

Fair and Tender Ladies

by
Lee Smith

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 10

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About the author

Lee Smith is author of three collections of short stories and nine novels. She is a professor of English at North Carolina State University in Raleigh and the recipient of numerous awards for her writing, among them the prestigious John Dos Passos Award for Literature, in 1987. She lives with her husband and two children in Chapel Hill.

Discussion questions

As Ivy ages, how does she change? In what ways does she stay the same?

Why was Ivy's mother unwilling to sell the farm even though the family had moved to town and needed money badly? Why does Ivy refuse to leave the house in Sugar Creek even when she is dying?

Why is Ivy closest of all to Silvaney? Ivy wonders, "... if you treat somebody as simple, does it make them simple? ... And if you love somebody ... does that bring them out?" What do you think? Why is Ivy still trapped inside herself in some ways, even though Oakley loved her so much?

Additional readings

Lee Smith. *Oral History*, 1983.

Shelby Lee Adams and Lee Smith. *Appalachian Portraits*, 1993.

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Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* spans its heroine's lifetime. From her early youth at the opening of the twentieth century through her death at 74, feisty Ivy Rowe, an Appalachian mountain woman, is a "fool for letters." Smith has created this joyous, inspiring, and heartbreaking novel in the form of Ivy's prolific correspondences with family members, friends, and imaginary pen pals. Beginning and ending in a rustic cabin nestled in a remote "holler" of Ivy's beloved Virginia mountains, the reader travels via her letters through the years before automobiles, the Depression, two world wars, other military conflicts, and mining disasters, continues past the novelty of electricity in Appalachia, the crooning of Elvis, and tabloid intrigues about Jacqueline Kennedy, and arrives in the world of Orange Julius and birth control pills ("They are the greatest thing since drip-dry."). *Fair and Tender Ladies* is a history of twentieth century America and how it shapes the lives of three generations of the Rowe family as they marry, have children, move away, divorce, remarry, adventure, disappear, reappear, and die—with Ivy and her husband Oakley Fox at the center.

In her first letters, Ivy displays many of the attitudes that will color her entire life, for as she later asserts, "We have all got a true nature and we can't hide it, it will pop out when you least expect it." Her letters are filled with enthusiasm and a zest for living. With limited schooling and a mother who scolds her against reading too much lest books fill her head with "notions," the young Ivy invents her own spelling and writes in the dialect of her region. Her letters are pages long, and intimate even with strangers. In writing to a pen pal in Holland (whom she never manages to contact), she tells the details of her parents' meeting, how they ran off together to get married, how her father is ill and her mother run down. She tells also of her teacher's love life:

Mister Brown is a forren preacher from the North but does not preach he . . . says to her, what is your substance whereof are you made? and other poems. He carries bunches of flowers up from the creek for her and one time it was about a month ago he brung them rigt into the schoolhouse and give them to her with a funny little bow like a Prince you ougt to of seed him, we was all rigt ther when he done it. Her cheeks turned as red as a apple, I wuld of had a fit if it was me.

Ivy is an aspiring writer in love with family histories, cherishing the customs and tales of mountain folk. She is engaged in all she encounters, compelled to put into words the details of her world, to "hold on to what is passing," and in the telling she discovers truths about herself and others that she might not have otherwise known. Toward the end of the novel, Ivy's daughter Joli, a writer, wants to collect her mother's letters. Ivy cautions her against it, saying, "The letters didn't mean anything. . . It was the writing of them, that signified."

The discovery and expression of her true nature is Ivy's greatest challenge and triumph. Still, as much as her character is often transparent to others, she remains mysterious to herself, a knot of conflicting desires. She is lonely and craves communication. Buried in the noise of so many siblings, she writes letters to people who will never read them, continuing to address her pen pal in Holland with no hope of a response.

I can not talk to my Family they is so many of us here in the house in the snow we have to keep the younguns in you can not bath yourself nor nothing and little Danny crys. They is no place here you can go to get away from him crying, it is only when I am writing you this letter late in the night that I dont hear.

Later she addresses her most intimate thoughts to her sister, Silvaney, brain damaged since birth and an unlikely audience for someone who is longing to express her innermost self. Even after Silvaney is institutionalized, Ivy continues to compose her longest, most insightful letters to her sister. Ivy persists in penning these letters even after she learns of Silvaney's death.

Similarly, Ivy is surprised at times by what she refuses to tell to others, and by her own actions which thrust her into situations she had not foreseen. She never tells the father of her first child about his daughter's birth. Later, he dies in the war, and when Ivy is contacted by his relatives, she confesses only, "Do not worry about me . . . I still have something else to remember Lonnie by." While she is living in a mining camp on Diamond Mountain, Virginia, she allows herself to be seduced by a wealthy young womanizer, despite having been warned against his advances. Then she suddenly rejects him in favor of Oakley Fox, a childhood acquaintance whom she'd refused to consider

a serious suitor until she saw him, injured and blackened with soot, emerging from a collapsed mine shaft. After years of marriage to him, she runs off with a vagabond beekeeper to live in a cave for several days of sensuousness and daring. She is baffled by her own actions, other than knowing she is filled with mysterious longings.

Ivy loves her husband, her brothers and sisters, and her children, but most of all she loves the freedom to follow her heart. This is evident when she sorrowfully watches as a young man whom she had almost married marches off to war. She says, unabashedly:

Then he was gone. I blinked. Well, I thought, thats that, and with him gone it was like my whole self came rushing back to me again and I looked at the water and thought, Oh I do want to go to Boston, I do want to go after all.

After Oakley, her beloved husband of many years, dies, only a month later Ivy is savoring her returned freedom:

I can make my own life now which ever way I want to, it is like I am a girl again, for I am not beholden to a soul. I can act like a crazy old woman if I want to which I do. I can get up in the morning and eat a hotdog, which I did yesterday. I don't know what I might do tomorrow!

Like her father, Ivy refuses to be beholden to any man or god. This, too, is an expression of her fierce determination to be master of her own fate. Although Oakley pressures her to believe and her brother tries to convert her, she staunchly refuses to relinquish ownership of her soul. Near the end of her life she reads Ecclesiastes and gains a greater understanding of the oppositions embodied in the events of her life:

It makes sense to me Silvaney. Lord knows I have had my time to dance and my time to mourn. Now I think it is time for me to cast away, and get about my business, if only I could tell what that is (Ha).