RF: No, not as a ranking. You read the novel, and I just want to know, from a male's perspective, what did you think of the novel? Just the novel.

RA: I've always loved this book. I've taught it several times. I've loved its authenticity or feel about the way people think and act in Appalachia. I've loved its humor. I've loved the almost mythic quality it takes on at times with Ivy as a kind of—she's a real person, but she's also a symbolic person.

RF: What kind of symbolic person?

RA: Um, I don't know; I haven't thought that one out. Well, she represents something, it seems to me, about the mountain spirit; the indomitability of the people she comes from, but she is a woman so she represents a strength in women that makes me think about my forebears, my grandmothers. What else in overview do I like? Oh, well it is well written. I like the epistolary style. I like the characterization.

RF: What about the fact that you only have Ivy's viewpoint of the characters?

RA: Well, I mean that's just a convention of writing. It doesn't change the quality or the depth of perception.

RF: Uh, I'm thinking. Well, what about Lee Smith's portrayal of male characters in the novel?

RA: Well, because they are seen through Ivy's perspective, I don't see them quite as male characters so much as the men in Ivy's life. It seems to me that when—one of the things I like about Lee as a writer, not just in this book but in others I've read is, of course, she's got male characters, she's got female characters, she's got old characters and young ones, but they are human before they are any of these things.

RF: So you find them very believable.

RA: Yeah, even the ones that are minor characters and you can tell that they serve some function or purpose in furthering the plot or something. But there's still—she gives them a life, vitality.

RF: So you don't agree with critics who have said that some of her male characters are not developed fully?

RA: Well, yes, of course they're not developed fully. They're not supposed to be developed fully. What it would seem to me is it would depend on the book and what their use is. But it would seem to me that her purpose is not to develop them fully. You would have to give me a specific character.

RF: Well, what about Oakley?

RA: Oakley. Oakley seems to me to have a good bit of development, as much as you would expect of a character who is not the major character in a primarily one person book. Oakley is as well developed—again to use an analogy of *Huck Finn*—Oakley is as well developed in that book as say any of the female characters in *Huck Finn*. And I don't think anyone would accuse Mark Twain of not developing female characters. He doesn't. They're not front and center because he's writing from a male perspective, but that doesn't mean they're cardboard or clichéd. It seems to me there is real humanity even in her minor characters. What is the name of young man, the boy that Ivy first slips up with and impregnates her?

NA (from back seat): Lonnie Rash

RF: Lonnie.

RA: Even he, who is extremely minor, is there so that Ivy could have this illegitimate child, and also introduce them to passions and so forth. You know, even he's got angles and complexities to him, but when you get to somebody like Oakley or Franklin Ransom.

RF: I hadn't thought about the development of the male characters as fully as that, and I think that is really interesting.

RA: I don't think they're fully developed in the sense that she is.

RF: But you know them.

RA: You know them, and they're real. Even her father who is such a strong presence in the book. Even he is not a major—not a lot of the book is dedicated to him, but he is real, he is there partly because Ivy feels he is real and he is there.

RF: And would you compare him to *Huck Finn*--thinking about the male characters—I mean, I think her male characters are as fully developed as say Jim. I know that's...

RA: Oh yeah, certainly. Jim serves, Jim's there, of course, primarily as a foil for Huck. I don't mean a foil in a simple way. He's primarily there so that we can learn about Huck and what Huck feels and knows, and also so Huck can learn about himself and grow. Jim has reality. Jim has complexity. He's not just some kind of stereotype, black comic character, even with characters like the duke and the dauphin in *Huck Finn* who are there primarily to be, not stereotypes, but stock characters. Even they have their richness and fullness because Mark Twain's a good writer, which is the same thing with Lee. Because she's interested in people, even her minor characters have humanity, humanness. It may not be very noble humanness as it is in that awful evangelist preacher brother of Ivy's.

RF: Garnie.

RA: But he's memorable, isn't he?

RF: Oh absolutely. What do you think about writing as art, as Ivy's art? The letters: why do you think Ivy writes the letters? Do you have an opinion?

RA: Why does she write the letters? You mean from Ivy's perspective?

RF: Yes.

RA: Because, as the book says, she is this immensely bright and artistic and feeling spirit caught in very stringent circumstances, in very limited circumstances, caught by time and place and shaped by them in ways that don't let her find the outlets that she might have found if she'd, say, grown up in Paris, in the elite, or upper crust, and so her only outlet is the letters. It is an artistic, aesthetic outlet, and it is also her window to the world. Let me go back and say something before you go off and leave the male characters. I don't know when you were going to come back to this or not, but it seems to me that as I said, Lee Smith creates good characters and memorable characters even among the minor ones because she's interested in them, and in the same way, I think Lee really likes men, and it shows up. Even her flawed male characters are magnetic, and in that sense, Ivy seems to me—Ivy loves men. Ivy is a man's woman. She loves men, and men love her, and how can a male reader not respond to that? I love Ivy. I wish I knew Ivy. She'd be fun to be around. She might be dangerous to be around. Nancy might not like me to be around Ivy, but she's—you know. So this, to me, it's not a book about, it's not a book where there are man versus woman things. This is a book about people and the chief character happens to be female, and it makes sense for her to be female because the writer is female. This isn't a book about male/female relationships written from a female perspective. It's not, it's part of it. And so, to me, it's not a woman's book because it's not interested in being a woman's book. It's interested in being a book about people.

RF: Well, let me tell you what my sister said, and you comment on this. I asked her, she read the book; she loved it. It was one of the first books—she's forty, she's not a reader; didn't go to college, but she heard my other sister and me talking about it at Christmas, and she decided she wanted to find out what this book was about. We were so just yackety yackety, and we had met Lee at a book festival in October. But anyway, she decided she had to read it. Well, once she read it, she read everything else. So I asked her, "What did you like most *Fair and Tender Ladies?*" And she said, "It saved my life." What do you think about that?

RA: [laughs] I don't know how to respond to that.

RF: So as a male you don't have that . . .

RA: Well it didn't save my life [laughs]. No book has saved my life though I suppose Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* came closer than most. But yes, I think I can see why she would say that. I think it celebrates, at the same time it both laments and celebrates a closed life, a woman's—I don't want to say frustrated, but in some ways it is a frustrated life. Ivy rolls with the punches so nothing ever wipes her out; but she could have had a better life, that's for sure.

RF: But she celebrates the one she's got.

RA: Yeah, she celebrates the one she has. And she, therefore, she allows perhaps others to see the one I've got isn't as bad as I thought it was. Does that make sense?

RF: Yeah, exactly, exactly. I mean it validates a woman's ordinary existence.

RA: Ordinary existence, it's not ordinary; it's extraordinary.

RF: Yes.

RA: Yeah, you feel like you're closed in, just go find the honey man! [laughs].

NA: Is that how your sister explained saving her life?

RF: Yeah, sort of. It was at a time, and she told me recently, she's now pursuing, she works full time and she's pursuing an interior decorating degree. And she said, "I really believe reading that novel sparked all this for me, that I realized that even if don't think I am as smart as you (which she doesn't) that I can pursue whatever I want and that's okay."

RA: Also, that you can enjoy what you've got even though sometimes our world says that unless you are out being . . .

RF: . . . productive?

RA: Not just productive, but out—away from the home—then your choices aren't good ones.

RF: You know I think a lot of times it's those women out there who are having to do it that make those decisions and those kinds of sayings because they really prefer to be in the other role—they get to justify their own. Okay. Let me think.

RA: You did ask me a question I didn't get to answer. I can't remember what it was now, so go ahead.

RF: What about the religion in the book? Talk to me about Ivy's view of religion in the book.

RA: I don't have a response to that. I'd have to think about that for a while because that is not something I have thought about before. Now Ivy, for a long time she's not religious, right?

RF: Right. The only real thing you get is Sam, what's his last name, the preacher man that Garnie follows, and you get that violent view of religion.

RA: Of course, Oakley and his family—what did she say about him, every time the church doors are open, Oakley is there.

RF: Yeah.

RA: And she doesn't resent that. She's not anti-religious. I think it just doesn't speak to her. Her religion is on a more personal level. Hers is more natural, not even deism. It's just, what do they call it, animism, dynamism—a sense of being part of life, being part of the world.

RF: Like Ivy, her name, runs through all of it.

RA: That speaks to me because it's my personal view too, but I hadn't really thought about it being substantive in the novel other than it's just part of the character of Ivy.

RF: I read this question somewhere. I think it was things to talk about if you are going to do a book club, and it said is there any significance to the—is it Ecclesiastes—that's interspersed in the dialogue in the end when she is dying and she is reading from Garnie's bible. Is there any significance to that? I mean, I'm just asking.

RA: Do you mean in terms of specific theology or religion? I don't think so. I think she, I think anybody in Ivy's world would have been as much—the traditional language of the King James Version of the bible would have been part and parcel of her world and her life. So it's natural to take comfort in it. But Ecclesiastes, of all of the books in the bible, it seems to me to be the least, the least—very much in an old stoic kind of Judaist rather than Christian theology of acceptance of the world and its ways for what it is, and the fact that you come into it, and you live, and you die, and that's it.

NA: Everything has its season.

RA: And it doesn't speak to Christianity's sense of the afterlife and all of that. It seems to me, Ecclesiastes is my favorite book in the bible, but I don't think it has much to do with Christianity.

RF: OK. What about burning the letters? Do you have a take on, she says, "It was the writing of them that signified" and then she burns them. Do you have a take on that?

RA: Other than to take her at her word.

RF: Just take her at her word.

RA: They're so meaningful to her. They're meaningful to her because they were her life, not so much a record of her life as the way she lived. They are the means, and now her life has come to an end, and she doesn't want them to particularly become anybody else's—I don't think she's so much afraid of having them read, but just—maybe she is a little bit. You would be, wouldn't you?

RF: Well, it depends on why you write, I think.

RA: Yeah, you can write to yourself, but you can also think, "It's just as well if my children and grandchildren don't see all of this."

RF: Yeah, and then you can say it's over and done.

RA: The same reason Richard Marius says he doesn't want anybody to look at his papers for forty years after he is dead. You may want to write them at the time you are doing it, but you're not necessarily wanting everybody in the world to be part of your innermost feelings.

RF: Right.

RA: But I think more, it's just that, and also, it's part of the art of the book. This book is over. This book has been the letters. It is Lee closing the book.

RF: Yeah, that's interesting. I hadn't thought of that, of Lee closing the book. I like that. Okay. What about specific characters? Tell me what comes to mind when I mention Silvaney.

RA: Silvaney is the quintessence of the spirit of the earth. Yeah, more than Ivy even. Silvaney, even her name means of the forest. She's like some kind of ancient Greek spirit of the earth, spirit of the mountains, and therefore—of course it's important to Ivy to keep her alive as long as she does, as she comes to realize. You wonder, and I'm not going to give you an answer on this, but one of the questions that any reader needs to debate is to what degree is Ivy consciously or unconsciously complacent in keeping alive the myth of Silvaney long after she has died. Ivy, consciously, gets really upset to find out that she's been writing letters all this time to somebody who's not there. But to what degree is she sort of aware that nobody's there but as long as she keeps writing the letters, there is somebody there, and they're important to her, and it's important that they keep

together this—Silvaney is the wild side of Ivy. And what's the other sister, the common sense one?

RF: Beulah? And Ethel, Ethel marries the older man.

RA: Ethel is the one I'm thinking about. Beulah is the one that is unhappy and goes off. Ethel is the common sense side of Ivy. Silvaney is the wild side of Ivy, and she encompasses them both, and she loves them both.

RF: She says she loves Silvaney "bestest" of all.

RA: Well, of course. I think being the kind of person her wildness would be what she would want to keep alive.

RF: Well then how would you explain Babe, who is Silvaney's twin?

RA: What do you mean how would I explain him?

RF: Well, you said, she is the wild side.

RA: He's wild too.

RF: But he's murderously evil or something to me.

RA: Oh, I don't think so. He's strange and exotic. I hadn't thought of him as murderously evil.

RF: To me, he's evil. There's something . . . .

RA: But there is--he's dangerous and wild.

RF: Dangerous maybe is better.

RA: But I don't know that I would call him evil.

RF: His head gets splattered on the creek bank.

RA: I don't know that I would call him evil. I think I would say only, uncontrolled. And Ivy, of course, admires that, but is also wary of it because she's a more balanced person.

RF: He's the extreme.

RA: He and Silvaney both are in their own ways. Because he has got the testosterone, he's going to get into fights and into trouble and get shot, but he and Silvaney are really very much alike.

RF: Okay, I'm glad you said that, but I hadn't thought of that, but I can see it now, them being so alike.

RA: The only character I see in this novel as evil would be that awful little Garnie.

RF: And he's made evil by . . .

RA: . . . by his stunted little soul—I think that seeps out. I don't know, the novel doesn't explore this so there's no way to answer this question, but does he, is he made evil by what he becomes or does he become what he is because he's evil?

RF: That's a good question; that's a real good question.

RA: Does he seek out the world that gives him a mean spirited kind of power?

RF: That's a Jim Baker question too, isn't it?

RA: Absolutely. I always think—I tend to be more of a nature than a nurture person. I tend to think we are what we are because of who we are.

RF: She [Ivy] says that in the book. She says, you know, or somewhere, she says that sometimes when we are young we are just going to do some things in our lives that we just can't help doing, and we're on a path—like you are saying, nature vs. nurture.

RA: I think we can resist that path, but I don't—the really mean, evil people of the world; I don't think they get made that way. I think they are that way. I think it's possible to control and temper your meanness if you wish to.

RF: Well, do you think Garnie then is evil like Bin Laden?

RA: Yeah, sure. On a minor scale he's just as mean and vicious as Bin Laden.

RF: Do you think—his is not a coming and going in and out of it?

RA: Sure. I think he likes messing up people's lives. The way he treats Ivy is unbelievable. On that little scale, I mean he doesn't hurt millions of people, but on that little scale it's every bit as vicious as . . .

RF: . . . but given the means he might. Okay. What about Honey? No let's go to Franklin Ransom.

RA: I don't know. I can't separate out Franklin in the book from Franklin in the play. I don't have a personal opinion of Franklin in the book, but he's there primarily for a foil.

RF: But I come back to his name, Ransom. I always think that if Ivy goes with him, she pays a ransom.

RA: [laughs] Well, there's enough play with names in the book that I'm not going to say you are wrong at all, but . . .

RF: . . . you don't think so?

RA: I don't know.

RF: Yeah, because that is what Beulah wants for her. And Beulah . . .

NA: . . . but could he also ransom her from single motherhood, et cetera.

RF: And the life she would have?

RA: But you know he's never going to do all that.

RF: What marry Ivy?

RA: Ransom her from all that.

NA: No, no, no. That's not what I said.

RA: Franklin is not somebody you can depend on.

NA: Exactly, but he also shows Ivy she can still be a woman.

RA: Of course, that was my point I was getting at. He's the foil to let her develop her, you know . . . .

RF: She realizes she is beautiful.

RA: Yeah, and she has fun, and she enjoys being intimate. She enjoys sex, and she's not apologetic about it.

RF: She loves her body in that role.

RA: She doesn't care what it is doing to her reputation, and there's a lot of independence of spirit there that you really admire in Ivy, and it's made possible because

of Franklin, not by Franklin but because of him. You can't help thinking that she would have found a Franklin if that Franklin hadn't been there.

RF: She found Lonnie Rash, remember? And he's what frees a body up.

RA: Yeah, being with Lonnie frees the body up.

RF: I use that in so many ways, because as we age and we get older, we go through different stages in our lives, and the older you get, you get a little freer, you know what I mean. You're sort of like, okay, what have I got to lose?

RA: Well, most of us don't; most of us don't get that free, and that's one of the appeals of this work. It's one of the things that you can do, and I expect this is one of the reasons that it appeals to a lot of women readers. Ivy does the things that other people only think about doing.

RF: And we live vicariously through Ivy.

RA: Sure. But that's what we do with all good literature.

RF: Is that the measure of good literature?

RA: It's one measure in my mind. Before a good, at least with fiction, I won't say all literature but at least with fiction, before it can do anything else, it needs to capture you and entertain you. Otherwise it serves—that's its first function and its most primary, and I think this book does that marvelously well. And it does that even for me as a male reader. I won't say that it always will for all men. I don't claim to be speaking for my whole sex, but for me, I could live vicariously through Ivy. And I know . . .

RF: . . . but you lust after her [laughs].

RA: [laughs] But I love her spirit, and I love her freedom, and I love her sense of humor, you know, independent of gender one way or the other. I can certainly see why, for a lot of women Ivy, Ivy's a chance you know vicariously to let loose in ways that probably you would never do yourself. Most women have got to resist the temptation to run away with Honey Breeding.

RF: Speaking of Honey, now you can talk about Honey Breeding.

RA: Well, he certainly is one of the most symbolic, metaphorical and spiritual figures in the book. He's mystical. Obviously, he is real in the storyline of the book, but he's also this mythic sense of, what, well, sweetness and life, sensuality.

RF: He is like a, one of your—like you said Silvaney . . .

RA: Oh yeah, he is absolutely.

RF: like your Greek, mythological . . . .

RA: Oh yeah, I almost see him with shaggy legs, and fat locks, and little horns when they go up there on that mountain. He's Pan. He's the least real of the men in the book in one sense, but Ivy brings that back to reality because I mean it is real. She goes up there and she has this fling. And she knows she is going to pay a terrible price for it, and she doesn't care, she says at the time.

RF: She says she would do it again. And what about, is her child LuIda, the death, is it a reckoning for her behavior, or is it a natural consequence of life, or is she punished?

RA: I think every reader would have to decide that for herself or himself, and it would depend. Ivy certainly sees it as punishment, but that is just possibly guilty conscience. Would it have happened if she had stayed there? Probably, but at least she wouldn't have had to feel guilty about it. Now she has to feel both sad and guilty, but it is a way for her to punish herself.

RF: And she comes back and loves Oakley more. Or is—I don't know if loving him more is right more than she's settled.

RA: Appreciates him more.

RF: For his steadfastness? Or . . .

RA: . . . for his forgiveness more than anything. And the fact that he'll take her back at all and then secondly for, of course, she knows he's her rock, her base.

RF: Okay.

RA: And she's got her wildness out of her system now, and she can settle down with him.

RF: What's his sister's name that hates her? You know, that comes to take care of her at the end. Do you remember?

RA: I don't

RF: What about her coming back to take care of Ivy and that's the only person Ivy will let in?

RA: Do you think that's some punishment in some way?

RF: No, I think it's forgiveness on the, it's sort of like that chapter is closed as well.

RA: Yes, I think that is reconciliation.

RF: Yeah.

RA: And also, finally, this is a book about, among other things, family, you know. As Robert Frost says, home is where when you go there they have to take you in, and family, even at its worse, is family to Ivy and that should be.

RF: And that may be why Garnie's bible is what she is reading. It is about family, the good, the bad and the ugly.

RA: This is a book about the individual family, and it's a book about Appalachian families, and it's a book about human families.

RF: So what others, what about Ivy as the heroic figure, the quest, you know, symbolic of making to the top of the mountain. Is that, I mean, because she could have done it by herself, but she went with Honey. I don't know. I'm grabbing onto stuff. You're not commenting on any of it,

RA: No, I see. You just read the question and I have to consider it. Does it lessen her as a heroine that she has to go with Honey? Is that what you are saying?

RF: No, no. Could you make a case of her being an archetype, female?

RA: Well, I think you have to, and I think clearly, that's in there. She's supposed to be this symbol, but it's not a hero in the conventional sense of somebody perfect. She's a very flawed character. She's a very human character, and that's part of her wonderfulness, her strength. She makes mistakes, and she needs other people. Yeah, I think it's obvious that she, but what I like about the book is that Lee Smith never loses the reality of Ivy, never sacrifices the reality of Ivy to the symbolic theme. Ivy is always an individual and a real person and a funny one and a very self-aware one. I like that about Ivy. She knows who she is. I always like it when she accepts it.

RF: And I, one of the things that keeps coming to me is the writing. And I'm not real sure how to get at this, but writing is Ivy's art form. Writing is Lee Smith's, but I don't mean the same—they both write for different reasons. Lee Smith wrote this novel at a time when her mother was dying, a son who just died had been diagnosed with mental illness, and so she had to develop a character, and this is a quote, "who could take whatever shit hit the fan," and it was a way for her to make it through the night. She could, she said, come home; writing is way to make order in your life out of chaos, and so she would come in and make order. She also wanted to preserve the woman, or honor

her mother, because her mother was dying. But now her mother was not like Ivy. Her mother was a privileged . . .

RA: . . . relatively privileged

RF: Yeah, but always an outsider in that Appalachian [environment], and I don't understand, and I'm going to ask her why she didn't write from her mother's viewpoint as an outsider rather than someone who was on the inside.

RA: It makes such a great story this way, and also, I think I remember reading somewhere that Lee was first given the germ for Ivy by somebody she encountered, an old mountain woman she encountered, in her writing. And it's fiction, you know.

RF: Yes, Lou Crabtree.

RA: You don't want to write this autobiography, this biography of your mother, if you are a fiction writer. You naturally want to fictionalize everything, which means you gain insight by distance. Does that make sense?

RF: Yes, absolutely. And that's interesting. Okay. Something hit me and it's gone. How does it gain insight into her mother?

RA: I don't know. I think that's a question you need to ask Lee, not me. [laughs]

RF: [laughs] That's true.

RA: I don't know. I don't know, but I would think, one of the ways, one of the conventional devices that writers use for emotional control so that when they are dealing with something personal that's very difficult to deal with because of the emotional closeness is to distance themselves fictionally, and put it in another perspective.

RF: Well, Lee Smith writes and puts Ivy's spirit on the paper. She's got that. And Ivy writes simply to be writing.

RA: Well, Ivy loves words and that's the first step of any, first of all, that's the mark of high intelligence, I think. I believe that's the way the human mind works. I think words help shape the mind and a love of words is always a sign of high level of intelligence.

RF: And she wanted to be a writer.

RA: She wanted to be a writer because, she doesn't examine that, she just wanted to be a writer.

RF: She loves it bestest in the whole world.

RA: Because it's fun; it is fun.

RF: She's good at it.

RA: If you can shape words, it's always a pleasure, and it's so different from everything else in her life. She was fortunate to encounter one or two teachers there who encouraged her and supported her in it.

RF: And she was going to Boston until she found out she was pregnant. Interesting. That's interesting.

RA: Biology got in the way there.

RF: Nature, as you said.

RA: Unless, if you want to get really Freudian about it, does she, on some subconscious level, want to keep herself from going to Boston, so she gets, lets herself get pregnant?

RF: I'm not sure she knew how to prevent it at the age she was.

RA: Well she knows this: if you don't go to bed with a boy, you won't get pregnant.

RF: Well, that's true. But she didn't care. I mean, she was thinking in the moment, you know, and she says that in the book.

RA: Are we to believe her though? That's always the question you've got about a first-person narrator who's part of the book: to what degree are they objectively credible, and does Ivy always know what Ivy wants and is doing?

RF: I think she writes to Silvaney and tells Silvaney that she's realized this is your life Ivy, you're right here; you're living it more or less, which is the great philosophy we should all live by.

RA: Yeah, yeah, that's accepting things and rolling with the punches that Lee talks about. But you know, is this to say she was afraid of the bigger world and made it impossible for her to escape it. What's that teacher's name? Anyway, is there a possibility, the play suggests and some readers interpret the novel, that Miss Torrington is making a lesbian overtone to Ivy and on some subconscious level she is afraid of it, and she chooses heterosexuality over that.

RF: The first time I read it, that's what I thought. The second time I read it, I was taken by Ivy's response to it, that it was that response rather than—you don't know what's Miss Torrington's intention.

RA: No. You don't.

RF: You only know how Ivy responds.

RA: Well, that's all you can know anyway in the first person.

RF: But you're right, she chooses.

RA: Is she deliberately then making it impossible to respond to Miss Torrington by getting pregnant?

RF: Because that is way out of her world.

RA: Yeah, uh-huh. These are all speculations that critics get into, and they're not, all you can do is speculate and make your own support for the case, and I don't think so.

RF: Speaking of critics now. How many people write a book and think about critics?

RA: I think that's as varied as writers, and I think, in fact, writers rarely, when you talk to them, give you candid responses about things like that. But if you found one who was willing to give you a candid response, I suspect sometimes they'd say, "Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't."

RF: Don't you think it shows up in the work?

RA: I don't know.

RF: You don't know either.

RA: I don't know about that.

RF: See I want to believe it would.

RA: I think that all good, I think, I don't know, I just think that art is such a mystery that the only thing you can say is real talent is gonna find a way.

RF: That's what amazes me about Mary Ward Brown.

RA: I believe, my own personal theory of writing, which is not necessarily an analysis of Lee Smith as a writer, is that writing is always, always a form of communication. It's always reaching out. You are always, as a writer, on some level, thinking about how will my reader respond to this. And so how can you not think about the critics because they are readers?

RF: That's true. I hadn't thought of it that way, but you're exactly right.

RA: And so, most writers tell you, "I only write for myself." But I don't believe that. If they only wrote for themselves they wouldn't have to write it. They certainly wouldn't have to show it to anybody else. Even Emily Dickinson kept all her manuscripts and made sure they were around after she went away.

RF: Yeah.

RA: I just don't believe this stuff that the only reason I'm writing is to please myself. Well, if you're gonna please yourself, don't show it to me. [laughs] But I think part of pleasing yourself is always, "Did I do a good enough job so somebody else understands what I was saying? Somebody else responds to it. I can bridge that gap of loneliness that is the human condition by reaching out to communicate." That's the quintessence of writing to me.

RF: Very good. Okay. You know the last line, "and I walked in my body like a queen," that Lee had that last line taped up on her wall for three years, that she wrote the last line first, and she had it on the wall that whole time. She says she does that frequently, but she's not worried about writing the last line.

RA: Does she write toward that or is it just her general inspiration?

RF: I think it was inspiration, that's my opinion. That line . . . .

RA: How do I create a character worthy of that line?

RF: Yes. That was a beautiful line. And that's her mother, what her mother did.

RA: I think that's Lee too.

RF: Yeah, yeah.

RA: She enjoys . . . .

RF: But I think Lee is, you know she got kicked out of Hollins. She went to France and stayed out all night talking to a boy, and they kicked her out [laughed]. So she might be a little more like Silvaney [laughs].

RA: But she also has a sense of, I think a flare, of appearance, of elegance, of self awareness—that line fits her to some degree.

RF: Yeah, yeah. And that's what, underneath all this, this book is for her, for her mother, for Ivy, and for her reader as well.

RA: And while in some ways she might envision her reader as a woman, she is too good of a writer for it to be only women. She wants to, because she gets involved in that, she gets interested in those characters and wants to make them real, alive, vital, and so they come across as not male, not female first, but human first.

RF: That's good. That's good.

RA: I think that most good writers do that. I won't say all good writers.

RF: Do you think this book has any permanence?

RA: Oh, I do. Who knows? That's such a happenstance and weird thing, and nobody knows some books survive and thrive and others don't. But, yes, of course, I think it is an American classic.

RF: Well, I agree. Any negative comments on the book?

RA: No.

RF: Anything else you would like to add?

RA: No.

RF: Do I have the opportunity to ask you more if I need to?

RA: Sure, sure.

RF: Miss Nancy, have you got any questions you'd like to ask?

RA: Anything I didn't say that I need to explore, Nancy? Anything you'd want to hear a male perspective on?

NA: Did her view of the mountains as mountains and nature and so forth have a power all of their own?

RA: Of course.

NA: Speaking to a reader that's very aware of environment, background, and setting and so forth, has she captured that effectively?

RA: Yes. I think so, very much, and I think that's one of the things I've always read in all the work I've read by her. She makes me feel the sense of the mountains, the sense of the environment, and of course, that may be one of the reasons that she appeals to me so

much because that's also to some degree in my blood. I didn't grow up right in the mountains, but I've always lived near them, and I've always loved them.

RF: But she also sticks to those rules of what makes Southern literature southern.

NA: A strong sense of place.

RF: Community, family.

RA: Yeah, that may just be because she is just trying to write honestly. I mean I think that's in some degree what finally, it's not that a writer says if I am going to be a Southern writer I must do this and this. It's just that if you are an honest writer that's trying to capture as fully as possible time and place, then this is what you are going to write about because this is what happens in the south.

RF: I told my class the other night, something came up, and I can't remember, and we were talking about them moving, and I said, "Well, how many of you plan to move when you graduate?" And I mean, every young hand went up. My afternoon class is young, so every hand went up. My evening class, all the young ones. The older ones didn't. They kind of just looked around and snickered, and I said, "Well, how many of you are from the South?" And I said, "Well, I hate to tell you this but one of the things about being southern," and I said, "And that may be changing with your generation, I don't know, is that we have a strong tie to our home, to the area." It's funny to watch that.

RA: I think that is really disappearing though. It's inevitable as the South, one of the things that allowed the South to maintain those values, which are after all old-fashioned values that much of the world used to share, one of the things that let us maintain that so long into the twentieth century is that we were economically backward and culturally isolated. And as we become part and parcel of the mainstream of the nation, then we are inevitably going to lose it.

RF: Another question, Nancy?

NA: I reserve the right to come back.

RF: Okay. All right. Thank you, Rick.

RA: You're welcome.

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